

Chosen Mate Of The Beastmen Empire

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"It's All-seeing Eyes." Drew held up the object high. "In order to steal this, our second brother lost his life."

Upon hearing this term, the old man's breathing quickened. Seeing Drew's trembling hands, he rushed forward, worried that Drew might drop the object, and tried to take it.

A hand faster than his own snatched the cylinder away.

Monka, holding the small object, found it hard to believe. "Is this the All-seeing Eyes?"

It was because of this unassuming little thing that so many of their villages had been destroyed by Erik.

He fiddled with it, unsure how to use it, and looked at Drew for help. Drew, however, was in the midst of hugging Draven, both of them crying for their fallen second brother.

"Stop crying," the old man said, pulling them up and patting their backs. "The dead can't come back. The court has destroyed so many of our villages. Many of our brothers are gone. What we need to do now is get revenge for them."

He thought, 'So what if we are temporarily oppressed? As long as we endure, eventually, we could drive Erik away. One day, we would recover, and we would retake Nevaton and seize Kellingtown.'

"You've done well this time. Your past mistakes can be erased. Bringing the All-seeing Eyes is a great achievement," the old man said with a kind smile. "And you've brought food. Tomorrow, let the young men from the tribe go hunting to celebrate your success."

Neither Monka nor the old man knew the origin of the All-seeing Eyes. They both imagined it to be a mysterious object, but neither could have known that there was more than one.

Monka believed he had found the greatest treasure in the world, so excited that he couldn't sleep all night, holding the object and studying it over and over.

The old man thought that with the court's army losing this tool, they would never easily track them again. He felt a weight lift from his chest and finally slept soundly.

The next day, the village indeed held a feast.

All the important figures were present, all staring eagerly at the All-seeing Eyes that the great leader was clutching tightly, eager to touch or even just gaze at it.

Monka wasn't stingy. After three rounds of drinks, he waved his hand, allowing everyone to come and admire the treasure.

The vibe was lively, and no one noticed that one of Drew's group had slipped out and didn't return.

"Did I drink too much?" Someone rubbed their temples, resting their hand on their head, feeling their eyelids growing heavy. "I only had... three drinks."

Before they could finish, they collapsed onto the table.

The chatter around them grew quieter, and before long, people were sprawled drunkenly all over the place.

"What's happening?" Monka, truly tipsy now, held his wine glass, laughing in confusion. "You usually drink well, but why is everyone drunk before I am?"

The old man suddenly jumped up, his scalp tingling as though he had fallen into an icy abyss.

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"We need to go." He pushed Monka, hearing the sound of shouting and fighting outside, and immediately began running.

Monka, still confused, didn't realize what had happened until Drew and the others pinned him down.

It was an ambush. The Northern Army captured 3,000 barbarians and took Monka, the great leader, alive.

Erik personally led the team and successfully made it out of Misty Ridge, avoiding getting trapped in the mountains by miasma and similar terrain.

Back in Nevaton, the general entered the tent, preparing to remove his armor, when suddenly his body tensed.

He flicked his wrist, and his sword was unsheathed, pointing straight at the screen. "Who's there, sneaking around?"

The screen shattered with a loud crack, splitting open to reveal a beautiful face, one that could occupy Erik's thoughts day and night.

The sword in his hand clanged as it fell to the ground.

Erik stood frozen, unable to believe his eyes. "Nyx? Am I dreaming?"

In the next instant, the person from her dream came alive, stepping over the dead body of the screen and walking toward him.

Nyx's eyes were smiling, her tone playful, as she circled the man, feigning fear while clutching her chest, "So fierce, General."

In her presence, Pale Wolf always appeared like an idiot, rarely showing such a sharp, cold side.

One day apart felt like years. After such a long separation, Nyx missed him terribly. Seeing any version of Pale Wolf made her happy. She tiptoed, stretched out her arms, and hugged him tightly, pressing herself against him.

Perhaps it was her nature, inclined to tease honest men.

The more anxious Erik became, the more reckless she got. Her eyes held a trace of autumn water, her voice deliberately soft and tender. "The general just won a great victory. Arlong sent me to serve you and to comfort you."

Even though a thick layer of armor separated them, the moment his body touched the warmth of her soft skin, Erik's muscles tensed, and his breathing became rough.

He struggled to grab Nyx's arm, pulling her away, his old stutter returning. "I'm dirty... I'm... so dirty."

Last night, he had led his troops to ambush near the barbarian village, covered in ash, grass, and dew, his body caked with mud. After the battle, it was inevitable that he had gotten bloodied.

Nyx was clean and fragrant, like a fairy, which made him feel ashamed of himself.

He turned and called Arlong outside the tent, instructing him to bring water.

"I'm here to help you undress, General." Nyx didn't mind his dirt; she was more concerned about him enduring the hardships of war and battles. Even though he pushed her away, she wasn't discouraged and pressed herself back to him, as if determined to comfort the general.

"I... I'll do it myself." Erik's face turned red, unable to handle the teasing anymore. After three months of traveling, other generals either brought their concubines or took in new recruits for company.

He wasn't interested in any of that. He only thought of Nyx. He thought he would have to wait a while longer to reunite with her in the capital, but she had come to find him.

"It's dangerous on the road. How did you come? Did Aurelius actually agree?" he asked.

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It wouldn't be long now before he returned. She should be waiting for him in Hilltop City.

"Because I missed you." Nyx threw the truth out there, straightforwardly.

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Seeing Erik's disapproving expression, she couldn't help but click her tongue and glance downward meaningfully. "Aren't you also wanting me?"

She wanted to personally bring Pale Wolf back home and, on the other hand, couldn't trust anyone else to escort the gunpowder, so she took matters into her own hands.

To get out of the house, she had to work hard to calm the little kitten at home, nearly going mad in the process.

The teenage Aurelius was extremely ruthless, while the hage Erik was much gentler.

Nyx mentally compared the two and acted more recklessly in front of the honest Pale Wolf.

Knowing he was about to bathe, she didn't shy away, staring at him with interest, then soaked the towel to gently rub his throat, which was constantly moving. "I'll help you clean up"

A droplet of water slid down Erik's muscular crevices, it was hard to tell whether it was water or sweat.

Nyx was so absorbed in playing that she didn't notice when her wrist was suddenly gripped by a hot, large hand.

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Since it was still daylight, the captured barbarians and their leader, Monka, were waiting to be dealt with. Erik didn't indulge himself, only grabbed Nyx for a quick kiss before releasing her.

It wasn't that his self-control was so strong. Quite the opposite, he didn't trust his self-control. He knew that once he let loose, he wouldn't be able to stop, which is why he dared not take action.

Although he didn't go further, Nyx still looked like she had been tortured, her hair wet with sweat, sticking to her forehead, and her dress wrinkled with many creases.

Erik patiently wrapped her up in a thick woolen blanket, tidied up the shattered screen and the mess on the floor, then half-knelt at the bedside, kissing her forehead before reporting, "The deputy commander and the officers are waiting for me. I'll be back before dinner."

"Arlong is just outside. If you need anything, tell him," he added, not forgetting to remind her once more.

Nyx, still stunned, shrank into the blanket, only her fair, pinkish face showing, like a helpless little rabbit waiting to be slaughtered.

Not receiving a response, Erik quickly averted his gaze, unable to look any longer. He put on his clothes and left.

If he looked any longer, Pale Wolf would have surely given in to his urge to torture the rabbit.

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The humid air gradually cooled down. Only Nyx remained alone in the tent. She sat there for a while, her gaze falling on the armor on the table, her face flushing bright red like a tomato.

When she helped him take off that armor, she thought she had everything under control, acting all arrogant.

But in the end, she was just kissed, and she completely lost the battle.

Pale Wolf had truly missed her after three months, so much that he seemed like he wanted to devour her, from her hair to her toes, leaving no inch untouched.

He seemed so thirsty, his throat constantly swallowing, his lips cracked and rubbing against her neck, making her want to hide.

However, with such a disparity in strength, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't escape.

Erik kept staring at her with his reddish wolf eyes, as though he had locked onto his prey.

Looking back on it, Nyx felt like her entire body was burning. Embarrassed, she buried her face in the blanket.

Thinking about the male's lingering aura before he left, she began to feel a little scared about his return.

Before evening, Arlong drove Nyx and arrived at the mansion where Erik was temporarily staying in Nevaton.

The large mansion was only occupied by Erik.

There were no wives, concubines, or close relatives by his side, nor any beautiful maids. He ate from the same pot of food as the soldiers every day, and didn't even keep a cook. Only Arlong, his trusted confidant, and a few shadow guards often moved around the mansion.

Now that Nyx had arrived, though only temporarily, the maids and servants were all provided for her immediately.

Arlong personally selected them and brought them to Nyx for confirmation.

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He introduced each of the servants to her and then bowed, saying, "Madam, rest assured, they are all honest people with clean backgrounds and quick hands."

As soon as Nyx heard the words "honest people," her hands trembled, and she almost spilled the tea onto herself.

She cleared her throat awkwardly, nodded to show that she trusted Arlong and had no objections.

After spending the afternoon nervously thinking up countermeasures, when the maid came to report that the general had returned, Nyx had already masked her emotions well. Her face was calm and collected, with no trace of panic.

From a distance, she smelled the scent of alcohol and quickly stood up to meet him. "Did you drink?"

"Yes." Erik lowered his head, as if afraid she would be angry. "It was a victory banquet; I drank a little."

He was a general, and no one dared force him to drink, but his subordinates had repeatedly offered him drinks, and so he had consumed one cup after another.

By now, he had really drunk quite a bit.

"Have you eaten?" Nyx wasn't angry. She softly ruffled his hair and led him into the house.

"No, I haven't eaten..." Once inside, Erik wrapped his arms around her from behind, and his hot breath slid down her neck. "I want to eat with Nyx."

His eyes were bright, his pupils filled with her reflection, like a dog wagging its tail at its owner.

When he said he wanted to eat with her, he would never let her wait in vain.

Nyx couldn't say how she felt. She pursed her lips and pinched the muscles around his waist and abdomen through his clothes. "You'll regret it if your stomach hurts later."

She thought, 'No matter what age, Pale Wolves are always just as foolish.'

The victory banquet was a serious matter, missing one meal to eat with her wasn't an issue. She thought, 'Why force himself to just drink?'

"It doesn't hurt; I have no regrets... but don't pinch me, Nyx." Erik seemed quite drunk. He didn't seem to understand what she was saying. His body tensed up suddenly, gripping her wrist with both hands, his ears turning red. "I'm drunk. I can't help it."

Nyx froze for a moment. When she came back to her senses, she immediately withdrew her hand. "Who touched you? I was pinching you."

Her little strength, even if she tried to pinch hard, was no different from flirting for a man with tough skin.

When the maids came in to serve the food, they caught sight of Nyx pinching the general's ears, almost straddling him aggressively. She was far from the gentle and serene woman from earlier.

They immediately lowered their heads, not daring to look further. Their minds were in turmoil.

Nyx released her grip. She thought, 'No, it's not what you think. I am just reminding Pale Wolf to eat on time and not drink on an empty stomach.'

Pinching his ears was because he seemed hazy with drunkenness, and she was afraid he wouldn't listen without some pressure.

"I'll remember, Nyx." The general nodded obediently, as though unaware of the maids in the room. He only focused on pleasing Nyx. "I'll listen to you."

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As soon as he finished speaking, the sound of plates and bowls clattering echoed, as the maids had been so startled they lost their grip.

Erik looked up at the sound, frowned, "Go, you don't need to serve here."

His presence was imposing, even though he was young. He had fought on the battlefield for years, and just sitting there was enough to make people fearful.

The maids were a bit afraid of him. They nervously put down their things, bowed, and left.

Just before the door closed, they caught a glimpse of the general standing up to wash his hands, lifting the bowls and fork, as if preparing to serve Nyx.

The maids thought, 'Did they get it wrong?'

"You don't have to worry about me." Nyx also picked up a bowl, ladled some hot soup, and pushed it toward Erik. "Have some soup to help with the alcohol." Whatever Nyx said, Erik would do. He seemed to have truly meant what he said earlier: he would listen to her.

After finishing his meal, he lay on Nyx's lap, reaching out to measure her waist, which was just the right size for him to hold. He suddenly raised his gaze, staring at her with an intense look, like a hungry wolf eyeing its prey.

In an instant, Nyx's heart almost skipped a beat, and the sense of danger she had just shaken off flared up again.

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Her brain worked at lightning speed as she recalled the strategy she'd come up with that afternoon. She casually asked, "So, how did you break into Barbarians' stronghold? Is the rebellion completely crushed now? What's going to happen to their leader? Are you sending him back to Hilltop City?"

She figured talking business would help her dodge other topics. But Erik didn't take the bait. He just kept staring at her with those burning eyes. After a long moment, he suddenly propped himself up and leaned in, kissing her like a storm rolling over the horizon.

The little rabbit had traveled a thousand miles to deliver itself straight into the wolf's jaws, devoured until not even its bones remained-too late to cry about it

now.

The next day at noon, Nyx finally dragged herself out of bed, her limbs soft as noodles. Erik stayed right by the bedside, jumping up the second he heard her stir to help her wash and get ready.

The maids' chores got completely hijacked—they could only watch as the general, with hands used to wielding swords and spears, deftly twisted her hair into a neat, pretty bun.

Just as they started to marvel at it, a massive wolf's head poked through the doorway, scaring the daylights out of the young

maids, their faces turning pale in an instant. "A wolf! How can there be a wolf here?"

It was clearly a wild wolf—every strand of fur bristling with untamed energy, its frame sturdy and thick. Though it still had the look of a young pup, it was already bigger than most grown wolves. In its mouth, it carried a tiny rabbit, probably its snack.

The maids trembled, torn between pity for the rabbit and terror that the wolf might turn its attention to them and take a bite.

But the gray-furred wolf didn't even spare them a glance. It padded straight toward Nyx with light, confident steps, then flopped down by her feet under everyone's nervous stares, rolling over to show its belly. A bunch of eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets at the sight.

Nyx looked down, her eyes crinkling with a smile. She rubbed its fur a couple times with her bare foot and said, "Had enough fun out there? Back home now, huh?"

It was a wild wolf cub, after all. Though it was attached to her, that feral streak in its bones never faded. The moment it hit the wild, its blood kicked in, and it got all riled up.

They'd only settled in yesterday, and Nyx, seeing it didn't want to sit still, had let it loose to romp around in the mountains.

The wolf cub let out a little "woo" like it was playing cute, then dropped the rabbit from its mouth into her lap.

"For me?" Nyx touched the rabbit, checked it was still alive, then picked it up to look it over. That light yellow fur looked awfully familiar somehow.

She went quiet for a second, brushing off the weird thoughts popping into her head, then poked the cub's head with a helpless grin. "Why do you love catching rabbits so much?"

It didn't even eat them after catching them—just licked them like they were toys. It had a real thing for rabbits. Erik gave the cub a longer look. It never listened to him, and suddenly he thought it kinda felt like his own kid.

He shifted his gaze away and brought up Nyx's questions from last night. "The barbarians took a big hit this time because some insiders slipped a sedative into the food they brought. Pretty much anyone who ate at the feast lost the will to fight and got captured by us."

"Monka and his foster father didn't eat the stuff they brought, so they didn't get drugged. We nabbed Monka, but the old guy was slippery and got away," Erik said, his eyes darkening.

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"We took three thousand prisoners this time—not a small number—but plenty of them slipped out in the chaos too. Those barbarians know Misty Ridge like the back of their hands. If they regroup under that old fox, they'll still be a threat we can't ignore."

The barbarian tribe used to number in the tens of thousands, but now only a few thousand stragglers remained. Most had been wiped out or captured in the last three months of fighting—technically, the rebellion was already as good as done. But he knew if they didn't stamp out this last pocket of resistance completely, the tragedy of Nevaton getting raided could happen all over again.

"Once I catch Monka's foster father, I'll haul them both back to Hilltop City," Erik said in a low, firm voice.

Nyx lowered her eyes, getting a clearer picture of how things stood. But she didn't say anything—like she hadn't even heard Erik talking—and just kept playing with the wolf cub, leaving the big Pale Wolf hanging.

Erik was speechless. "Are you mad at me, Nyx?" He knew he'd messed up, so he half-knelt down, resting his head on her knee in shame. "I got drunk last night, I-

"Drunk, my foot!" Nyx was torn between laughing and fuming. She lifted her foot and pressed it against his shoulder. "Just shut up."

She knew how much he could handle. They'd been apart so long, though, so she let it slide and indulged him pretending to be drunk this once.

Looked like even the honest guy wasn't that honest-once he got going with a little liquid courage, he was wilder than the jealous nut back at the palace.

"If you didn't like it, I won't drink again," the big-tailed wolf said, sneaking a peek at Nyx's face. "Next time it happens, you

can kick me out."

Nyx wasn't totally convinced. This guy was probably banking on knowing her too well, figuring she wouldn't say she disliked it or ever really kick him out. Whatever. He only gets greedy about this one thing anyway-not a big flaw, she thought.

All the males at home were like this. Pale Wolf was already the most well-behaved, even if he usually got the short end of the stick against the sly little cat with eight hundred tricks up its sleeve. She could cut him some slack.

Nyx softened her expression and let out a vague little hum, leaving him to figure it out. Erik couldn't figure it out.

He was genuinely freaking out, clumsily pulling out every trick he had to smooth things over. If he could turn into his beast form right now, his tail and ears would definitely be drooping.

While the bosses sorted out their drama, the maids kept their heads down, not daring to make a peep. But they couldn't help sneaking peeks, thinking the general's groveling, spineless act wasn't all that different from the wolf sprawled out belly-up as madam's footrest.

Once they were out of the bosses' sight and into the courtyard, they started chattering like crazy.

"The mighty Expedition General, scared of his wife!"

"No wonder he never had a flock of pretty girls hovering around him!"

Arlong came stomping in from outside, dusty from the road, passing by the gaggle of maids. He overheard them whispering something like, "The general just got drunk, and now madam's twisting his ear and making him kneel to apologize, swearing he'll never touch a drop again."

Arlong was rendered speechless. After a beat of silence, he barked, "Talking behind the bosses' backs-what happened to your manners?"

He chewed out the gossiping maids until they couldn't lift their heads, then strode off with his hands behind his back,

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thinking in his head.

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Knowing Nyx like he did, she wouldn't get mad over something petty like getting drunk at a victory feast. Erik must've done something else out of line.

And knowing his tolerance, the drinks at the feast wouldn't have been enough to make him act wasted. Looked like he faked being drunk to pull some stunt.

In the study, Erik listened to Arlong's work report, waved him off, then heard him clear his throat lightly. "Boss, didn't you prep a gift for madam? Why not bring it out to cheer her up?" If Nyx got happy, she'd forgive the boss's screw-up. "Gift?" Erik gripped the brush in his hand tighter, his face turning a bit awkward. He had prepared a gift for Nyx, sure-but right now, he didn't quite dare give it to

her.

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At noon, after lunch, sunlight streamed through the hanging flower gate into the courtyard, warming everything until it felt like your bones might melt. Nyx lounged lazily on a low couch, teasing the wolf cub with a grass.

A few maids finished their tasks and gathered around her, stitching while stealing glances at the majestic wolf. Kellingtown had wolves too, but they were scrawny little things-nothing like this impressive beast.

It looked so big and fierce, with a mouth full of sharp fangs glinting coldly like it could snap someone's throat in one bite. Yet, when it lay at Nyx's feet, it fawned over her like a puppy.

The maids, who hadn't seen much of the world, couldn't quite put it into words- they just quietly marveled at how amazing Nyx was

After tiring of pouncing on the grass, Nyx pulled a ball she'd sewn from her old clothes out of her sleeve and tossed it far across the yard.

In a flash, the gray wolf cub bolted after it like a gust of wind, its sleek form vanishing out the gate. It came back quick, the toy dangling from its mouth. And it wasn't alone- someone followed behind. Spotting that tall, broad-shouldered figure, the maids shot to their feet, too nervous to keep slacking off.

They'd gotten over their fear of the wolf since it didn't bite randomly, but even knowing the general wouldn't kill without reason, they still couldn't help feeling spooked.

No mystery why-his presence was just too intimidating. It's amazing that Nyx managed to tame a beast like that.

Nyx stayed sprawled out, not bothering to move. She had no intention of getting up to greet her guy, just flicked her eyes up at him and gave a lazy wave.

Right away, the wolf cub's tail wagged like a blur, and the general's eyes lit up with a clumsy, eager grin. "Nyx, I got you a gift."

"Oh: Clothes?" Nyx's gaze landed on what he was holding. "Let me see."

Maybe some local Kellingtown specialty outfit. When she shook out the fabric, Nyx realized it was a sharp, practical set- narrow sleeves, cinched wrists, super crisp.

Erik had even matched it with shoes-a pair of long boots with simple cloud patterns stitched on. No extra frills, but she could tell the craftsmanship was top-notch, with serious care put into the materials and stitching.

"Why'd you suddenly think to get me this?" Nyx asked, running her fingers over it with interest.

She didn't need to try it on to know it'd fit perfectly. She hadn't gained or lost weight these past three months, and Erik had measured every inch of her a million times before-he knew her sizes like the back of his hand.

Thinking of that, she narrowed her eyes and shot him a knowing look. She thought, "He's not cooking up some naughty plan to try new tricks with me, is he?"

Ever since the Emperor back at the palace got a taste of role-playing he'd gone wild with it, always roping her into new roleplays.

One day it was a power-hungry minister forcing himself on a favored consort, the next a pure-hearted guard secretly comforting a lonely noble, then some priest claiming to use his energy to exorcise her.

Teenage males had endless stamina and greed to match-Nyx could barely keep up. She'd finally escaped out here for some peace, but had the other guy at home quietly picked up bad habits too?

Erik had no clue why she was eyeing him like that. He got nervous and started stammering, "I—I got you, uh, a horse?"

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The old garrison commander in Kellingtown loved fine horses and had offered him a few choice picks when he arrived.

Erik usually didn't take gifts and had plenty of horses already, planning to send them back untouched. But then he spotted a gentle, adorable foal and couldn't resist.

He remembered Nyx riding a white horse to see him off before the campaign—her cool, heroic figure burned into his mind, haunting his dreams.

He couldn't fight the selfish urge, kept the foal, and sent some gold and silver as payment, treating it like he'd bought it himself. After getting the horse, he made a bunch of riding outfits for Nyx—this was just one of them.

"A horse?" Nyx's eyes sparkled. "What kind? Where is it? Take me to see it now!"

She scrambled up in a rush, all excited, but then felt a weird ache in her waist. Her smile froze on her face. Erik was quick on his feet, catching her before she flopped back onto the couch and scooping her up in his arms.

They locked eyes, both going quiet. Seeing her clench her little fists tight, the general's heart started pounding like a drum.

He'd hesitated so long to give her the gift because he was scared she'd get mad again after the excitement wore off. After all, it was his fault she wasn't feeling great and couldn't ride a horse anytime soon.

With maids and servants gawking from all sides, Nyx couldn't keep her cool. She shoved at his rock-hard chest. "Put me down."

Her feet hit the ground, but her legs felt like jelly. Her face twisted for a split second before she forced it back to normal, strolling into the room like nothing was wrong. She shut the door and glared at the culprit. "I'm not touching you again until we're back in Hilltop City."

The cold, ruthless Nyx laid down the law, sentencing her unruly male to abstinence. Even when he gave her those pitiful, rain-soaked-puppy eyes, her heart stayed stone-cold.

But when night rolled around, she couldn't bring herself to actually kick her partner out. She left half the bed for him like always.

Erik dutifully warmed up the covers, trying to make up for his sins. Still, holding her soft little body, he was too wound up sleep all night. He really wanted to kiss her but didn't dare make a move.

In the end, Nyx took pity on her guy. After freezing him out for a day or two and seeing him squirm, she let him off the hook. This time, Erik learned his lesson- every move gentle and measured.

The next morning, Nyx felt fine, no discomfort at all, so she gave her obedient male plenty of warm smiles. Before breakfast, she fed the wolf first, setting the basin on the ground and saying, "Wait a sec."

Grayball had been a greedy eater since it was a pup. Its green beast eyes locked onto the meat, practically drooling, but it held back because of her command.

"Go ahead." With Nyx's okay, it finally dove in, pouncing on the food. "Slow down, slow down," Nyx said, patting its head. It obediently eased up on the chowing.

Erik watched from the side, amazed. "Nyx, you're incredible. You've got it trained like a dog."

This wolf cub was a wild handful-not only did it ignore him, but even famous dog trainers couldn't handle it. Teaching it to wait and eat slowly had been a bust; it stayed a beast through and through, scarfing down food and snapping at anyone who

tried to take it.

But it'd turn so tame in Nyx's hands. Nyx looked at the cub, clearly starving but keeping its manners, and suddenly chuckled, "Yeah. Wolves are pretty well- behaved."

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Take this dumb Pale Wolf-tell him to go hungry, and he'd actually sit there starving like a good boy. Two days of that, and he'd turn totally docile. That's Canine males.

If it were cats, the situation would be completely different. They wouldn't stand a single meal without meat.

But then she thought of the Snow Wolf back home, with eight hundred tricks up its sleeve. She coughed and thought, 'Guess it wasn't really about being canine

She glanced up at her goofy Pale Wolf again, feeling a little extra fondness. "You free today?"

He nodded, and she stood up, satisfied. "Then take me to see the gift later. It'd been a while since she'd ridden a horse-she wanted to stretch her legs. Since Erik hadn't explained it clearly, Nyx assumed he'd gotten her some dashing, heroic steed. When they got to the stables and she saw it, her jaw dropped. It was a squat little foal.

Obviously super young, like a fluffy golden cloud-full of life, with big, round, pure eyes that darted around curiously. The second it spotted Nyx from afar, it trotted over excitedly, clip-clopping its tiny hooves. So cute.

Nyx couldn't help reaching out to pet it, then shot her partner a mock-annoyed look. "It's so little, and you didn't tell me sooner?" If she rode it, it would be child labor.

Erik rubbed his nose, looking sheepish. When he held Nyx, she felt so light he barely noticed her weight-figured a foal could carry her no problem.

Since they were already out, even if she couldn't ride yet, Nyx didn't want to head back. She played with her little foal for a bit, fed it some treats to get it used to her smell and voice, and bonded with it.

Leaving the stables, with plenty of daylight left, she decided to wander around. Sitting in the carriage, she lifted the curtain to take in the scenery. Erik played coachman for her.

Kellingtown's climate was warm and humid, with lush greenery, tons of mountains, and water everywhere-beautiful views. all around. Too bad this era hadn't figured out

tourism yet, and the place had been plagued by barbarian raids for years, leaving the locals struggling.

Nyx's mood dipped and rose as she gazed into the distance, then pointed suddenly. "What's that over there?"

It looked like a fortress-high, towering walls on all sides, solid and heavy, giving off a suffocating vibe.

Erik followed her finger and frowned. "That's the prison for serious criminals."

It mostly held high-ranking barbarians or die-hard rebels now-key figures from the uprising, waiting to be shipped back to Hilltop City for the Emperor to deal with.

"Monka's in there too," Erik said, a cold glint flashing in his eyes. "Used to think he was spineless, but turns out he's got some guts. Arlong's crew grilled him for two days and still couldn't crack him."

A coward who'd break at the first scare, yet he wouldn't rat out his foster father no matter what. Funny thing was, that foster father he adored so much had ditched him to save his own skin the second things got hairy.

Nyx sighed a little, "I want to take a look."

Erik gave her a disapproving look. "There's nothing worth seeing in there," he

said, choosing his words carefully. "Since they're hardcore criminals, interrogation gets messy." Nyx might end up with nightmares if she saw it.

They went back and forth for a while, but Erik couldn't talk her out of it. Grumpy,

he drove the carriage toward where she wanted to go.

A sentry up in the watchtower spotted the general's carriage from a distance and reported it to the boss right away. By the

3/5

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time the carriage rolled up to the gate, a bunch of soldiers and jailers were already lined up to greet them.

Seeing the general himself sitting up front driving, the warden's legs went weak, and he dropped to his knees 'G-Generat

Why is the general playing coachman? Is there someone in the carriage? Who could make the general drive for them? The Emperor himself, maybe?' Everyone stood there shaking, hearts pounding with the jitters of facing some big shot. When the curtain twitched, they all held their breath, heads too scared to look up.

Keeping their eyes down, they caught a glimpse. The general personally lifted the curtain and reached in to help and hug -'Hug?' Realizing something was off, they jerked their heads up, eyes wide, practically drooling in awe.

Even in a sleek, practical outfit with her hair tied high, no one could mistake Nyx's gender. That moonlit face was like a fairy's-too perfect to belong down here. "Greetings to the general and madam," the head guy said, leading the salute, and the rest followed in unison.

"General." The warden couldn't help butting in. "Why'd you bring madam to a filthy place like this?"

Beyond the rusty iron gate was a damp, gloomy tunnel, reeking of rot and decay.

No daylight, just the dim yellow flicker of torches. Nyx's pale, delicate face glowed in the torchlight, totally out of place here.

Erik didn't even want her shoes touching this ground. He'd been holding her since they got out, letting her sit on his solid arm like he was her human mount. Nyx gave an embarrassed smile to the guy leading the way. "We were just passing by, and I got curious."

Mid-sentence, a loud bang rang out-a sharp crash that startled her out of nowhere. Erik's face darkened instantly, and he patted her back to calm her down.

"Those damned animals!" The warden's expression soured too. "We haven't questioned them yet today-guess their skin's itching for it!"

Nyx traced the sound and squinted into the dark. After a bit, she made out a few figures slamming their shackles against the cell door, shouting in a language she couldn't quite catch, though it was obviously curses.

They were barbarians captured two days ago, knocked out at the feast. Full of resentment, they cursed the traitors to a bad end and Erik for fighting dirty. After two days of interrogation, seeing their archenemy Erik show up-and with a woman in his arms-they let loose a string of filthy insults.

Erik understood barbarian tongue, and the last trace of emotion drained from his face. Even though Nyx couldn't, he still covered her ears with his hand.

"Cut out their tongues," he said.

The warden flinched at the general's tone, bowing and mumbling agreement before signaling the jailers.

"Erik?" A dry, raspy voice croaked from deep in the cells.

Nyx might not have caught much else, but she perked up at her partner's name, tapping Pale Wolf's arm to check it out. Unlike the fired-up barbarians from before, this cell held a half-dead guy, slumped like a puddle of mud on the floor.

He wasn't speaking barbarian either-just stiff, awkward official speech. "It's really you."

Erik ignored him, turning to Nyx. "That's Monka."

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He was old enough, no heroic vibe, and just average-looking-not worth Nyx's curiosity.

"Bringing a pretty lady here for what? Gifting her to me?" Monka's eyes landed on Nyx, and he wheezed out a laugh. "You sure know how to spend big. Aren't you

worried you'll lose your wife and your plans, and we'll end up with the All-seeing Eyes too?"

If those traitors hadn't handed over the All-seeing Eyes, neither he nor his foster

father would've trusted them so easily or fallen for the trap. Erik had the guts to risk a priceless treasure-they'd lost fair and square. "What's the trick this time? A honey trap?" He eyed Nyx's soft, flawless face, sneering. "They say you don't care for beauty- guess the rumors are half-baked!"

Your woman's real pretty, but even if you let her sleep with me, I wouldn't bend the knee or sell out-"

Suddenly, a sword was pulled out, its cold gleam flashing into Monka's eyes, shutting him up

fast.

He'd meant to rile Erik up, hoping he'd cut his tongue out too for a quick death to dodge more torture. But when the blade actually hit his neck, he shook like a leaf, all bravado gone.

Nyx's face stayed calm the whole time, unbothered by the loser's taunts. She smoothed her hand over her partner's chest, calming the raging Pale Wolf, then looked down and said coolly, "Don't you know yet? I'm the one who had the All- seeing Eyes made. And not just that one.

"I've got dozens of them on hand now. Using one as bait's no big deal. Even if the plan flopped, it wouldn't matter."

"What'd you say?" Monka looked like he'd been hit by a freight train, freezing up

in a daze. He scanned everyone's faces, desperate for a hint of a lie, but found nothing-pure despair.

'No, no way. If that is true, what does that make me-treasuring that All-seeing Eyes like some priceless gem, losing sleep over it, only to end up a prisoner because of it? A total joke, right?' he thought.

After a long, stunned silence, he lost it-crying, laughing, screaming like a lunatic, babbling in barbarian tongue, and smashing his head against the wall. Mental damage hit harder than physical blows. Arlong couldn't pry Monka's mouth

open with all his tricks, but once he cracked, he spilled tons of useful stuff just

muttering to himself. Within days, scouts tracked down Monka's foster father. Sure enough, the barbarians who'd escaped that day had rallied around him, following his orders.

"They're still hiding in Misty Ridge, but in a sneakier spot now-cliffs shooting up to the clouds on both sides, just a narrow path for one person, blocked with rocks and guarded day and night," the scout reported to the general, scratching his head over that steep, tight ravine.

A natural fortress like that-tight as a drum-no amount of troops could bust in by force. It'd have to be brains over brawn. But the same trick wouldn't work twice.

The barbarians had just been burned bad-they weren't letting their guard down anytime soon.

Nyx listened nearby, quietly hooking her finger around Erik's palm. "I've got a gift for you too."

Of The Bea 405

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The moonlight glowed pure and bright. A sharp clang of gongs ripped through the valley, jolting countless people awake from their dreams. Every barbarian threw on clothes and scrambled up-the young and strong grabbing weapons to

assemble.

"The imperial army's here!"

"Move it! Hurry!"

Nyx stood in the middle of her guards' protective circle, looking around, soaking in the scene.

Between the two peaks was a razor-thin gap. If you stood there and looked up, the sky squeezed into a long, narrow line. sunlight spilling faint, hazy shadows onto the rock walls.

A natural wonder like that-often called a "sliver of sky"-would've been perfect for tourists. Right now, though, it was these barbarians' hideout. She didn't really want to wreck the scenery. If only they'd wise up and surrender.

On the other side of the stone wall they'd piled up, the barbarians seemed to have grouped up and started yelling out- official speech mixed with their own tongue. Nyx perked her ears, catching bits and pieces, piecing it together with some guesswork.

They were basically saying the outsiders could forget about breaking in, stop wasting time, and get lost back where they came from.

"Jon, you're up!" Arlong called out one of his guys-sharp-tongued and fluent in barbarian—who stepped forward to shout back.

Jon had a booming voice, perfect for trash-talking, and went straight for the gut. "Hey, barbarians inside-open the gate and surrender quick! Your chief Monka's waiting for you in prison! Know why we found this place so fast? He spilled how to track you down!"

Monka had been a respected leader among the barbarians for years. Hearing this, they flew into a rage-humiliated their chief got caught and refused to believe he'd sell them out.

"He's lying!"

"Slander! He's slandering the chief!"

"Shut your trap!"

Hearing the mess of shouts from inside, Jon sneered, "Bunch of idiots-sold out and still won't believe it!"

He cranked up the volume. "Monka's a spineless punk-couldn't handle the questioning and spilled everything after a couple rounds! Even screamed that his foster father screwed him over, begged us to grab the old man and drag him to Hilltop City to get hacked to pieces!

"That old geezer's full of dirty tricks-egged Monka on to drag you all into this mess. You could've been living decent lives as honest folk. When push came to shove, he ditched Monka and bolted. A lowlife he is! He's dragging you down too, using you as pawns."

As he kept cursing, his tone turned sly. "The general says if that old man dies, the rest of you captives who surrender won't

be killed!"

Below the stone wall, the old man's face turned livid, sensing the crowd's eyes on him shifting. He scrambled to steady the troops. "Don't fall for his tricks! This is another one of Erik's scams-trying to con you into opening the gate!

"Don't think the court'll really let you off! Long as you've got our blood in you, you'll always be dirt to them! Surrender, and maybe they won't kill you, but you'll be slaves-your kids and grandkids too, working like animals for them!

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Chapter 405

"Hold this gate, and they can't touch us! Why else would they waste breath on these tricks to lure us out??

No one would pick slavery over being a free commoner. Even if life in the mountains suckered, it beat signing your life away on a slave contract. Good masters were one in a million—most slaves got beaten on a whim, sometimes to death, and no one cared.

The old man's words hit home. Some who'd been wavering about killing him to surrender quietly dropped the idea, set on holding the gate to the end.

The trash-talking guy kept at it. His jabs were sharp and nasty, totally humiliating—pissing off the barbarians inside more than once. A few hotheads wanted to charge out, weapons swinging, but the old man shut them down.

The standoff dragged on who-knows-how-long. Night faded, dawn crept up, and both sides started feeling the exhaustion. Erik shot a look at the guy, whose voice was starting to crack, signaling him to come back.

"You've got fifteen minutes to think it over—surrender and live, or fight and die, no mercy," Erik's voice boomed out, silencing the whole army. The barbarians hiding in the valley felt their hair stand on end, like a beast had its jaws on their throats.

"Quit putting on airs!" the old man snapped back, forcing a cold laugh. "Come in here if you've got the guts! Daddy's waiting!"

This gorge only had a jagged path one person could squeeze through, now blocked by their wall. Climbing over wasn't easy—they had archers and vats of boiling oil ready. Anyone who tried would get a rain of arrows and a hot oil bath.

The air went dead quiet. Every rustle of wind or grass sent shivers of dread through the old man's chest. He stood tall anyhow, staring down that stone wall. Fifteen minutes wasn't long, but to him, every second crawled like years.

Time was up—a horn blared. A flood of footsteps echoed from outside, and every barbarian's heart jumped into their throat.

"They're pulling back!" The old man strained his ears, then his eyes widened, a grin breaking out. "Hear that? They're retreating!"

Those steps were clearly fading away—not charging in. He'd won this round. Erik was just bluffing—not worth fearing or surrendering to.

The barbarians' faces lit up with relief, cheering and shouting, bowing to the old man, hailing him as their leader. He had led them through this crisis.

They hadn't fully trusted him before, still hung up on the captured Monka. But after holding the fort all night, they'd thrown themselves at his feet, ready to crown him the new boss.

If the old chief could pull off one solid defense, he could do it again-second time, third time. Until the court got sick of wasting troops and supplies on them. Then they'd be free of the extermination threat, back to their old lives.

"Time to celebrate properly!"

"That so-called great general ain't all that! Just a bag of cheap tricks!"

"Next time they show up, I'll shoot arrows from the wall-might even nail the general with one!"

The valley buzzed with glee-folks spouting big talk and bragging, laughing their heads off. Mid-laugh, a deafening roar crashed down like thunder.

"Boom-!" It was like the sky caved in.

Of The Bea 406

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88%

The ground shook, mountains trembled. Rolling dust swallowed the whole valley, blotting out the sun. Everyone inside turned blind, unable to see a thing.

People were animals too, after all. When danger hit, some bolted in a panic, others curled up in despair, leaving it to fate.

A chunk of them had already taken the worst of it-knocked out bleeding by the blast, vision black, ears ringing. They couldn't dodge falling rocks or even the trampling feet of their own in the chaos.

The newly minted old chief got clocked by a chunk of debris too, his head splitting open. Ignoring the pain, he sat there horrified, hearing horns and war cries from outside.

When a couple of soldiers finally grabbed him and hauled him to the army, he twisted around. As the dust cleared, he saw the aftermath-his pupils shook, hands and feet trembling like a sieve.

The stone wall was gone, smashed to bits. The cliffs on either side weren't pressed tight anymore-a massive gap had been ripped open, surrounded by scattered boulders big and small.

"Heaven's thunder. Divine punishment," the old man mumbled. "The mountain god's pissed."

The soldier gripping one arm was from Hilltop City, clueless about barbarian talk, and asked the local soldier on the other arm, "What's he muttering about? You get it?"

"Uh, uh," the local guy frowned. "He says they've sinned, and the mountain god's done protecting them-now it's punishing

them."

"They sure have sinned! Killed so many of our innocent folks-they should've died ages ago!" Hilltop City soldier nodded sagely, then shook his head. "But wait, no- the general's wife set off something to blast the mountain open. What's that got to do with a mountain god?"

The local soldier scratched his cheek. "He's just babbling nonsense."

"The general's wife's gotta be a fairy from the heavens, not the mountains!" said the Hilltop soldier.

"You're right." The local soldier nodded.

For this battle, Erik rolled out with ten thousand troops. Before it kicked off, everyone thought that was way too few, urging him not to underestimate the enemy. Everyone knew attacking was tougher than defending-you needed several times their numbers at least.

But once the fight started, one big boom later, those barbarians turned to jelly- scared out of their wits. The first wave that stumbled out running got picked off easy by the soldiers waiting outside, no fight in them. The rest who couldn't move were sitting ducks, too late to escape.

A far cry from their cocky wall-shouting earlier, the captured barbarians were meeker than sheep now, bawling for the mountain god to spare them.

Some joker started a rumor that Nyx could summon heavenly thunder. It spread like wildfire through the ranks-Nyx even tried to shut it down herself, but it got her more worshippers, even the maids and old ladies back at the house whispering if she was from the sky.

Nyx was rendered speechless. With her rep now, plus Pale Wolf's fighting chops, she'd make a solid rebel leader. But the guy on the throne was her partner too. No way she'd rebel against him.

If she wanted that seat, all she had to do was say it-the little cat would roll right into her lap, begging to step down and be her pet. They were all family-Nyx had

no rebel streak, and neither did Erik. But outsiders didn't see it that way.

1/3

12:16 Sun, 16 Mar

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In just a few days, Nyx got a stack of calling cards-big shots like army deputies down to Kellingtown merchants and gentry. all sending their wives and daughters to sniff around.

Some were itching to climb aboard for glory, others loyal to the crown, ready to dash off a secret report to the Emperor if things looked fishy.

Nyx kept a poker face but sorted them all out in her head, jotting them down in her

little notebook to tattle to the Emperor later and let him handle it.

Before heading back to Hilltop City, she squeezed in some sightseeing around Kellingtown. No photos, so she sketched a few quick drawings and grabbed some local goodies.

The little cat waiting in the palace had probably already flipped the jealousy jar by now. She needed gifts ready-made coaxing him a bit easier.

Local stuff wasn't much this season-city shops didn't have anything fresh or exciting, nothing beating palace tributes. So Nyx poked around the wild instead- skipping risky mushrooms but picking flowers and plants no problem.

She dried some flowers and potted a few others. They were simple but sincere gifts.

Pale Wolf went nuts over a flower crown, and the palace cat wouldn't dare scoff either-Nyx's handmade stuff was the best in his eyes.

After roaming outside a few days, Nyx got restless, wanting to stretch out more. One night, on a whim, she poked Erik's rock-hard arm muscles. "Let me ride your horse."

Erik was half-asleep, jolted awake by her prodding and the word "ride. Suddenly wide awake in every sense. "Ride. How do you want to ride?"

He thought, 'Should I lie down or sit up? Like before the legs were busted? Why the sudden treat tonight?

Erik's face burned red-too bad it was dark, no lights, and Nyx couldn't see a thing. She didn't sense the danger. "Sitting up. obviously! How else?"

"I know how to ride-you know that," she said, thinking Pale Wolf forgot she could handle a horse. She reached out, patting his chest. "Don't worry."

Darkness stirred bad impulses, dulled reason, pushed people closer to beasts. Feeling that soft touch on his chest, Erik's dark eyes glinted like a wolf's. His long arm shot out, locking around her slim waist.

Honestly, Nyx had no clue how things spiraled like this. She fed the home beasts plenty, didn't starve them much, but they still acted like they hadn't seen meat in eight hundred years-scary hungry.

Thinking back to last night, she rubbed her temples, baffled how a normal convo turned into sex. After some head- scratching, it had to be one word's fault.

Well, great-now she definitely wasn't riding a horse today. Wasn't just her body- her mind needed a break too. She hadn't recovered yet. One bumpy ride on horseback, and she'd probably start thinking stuff she shouldn't in broad daylight. After a few days of chilling, on the last day before leaving Kellingtown, Nyx finally managed a horse ride outing.

Erik's mount was a sleek black steed. Maybe horses matched their riders-big guy, big horse. Its coat was short and glossy, not a stray hair, shining like black silk in the sun.

Pretty as it was, it had a rotten temper-proud and prickly. No one but its master could ride it, and even hinting at trying got you attacked. Except Nyx, of course.

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Chapter 406

She just stood there, and it trotted over curious. She fed it an apple, and bam- best buds, prancing around her, begging to play outside.

When Nyx climbed on, Cloudie played nice, smart enough to go slow and steady. Only when she nudged its side did it pick up the pace, speeding up on her say-

So.

Erik trailed on another horse, worried, but seeing Nyx handle his steed like a pro, he finally relaxed.

"Nyx, you're amazing," he said, eyes full of admiration and love. "Besides me, you're the first to ride Cloudie."

Even he'd gotten tossed hard breaking Cloudie in-only his tough hide pulled him through. Nyx rode it smooth as silk. Truth was, Nyx wasn't as chill about it as she looked.

This body was nowhere near her real one's strength-core too weak to handle a beast this big easily. After a short gallop, wind in her hair and joints loosened up, she rubbed her achy waist and thighs, ready to hop off and lead it on foot.

Looking up at a tree right in front of her, Nyx paused mid-dismount. Her eyes narrowed, staring at it for a while, then lit up.

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Of The Bea 407

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She didn't know Kellingtown grew trees like this. Nyx rode around it a few times, her eyes getting brighter.

Cloudie the black horse nipped off some branches, chewed a bit, then spat them out, tail flicking like it tasted awful.

"What's up, Nyx?" Erik caught up. "What're you looking at?"

Nyx grinned and patted the trunk, in a great mood. "A cinchona tree."

You could pull quinine from its bark-good for treating malaria. No big epidemics were raging now, but stumbling on a plant that could cure something still thrilled her-collector's itch kicking in.

Thing was, this tree liked Kellingtown's climate. Taking it back to Hilltop City to grow might not work.

After mulling it over, she picked a few semi-woody branches to cut as slips, planning to hand them to Jinx and Jules to try growing in a greenhouse. Worked out, great. Didn't, no biggie.

Erik got to work chopping branches and digging dirt, no complaints. The grand general gripped his sword with a serious face-not killing enemies, just playing farmhand. He wouldn't let Nyx lift a finger for this grunt work.

Nyx leaned on the horse, chin in hand, watching him, then piped up. "Aren't you curious how I know this tree can heal

stuff?"

Not just that.-All-seeing Eyes, glass, distilled liquor, and the textbooks she planned to have written, covering all kinds of subjects. That stuff went way beyond explaining away with her old ghost story fibs.

In this era, pulling out tricks like these was risky-standing out too much drew trouble. She didn't even like the spotlight- originally just wanted to be a quiet mascot, maybe manage the duke's accounts at most.

But with one partner off at war and the other wrestling scheming nobles, she couldn't sit by. Had to roll up her sleeves and dive in. Once she started, she couldn't stop.

Nyx let out a sigh. She knew full well the things she'd revealed didn't add up with her supposed identity or past. She didn't care much what outsiders thought-just found the "fairy lady" title a bit cringe.

But her partners' opinions mattered to her. Weird thing was, neither Pale Wolf nor the little cat ever asked-like it was no big deal

Erik paused mid-dig, his voice low. "Not curious."

Everyone's got curiosity-he did too. His pillow partner was a walking mystery; of course he'd want to know more. But if Nyx didn't tell, he didn't dare ask. He was scared she didn't want to say-or worse, couldn't.

What if, like in those storyteller tales, she was some fairy or spirit, and once her secret got out, she'd vanish in a puff of wind? he thought

Many nights, he had dreamed Nyx saying she had to go back to the heavens, disappearing from his arms. No matter how he grabbed or begged, she'd slip away, and he'd jolt awake, staring into the dark 'til dawn. He'd rather know nothing-curiosity be damned.

Nyx was speechless for a moment. "Really not curious?" She circled him, sensing a bluff, then grabbed his chin to make him look up. "What if I lied to you before?"

She'd made up a story on a whim to fool the dummy-looking back, her conscience twinged.

Their eyes met. Erik pressed his lips tight, his face an open book. "Are you leaving?" he asked.

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16:13 Mon, 17 Mar MOD

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'Has she grown bored of me, and now she is heading back to the sky?' he wondered. His eyes darkened, wrestling inside. He grabbed her wrist hard, a wave of pressure rolling off him. Like a wolf ready to pounce, jaws aimed at her throat.

Anyone else would've been quaking, but Nyx wasn't fazed-just confused. "Leave? To where? Aren't we heading back to Hilltop City tomorrow together?"

Meeting Erik's complicated stare, it clicked-she understood him.

"Relax, I'm not going anywhere," she said, tilting her chin to peck his cheek, holding back a laugh. "I'm right here with you- nowhere else."

Yeah, she'd tricked him before, but she'd come here to be with him forever-that was as true as it got.

Erik stared at Nyx, long and hard, finally sure she meant it. His whole body loosened up, eyes red as he pulled her into his arms. "A mortal life's short-stay with me a little longer, Nyx."

Her lifespan might be beyond his wildest guesses. He didn't expect her to remember him forever-just hoped she'd spare a few decades to stay by his side, give him the dream of a lifetime together.

Nyx felt a pang for her silly Pale Wolf, wrapping her arms around her anxious partner and stroking his back. "I'm not a fairy or a ghost, actually.

"Think of it like I came back from the future to find you and Aurelius. That's why I've got all this future stuff in my head."

Erik half-got it, only caring about one part. "We're together in the future too?"

Nyx nodded without a pause, and his mood shot up, eyes sparkling. He totally ignored the fact that there was another guy in her future.

With the general cheered up, he got back to work-harder than eight farmhands combined-neatly bundling the cut branches and packing the dug dirt into a basket they'd brought.

Seeing Nyx worn out from riding, he hung all the stuff on the horse, squatted down, hoisted her onto his back, and led both horses home.

The folks they passed by covered their mouths, snickering.

"Never seen a general so whipped!"

"Look what madam turned him into!"

Back in the room with the door shut, Nyx flopped on the bed, wiped out. Riding really was too much for her twiggy arms and legs now.

She closed her eyes, pretending to nap, hearing water brought in but not budging.

A pair of big hands picked her up, undressed her, and set her in the tub.

Then a loud splash-her tall guy stepped in, squeezing in with her. Nyx's eyes snapped open. His scorching heat roasted her up close, danger vibes making her hair stand on end.

"I-I'm beat," she stammered.

Erik leaned closer anyway, his voice rumbling against her.

"It's fine," he said, dead serious-just like when he worked for her. "You don't need to lift a finger."

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Of The Bea 408

Chapter 408

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Maybe it was the thrill of Nyx promising not to leave, or payback for her old ghost-story scam, but Erik cut loose big time. He didn't slack when he worked for her, head down and all in-same deal when he claimed his reward.

Nyx couldn't figure where he got all that energy. Same human bodies-she turned frail as a breeze, but both her guys were built like oxen. Honestly, they seemed more like monsters than she did.

Chopped trees half the day, dug a huge basket of dirt, carried her ten-plus miles on his back-and still acted like it was nothing. Meanwhile, she was a wreck-slept like a log 'til almost noon and woke up already on the carriage back to Hilltop

City.

Carriages back then had no shocks-fancy or not, comfort wasn't in the cards, especially on bumpy dirt roads.

That long haul from Hilltop City to Nevaton had Nyx fighting nausea the whole way, powered through by sheer willpower to see Pale Wolf-and a quiet vow to fix the roads someday.

Right now, someone held her close, her head on his shoulder, body propped steady. She barely felt the jolts in her sleep. However long she snoozed, Erik held her like that the whole time.

Nyx peeked out the curtain, squinted at the midday sun, then tucked back in, leaning on her partner's broad chest-deciding to forgive last night's antics.

The trip back took its sweet time. Expedition General marched back with three hundred thousand troops, hauling the rebel leaders to Hilltop City. They rolled in by early May, summer kicking off.

Warm winds, long days, pomegranate flowers popping bright. Nyx sat in the carriage, curtains down, ear tuned to the crowd's wild cheers and chatter outside, a small smile curling her lips.

When she'd first arrived, Pale Wolf was the fallen teen general in everyone's mouths-leg wrecked beyond repair, a crippled has-been. Now, after a clean, slick rebellion takedown, his star was back on the rise-everyone singing his praises.

The triumphant general rode Cloudie down the streets, flower petals raining on him from both sides.

Though he was married, Erik was still Hilltop City's hottest young catch. Common girls and noble ladies alike harbored crushes. Over six feet tall with a drop-dead gorgeous face-his looks alone could melt any woman's heart.

Sure, some didn't vibe with his fierce aura or battle-hardened edge, but he was Matay's sole heir, stacked with war creds and a bright future. No concubines, no mistresses, didn't even mess with brothels-advantages that blew other guys out of the

water.

Except for the super high-and-mighty noble girls, most would've signed up to be his side piece in a heartbeat.

Nyx caught an earful of the twittering outside. The women didn't know she was in the carriage, drooling over her man right to her face. The shy ones just peeked from the crowd; the bold ones let loose, giggling behind their hands, rating him up and down.

"The general's waist is so solid-bet he's got crazy strength."

"Oh my gosh!"

"You've got guts saying that!"

"How do you know? You've handled a guy before?"

"Never touched a man, but I've ridden a horse! That big black one looks tough to ride-takes serious waist power!"

"Makes sense, makes sense?"

1/4

16:14 Mon, 17 Mar MOD.

Chapter 408

"If it were me, ten or twenty miles and I'd be too wiped to move. The general rides it into war!"

"Oof."

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Nyx even heard some lip-smacking-those girls were meat-eaters too, practically starving for him. She rubbed her ears, feeling them heat up.

+53

They were just talking big for fun-she was the one who'd actually tested that solid waist, felt how strong he really was. The kind of power that tamed a wild horse like Cloudie was not average stuff.

The Kellingtown barbarian rebellion got wrapped up-Monka, his foster father, and the other ringleaders all executed, a tribute to the souls of Nevaton's fallen governor and innocent dead. The rest of the barbarians got spared death, shipped off scattered across the land-no longer a threat.

Expedition General, already maxed out on honors, couldn't get more titles-just piled up gold, silver, and jewels as a reward.

The reward details didn't matter-what mattered was the Emperor still treated him like a brother, no hint of tossing him aside once the job was done. Didn't even mention taking back his army command.

Seeing that, a bunch of capital bigwigs doubled down on hitching their wagons to him-probing openly and quietly, sending their wives and daughters to the duke's mansion to push their girls in.

Alliances leaned on profit, sure, but tossing in a marriage tie made it feel tighter. The general had a wife already, but no one believed a man like him would stop with just one woman.

Nyx was gorgeous, no doubt, but surely Erik wouldn't say no to more beautiful women. He'd dodged women before 'cause he hadn't tasted them yet-now he'd get it.

Loads of folks swaggered in with that logic, only to slink out covered in dirt.

The ones fishing for hints from Erik just got an icy stare. The ones sniffing around

Nyx ticked him off so bad he hit back hard-friendship off the table.

"No need to test me-I'm not taking concubines," he said. Three years after dropping that line, Erik still hadn't taken a single side chick.

The folks waiting for drama, betting he'd cave eventually, finally gave up- convinced he was legit about keeping it clean. The general didn't take concubines, but the madam picked up a second spouse.

Early that month, the Emperor and Empress tied the knot. The long-empty empress spot got filled-and the choice blew everyone's minds.

Out-of-town merchants hitting Hilltop City for business were asking around, double-checking if what they'd heard was real. "The Empress, she's really the same person as the general's wife?"

That was just too wild to believe. The teahouse erupted in laughs. "It's true! It's true!"

"You out-of-towners probably don't know, but His Majesty and Lady Nyx got engaged way back."

"Lady Nyx?"

"Hey! That's the Empress-also the general's wife. Her name's Nyx."

She hadn't officially joined the court, but over the years she'd rubbed elbows with folks from the ministries-public works, personnel, the imperial college-doing real stuff. Officials called her Lady Nyx out of respect, and the commoners followed

suit.

2/4

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The foreign merchants were still reeling, faces like spilled paint cans..

"What, you got a problem with Lady Nyx?" The teahouse laughter died down, replaced by sharp stares sizing up the

merchants.

43%

"Forget her helping the general crush the rebellion-just the cement roads under your feet were her idea! Without those smooth, wide paths, you southern newbies wouldn't even dream of coming up to Hilltop City for business, right?"

In their eyes, Lady Nyx was like an immortal who had descended from the heavens.

+53)

Her skill with numbers and calculations left even the officials of the Ministry of Revenue in awe, bowing in complete admiration. She'd also improved farming tools, invented something called movable type printing, and written some truly impressive books.

"The books in the shops these days are cheap enough for us farmers to buy," one said. "My little girl went to a few free classes at the school Lady Nyx set up, and now she can even read them!"

"I heard that if you study well, you don't even need to take the imperial exams to work for the court-just gotta have the skills."

"All thanks to Lady Nyx!"

As the crowd grew more excited, the merchants nodded along in agreement, making it clear they had no complaints about Lady Nyx whatsoever.

Leaving the teahouse, a merchant's teenage son muttered under his breath, "But she doesn't follow a woman's proper ways."

"Shut up!" his father snapped at once.

Compared to her massive achievements, a woman's proper ways didn't even matter. Someone like her shouldn't have to follow those rules anyway. Devoting herself to serving a husband and raising kids would've just buried her talents.

Forget everything else-just her work in educating the masses was enough to make scholars and commoners from humble families look to her as their leader, praising her

virtues with every flattering word they could muster. Besides, she'd done so much—no one among the scholars, farmers, artisans, or merchants could say they hadn't benefited from her kindness.

"The Emperor wants to make her his Queen, General, Read has no objections, the court officials have no objections, and the people have no objections," the merchant said with a cold laugh, smacking his son upside the head for being so dumb.

"Everyone from top to bottom says she's great, and you're the only one saying she's not—what are you, huh?"

With that kind of reputation, if it belonged to a man, he'd have had no choice but to seize the throne—otherwise, the Emperor would've feared him and had him killed. On a woman, though, it didn't seem all that different.

Thinking of how empty the Emperor's harem and the General's household were, the merchant shook his head with a chuckle, "Lady Nyx really is one of a kind!"

Even the Emperor had been won over by her—maybe she really was some celestial being from beyond the skies.

The morning court began. After discussing a few routine matters, no one stepped forward to speak for a while, and it reached the point where anyone with business could report, or they'd all just leave.

Aurelius gently toyed with the scented pouch hanging at his waist, already itching to get back to the palace and have breakfast with Nyx.

3/4

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Suddenly, a young official stepped forward. "Your Majesty, I have something to report."

Aurelius glanced up at the voice, suppressing his impatience, and allowed him to speak.

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"The Queen's health is frail and unfit for bearing children," the official began, his voice trembling slightly as if he knew he was courting death, but he pressed on anyway.

"Your Majesty is the ruler of all under heaven, and the stability of the realm rests on you alone. Without an heir to carry on the line, I fear it'll unsettle the court and

stir unrest among the people. So, I humbly implore Your Majesty to take more

consorts."

The grand hall fell dead silent; even the ministers' breathing grew softer. Through the beaded curtain of his crown, the official could feel the Emperor's face

darken, glaring at him with the look of someone staring at a dead man. Unable to bear the pressure, he shook harder and harder until his knees gave out, nearly collapsing to the floor.

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Of The Bea 409

Chapter 409 Chapter 409

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It was afternoon. Sunlight streamed through the carved window lattice, casting dappled golden patches on the floor and bathing Nyx, who lounged on a cushioned couch, in a soft, glowing halo.

Aurelius stepped into the bedchamber, and the moment he saw her on the couch, his stern expression softened.

He waved off the attendants' bows and hurried over, wrapping his arms around Nyx from behind. Burying his face in her neck, he took a deep breath of her sweet scent, his eyes falling to her hands. "Nyx, are you dyeing your nails?"

Her skin was smooth and pale as fine jade, her fingertips tinged with a faint pink. She didn't need any extra adornment to look stunning. Aurelius especially loved turning into his beast form, letting those hands pet him from head to tail.

Nyx didn't usually fuss over her appearance, so this was the first time he'd seen her dye her nails-he couldn't take his eyes off her, curiosity piqued.

The palace maids mashed balsam flowers into juice, soaked tiny squares of silk in it, and carefully pressed them onto Nyx's nails, tying them in place with string.

After watching intently for a bit, Aurelius rolled up his sleeves and shoed the maids away. "I'll do it."

He sat right next to Nyx, squeezing onto the same chair until she shot him an annoyed glance and ended up perched on his lap, just as he'd hoped. Seeing this, the other attendants tactfully slipped out of the room.

Whenever they were together, they never needed servants hovering around-and didn't like being disturbed either.

Aurelius had gotten good at these acts of service, handling them with a skill that made it seem like he'd been doing it every day in a past life and hadn't forgotten a thing in this one. He took Nyx's soft hand in his, his touch light but steady.

The cool sensation brushed her fingertips, and Nyx tilted her head slightly, gazing at the focused yet tender profile of the man beside her. Suddenly, she spoke up, "I heard you threw a huge fit at morning court today?"

"Some official urged you to hold a consort selection, and you tossed him in jail?"

"Who's been blabbing nonsense to you?" Aurelius frowned sharply. His anger flared up, but then Nyx nudged his earlobe with her nose, and just like that, he deflated, unable to stay mad.

"It's those idiots stirring up trouble for no reason," he grumbled, a hint of a pout in his voice as he nuzzled into her shoulder. "I ignored all the memorials they sent up before, but they wouldn't let it go-had the nerve to bring it up in open court."

Even the simplest villagers knew how much he adored Nyx-his own courtiers should know too. They had to realize it'd piss him off, yet someone still jumped out to push for consorts-someone behind the scenes was pulling strings. Either through threats or bribes.

Either way, he'd thrown that pawn of an official into prison first. Sooner or later, he'd catch the tail of whoever was really behind it and figure out what they were up to.

"Everything he said was nonsense," Aurelius declared, shifting into his beast form. He poked his head out of his dragon robe's collar and burrowed into Nyx's arms, his blue eyes gazing up at her pleadingly. "I'm not listening to him, and you

shouldn't either."

Nyx's health had been fragile for years, but after three years of care, she'd gotten much stronger-though the imperial physicians all agreed she couldn't bear children. But all he wanted was Nyx by his side-nothing else mattered.

With her nails still drying. Nyx couldn't pet him, so she leaned down and kissed his fluffy head instead, her voice tinged with a smile. "But you've got a throne to pass down, and I can't give you an heir."

"We'll just adopt one from the clan" The little white cat meowed quickly, cutting her off and rolling around in her lap. "I

don't like kids."

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Chapter 409

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A child who didn't even exist yet couldn't stir a shred of feeling in him. All he could think about was how tough it was for a woman to carry a child-maybe even life-threatening. Nyx not being able to conceive was honestly a relief.

You don't like kids Nyx squinted at him, her expression odd as she sized up the little white cat. "Really?" Seeing how he doted on Sera, he didn't exactly seem like someone who disliked children.

The little white cat blinked. If it were his and Nyx's child, he'd probably love it out of affection for her. As long as the birth went smoothly and Nyx didn't suffer too much.

But since Nyx couldn't conceive, that hypothetical didn't matter. As for other people's kids-The little white cat's face darkened for a split second before he stated firmly, "Don't like 'em."

"Oh, Nyx said with a knowing smile. Tll keep that in mind."

If you ever upset me, I'll go tattle to the kid, she thought.

Sera was a total little devil-she wouldn't hold back bullying her own dad. Aurelius

might be full of schemes, but against his own cub, he'd be helpless

Nyx could already picture two identical fluffy white kittens tumbling around in a ball—it was so cute she nearly got a nosebleed just thinking about it.

Curled up in her lap, the little white cat suddenly felt a chill run down his spine and shook out his fur.

He puffed out his chest, stood up straight, and glanced around to check if the windows were letting in a draft. Then he reached out a paw to touch Nyx's hand—feeling it a bit cold, he pressed his warm belly against it to warm her up.

I won't make you mad, Nyx, he promised earnestly.

As for having kids with someone else that was out of the question, so Nyx wouldn't have a chance to snitch.

Their eyes met, and the little cat's pure, innocent gaze pierced straight into Nyx's heart. Her hand warmed up nicely under his belly, but her conscience gave a little twinge.

"It's about time—I think we can take them off," Nyx said with a light cough, wiggling her fingertips to change the subject.

She'd gotten the sudden urge to dye her nails because Pale Wolf had stopped by the palace that day, bringing her some double-petaled balsam flowers freshly grown in the Duke's estate greenhouse.

The blooms were vibrant and thriving. The palace maids had never seen such a rich color and couldn't stop gushing about how pretty it'd look dyed on nails. Their chatter got so loud it sparked Nyx's curiosity too.

They unwrapped the silk, rinsed off the leftover juice with clean water, and she spread out her slender fingers, tilting them up to the light to admire.

From what she remembered, dyeing nails with balsam flowers could easily stain the cuticles too if you weren't careful—hardly pretty, sometimes even a bit creepy.

But Aurelius had a freakishly steady hand and hadn't gotten a single bit on her skin.

"It actually looks kinda nice," she said, fluttering her fingers lightly and holding them up for Aurelius to see. "Doesn't it make my hands look fairer?"

In the sunlight, her ten fingers were still creamy white as ever, but the tips shimmered with a deep red that faded into layers of peachy rouge.

The little white cat stared, totally mesmerized. After a long silence with no reply, Nyx's vision blurred for a second, and she blinked in surprise as he shifted back to human form.

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In broad daylight, the sudden shift hit her hard-even after all these years together, she couldn't handle it and awkwardly looked away. "Put some clothes on."

But his towering figure leaned in, pinning her wrists without a word, cradling her hand in his palm. He rubbed it gently, then started kissing-from the back of her hand all the way to her fingertips.

"Nyx," he murmured, bowing his head and placing her hand on top of his head.

Nyx instinctively smoothed his hair a few times, then he guided her hand to his face. Then his throat.

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Chapter 410

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The throat was a vulnerable spot, one most people guarded carefully, rarely letting anyone near. But Aurelius showed no trace of tension-his eyes were drenched with a lovesick haze, letting Nyx knead his neck however she pleased, like he was worshipping her, leaving his life in her hands.

Nyx's heartbeat skipped out of rhythm. All this over dyeing her nails. She had never noticed he had a thing for her hands before.

After all these years together, she was still uncovering new quirks about her partner. Nyx couldn't help but get curious too, letting him take her hand and explore further. That exploration dragged on for quite a while.

53)

At dinner, the maids brought in the meal and, unsurprisingly, saw Nyx lounging lazily while Aurelius diligently served her.

Usually, she'd at least pick up her own fork, but today, he fed her every bite. Probably because she was downright exhausted. After all, she'd called for water several times that afternoon.

Nyx didn't feel like moving a muscle. She was worn out-her hands especially, wrists aching from overexertion.

Pale Wolf had dropped by that morning, and then she'd spent the afternoon with Cotton Candy. She wasn't made of iron; offering up her hands was her half-hearted attempt at slacking off.

"Nyx." Aurelius said after dinner, sidling up to her once the maids were gone. He rubbed her hands, kissing her ear as he suggested, "How about I dye your toenails sometime too?"

Nyx went quiet for a long moment before she couldn't help herself and gave him a light kick.

She was wrong. This little pervert of a cat didn't just have a thing for her hands-he was shamelessly obsessed with every inch of her, head to toe.

That not-too-gentle kick felt less like punishment and more like a reward to the hot-blooded man-he didn't feel pain, just an itch in his heart.

Nyx glanced down at him, quickly scooted away, and didn't dare stay close. Just then, Arlong showed up with a report-there was movement from the jailed official.

Aurelius had no choice but to reluctantly throw on his outer robe and head off to deal with state affairs, using work to cool himself down.

The next day, Nyx slept in late, feeling refreshed, then took the now-grown Pale Wolf-Grayball-for a few laps around the garden. She came back with a light sweat glistening on her skin.

While bathing behind a screen, she suddenly heard the maids outside greeting someone. "General"

Before she could react, a tall figure strode in with big steps, rounding the screen and stopping in his tracks.

Nyx said, "Not today." Her tone was firm, leaving no room for negotiation, and Erik's face flashed with unmasked disappointment.

"Then can I just kiss you?" he asked, his Adam's apple bobbing as he settled for second best.

Nyx shook her head, and he drooped like a sad puppy, ears and tail practically wilting.

She sighed, exasperated but soft-hearted, and waved him over. The general perked up instantly, tail wagging as he bounded

over.

That bath ended up being for nothing But Nyx was used to it by now and took it in stride.

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Erik massaged her shoulders and legs, then casually brought up his rival's whereabouts. "That official nearly got killed in jail yesterday. They caught the assassin and grilled him all night, but he didn't talk. The official, though-he spilled everything.

"Turns out he used to be a retainer for Prince Banon. Been under his thumb all along. This time, it was Prince Banon who ordered him to push Aurelius to take consorts in court."

"Prince Banon?" Nyx frowned. "What's he got to gain from this?"

Ever since that banquet when she'd caught and detained him in beast form, Banon's faction had taken a huge hit- practically crippled, with no strength left to challenge for the throne.

These past few years, he'd kept his head down, probably knowing he had no shot, and lived quietly with his tail between his legs.

Nyx hadn't heard his name in so long she'd almost forgotten he existed. Erik wasn't quite sure what Banon was up to either.

Other than annoying Aurelius a bit, it didn't seem like he'd get much out of it-more likely, he'd just piss Aurelius off and get nothing good in return.

The couple sprawled on the bed, tossing ideas back and forth, trying to figure out why Banon had suddenly lost his mind. Chatting idly, Nyx's voice grew softer and fuzzier until she dozed off in her partner's warm embrace. When she woke up, the room was pitch black.

Nyx blinked groggily, so out of it she couldn't tell what time it was. She reached left and felt her partner's chin, then right and touched another one's hair. There were people on both sides.

Two strong arms wrapped around her waist at the same time, pinning her so she couldn't move.

"Nyx, you hungry?" Aurelius's voice came out of the darkness.

It sounded soft and gentle, but it made Nyx tense up instinctively. She shook her head fast. "Not hungry, not hungry."

"How could you not be?" A big hand rested on her stomach, and Erik's tone turned serious. "You've been asleep since this afternoon-it's past midnight now, and you haven't had dinner."

Hearing that, Nyx slowly calmed down from her jumpy state, her little face flushing. They were actually just asking if she was hungry.

She coughed lightly to cover her embarrassment, nudged Erik to light a lamp,

then turned to Aurelius. "When did you get

back?"

"Not too early-around ten," Aurelius said, running his fingers through her long hair and tying it into a loose bun. His gaze landed on the red marks along her collarbone, and his movements froze, his expression darkening.

Nyx didn't notice a thing, still asking curiously, "So what'd you do with Prince Banon? What'd you find out?"

Getting someone to push the Emperor to take consorts wasn't a big crime-or even a crime at all, technically. But forming a faction and harboring ulterior motives was a different story.

Aurelius didn't seem keen to talk about it, but Nyx's wide, curious eyes wore him down, and he gave in. "He didn't just manipulate that official to nag me about consorts in court-he's been spreading rumors inside and outside the court too, saying you're barren and jealous."

In a commoner's household, that'd be grounds for divorce-let alone for a Queen. Unable to bear kids and refusing to let the Emperor expand his line was unforgivable.

"His plan was that the rumors would rile up the ministers and the people, pushing me to fill the harem," Aurelius said, a cold smirk on his face. "Next step would be forcing me to depose you. If I insisted on protecting you, I'd get branded a fool of an Emperor, and he could stir trouble.

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"If I gave in and took consorts, it'd drive a wedge between us. He sees you as my greatest ally-getting rid of you would be like cutting off my right arm."

The logic wasn't bad. But Aurelius was not some weakling who'd bend to rumors.

Besides, the rumors didn't even work like Banon hoped. "The people just thought it was nonsense, cursed it out, and wanted to drag the rumor-spreaders to the authorities. Even the courtiers who believed it mostly still sided with you-worried about your position instead."

Only a handful of dimwits actually submitted memorials to test his reaction. But the second they saw his icy glare in court, they shut up and shrank back. Banon schemed his heart out and got nothing-nobody in court backed the official. The official toughed it out alone, got thrown in jail on the spot, and not a soul objected. A total flop of a plan-no gains, just another lost pawn.

"I stripped him of his title, confiscated his estate, and banished him to the Four Peaks Mountain," Aurelius said casually.

That place was remote and desolate, a rundown old villa. With all the dirt they'd dug up on Banon over the years, this punishment was downright merciful- preserving the royal family's dignity.

The maids brought in a late dinner. Since it was so late, Nyx didn't eat too much- just enough to feel satisfied. After washing up, she flopped back onto the bed, her round almond eyes wide open, limbs splayed out. "I don't think I'm sleepy."

She'd napped too much that afternoon and was wide awake now.

"Can't sleep?" Aurelius loomed over her, brushing his hand along her collarbone.

"Then tell me, Nyx-what'd you get up to with Erik this afternoon?"

3/3

Of The Bea 411

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"Afternoon?" Nyx's face froze, a flood of awkward memories rushing in, making her want to curl up and hide.

But Aurelius grabbed her, squeezing her slender arms and legs, forcing her to stay spread out and face his questions.

"H-He kissed me," said Nyx.

"Just kissed you?" Aurelius wasn't letting it go that easily. "How'd he kiss you? Tell me every detail, Nyx."

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As he pressed her, he mischievously toyed with her burning earlobe, rubbing it between his fingers. Feeling helpless, Nyx caught a glimpse of another tall figure approaching out of the corner of her eye.

"Why grill Nyx about it? She's too shy to say," Erik said, rescuing her poor ears and cupping them in his hands. His tone was calm. "If you're that curious, I'll just kiss her again and show you."

That night, the General stayed in the palace, sharing the same bedchamber with the Emperor and Queen, and didn't leave

once.

The maids were used to it by now. When they brought breakfast, they quietly included a serving for the General too, then slipped out without a word.

Nyx groggily ate her breakfast, then flopped back for a nap. Half-asleep, she felt soft kisses on both cheeks. The touches were gentle, and the familiar, comforting presence overhead put her at ease.

But after yesterday's ordeal, her patience was shot, and she let out an irritated huff. Even when she got mad, she was still adorable. The men's hearts thumped hard. Reluctant to leave, they each stole a few more dazed kisses before dragging themselves off to court.

Banon had held power without virtue, committed countless acts of rebellion and chaos, formed factions, and deceived the people-his crimes were clear, and by law, he deserved execution.

Out of kinship, the Emperor merely demoted him to a commoner, seized his wealth, evicted him from his mansion, and sentenced him to lifelong confinement to reflect on his sins.

At morning court, Aurelius officially announced Banqn's punishment, and no one objected. When the tree fell, the monkeys scattered.

The Emperor's move came so fast that the retainers in the prince's mansion didn't even have time to pack up and flee-they got caught and judged for their past crimes one by one.

Some of his diehard followers died resisting; others, learning the Emperor had a cure for the Moonshade Poison, turned on Banon then and there, abandoning the man who'd controlled them with toxins.

By rights, they should've faced trial for their own misdeeds too, but since they'd been coerced, their sentences were lighter-given a chance to reform, they might not lose their lives.

While Nyx practiced calligraphy, the men filled her in on what they'd confiscated from the raid. She suddenly remembered three old acquaintances from Banon's household. "What about Lady Joyce, Mila, and Kaya?"

The last time she'd seen those three was at that banquet when Banon visited the Duke's estate. She'd been too busy nabbing him to pay them much mind-her memory was fuzzy, just recalling them cowering in a corner, a far cry from their old

arrogance.

"Lady Joyce was old-she passed away last winter, Erik said, stroking Nyx's hair and skipping the grim details, keeping it simple. "Mila and Kaya, like the other servants and slaves in the mansion, were made state slaves and sent to labor in the workshops.

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After that banquet at the Duke's estate, Banon's downfall left him bitter and temperamental-they'd borne the brunt of his anger, so life couldn't have been easy. State slavery was tough, but it might've been better than suffering in his mansion.

"I had them sent to the harshest labor spots," the little white cat said, perched by Nyx's hand, tail up, scratching at the rosewood table with aka-kasound. He couldn't stand seeing anyone who'd hurt Nyx live even a little comfortably.

Plus, those two were clueless-when they got dragged off, they were still cursing Nyx, yet sobbing and pleading for Banon, the guy who'd tormented them and gotten their mom killed.

Even now, they dreamed of rising with him, maybe snagging a consort gig if he made it big. Greedy and stupid beyond belief. Sparing their lives was already a mercy.

Nyx didn't share his vengeful streak-she chuckled softly, set down her brush, and reached out to pinch the tip of his fluffy tail.

The white tail hooked around her wrist in a flash, and the whole cat leaped lightly into her lap, rubbing his head against her chest affectionately. "Nyx, you've got no idea how nasty they were about me."

Even with a hundred times more guts, those sisters wouldn't dare curse the Emperor.

But Nyx was the girl they'd bullied and stepped on for years. Even knowing she was now the most revered woman in the land, they still dared to hurl insults at her by name-calling her shameless, a seductress who'd bewitched the ruler.

Aurelius skipped their exact words, tweaking them into complaints about himself to tattle to Nyx. "They called me a tyrant, said I'm brutal and heartless, even hurt my own kin."

Nyx couldn't believe it. In her memory, those sisters were bold, sure, but not bold enough to badmouth the Emperor-that was a death sentence.

She turned to Pale Wolf, bewildered, seeking confirmation. Erik paused for a few seconds, then nodded. "Yeah. They also said I sold out my wife for glory, called me spineless, a lapdog for a tyrant."

Nyx bought it, and her face soured instantly. Cussing her out was one thing-they shouldn't have dragged her partners into it.

Fuming, Nyx's little face stiffened, and she stopped objecting to Aurelius's handling of them. People that rotten deserved some hard labor to straighten them

out.

The two men exchanged a glance, both pretty pleased with how this played out. The mood stayed cozy for a while.

With no pressing state affairs, one ground ink for Nyx while the cat served as her art tool, pressing cute paw prints onto the paper with his soft pads.

They whiled away most of the day like that. But by night, the harmony fizzled out as they squabbled over who'd sleep with her.

Nyx rubbed her throbbing temples. "How about I set up a clock for you? When time's up every night, you get out of my bedr

The men went silent, tucking away their fangs and behaving themselves. If Nyx got mad enough, she'd kick them out and ban them from staying over.

Seeing them settle down, a faint smile flickered in Nyx's eyes. She didn't kick anyone out, letting them both stay.

She'd just undone one button when a soft knock came at the door, followed by Aron's cautious voice. "Your Majesty, are you asleep?"

Nyx froze mid-motion and buttoned back up. The three of them exchanged looks, frowning in unison. The steamy vibe vanished.

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Unless it was something urgent. Aron wouldn't dare interrupt at a time like this-he wasn't that clueless

Erik, the most dressed of them, threw on an outer robe and stepped out to check.

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The little white cat shifted back to human form, dressed in record time, and patted Nyx's hair. "Ill head out for a bit. Go to sleep. Nyx-don't wait up"

Ill come with you" Nyx said, fixing her clothes and twisting her long hair into a bun. She grabbed his hand before he could argue. "Let's go."

When the officials from the Ministry of Justice saw them appear together, their eyes nearly popped out.

Still, they'd long accepted Nyx marrying the Emperor after being the General's wife, so they quickly composed themselves. their faces settling back to normal as they bowed in greeting. Aurelius waved them up.

On the way over, Aron had already given a quick rundown of what happened- Banon had a backup plan. On the way to Four Peaks Mountain, he'd pulled a switch and escaped-nobody knew where he'd gone.

"Did you interrogate the guy he left behind to impersonate him?" asked Aurelius.

"We did-used every trick in the book, but he wouldn't say a word, practically mute," one official replied.

The officials were miserable. With Banon's lineage and ambition, his slipping away was a massive threat to the court.

Screwing up this badly, the officials in charge were in deep trouble-forget keeping their posts, they'd be lucky to keep their heads. If Banon wasn't caught and stirred up more chaos, they'd face execution or exile, dragging their families down with

them

Nyx saw them trembling-especially an old guy with a white beard who looked ready to faint-and took pity. She offered some comforting words and urged them to recall any details that might help them make amends. Leaving the hall, Erik summoned Arlong and sent him with the shadow guards to investigate. If Banon had left Hilltop City, he'd have left some trace. Aurelius called in sharper folks from the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review, ordering them to grill everyone from Banon's old crew one by

one.

"He had someone pose as him to trick the escorts-chances are he'll try that again, sneaking out under a fake identity," Nyx mused.

She couldn't do much to help with this, but she also couldn't just sleep while her partners were busting their butts. So she brewed a pot of hot tea herself and stayed up with them.

After a busy night, at dawn, the shadow guards reported back. Just as Nyx guessed, Banon had taken on a merchant's son's identity, grabbed a few loyalists disguised as guards, and bolted from Hilltop City right away.

Where he'd gone was still unclear, but some of the turncoat followers coughed up a lead-Banon had some hidden forces in Yarrowfield. Yarrowfield used to be his fief. He knew it well-made sense he'd head there.

Nyx stared at the wispy steam rising from the tea, then had a sudden idea. "Summon the heir of Marquis Anders to see me." While waiting, she casually asked the shadow guards, "You guys know about newspapers?" The guards exchanged looks. "Yeah"

Newspapers were Nyx's brainchild, a joint project with the Ministry of Works, the Imperial Academy, and Marquis Anders's heir. They came out three times a month-packed with scholars' essays and poems, political news, even gossip and

serialized stories.

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Unless it was something urgent, Aron wouldn't dare interrupt at a time like this-he wasn't that clueless.

Erik, the most dressed of them, threw on an outer robe and stepped out to check.

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The little white cat shifted back to human form, dressed in record time, and patted Nyx's hair. "I'll head out for a bit. Go to sleep, Nyx-don't wait up."

"I'll come with you," Nyx said, fixing her clothes and twisting her long hair into a bun. She grabbed his hand before he could argue. "Let's go."

When the officials from the Ministry of Justice saw them appear together, their eyes nearly popped out.

Still, they'd long accepted Nyx marrying the Emperor after being the General's wife, so they quickly composed themselves, their faces settling back to normal as they bowed in greeting. Aurelius waved them up.

On the way over, Aron had already given a quick rundown of what happened- Banon had a backup plan. On the way to Four Peaks Mountain, he'd pulled a switch and escaped-nobody knew where he'd gone.

"Did you interrogate the guy he left behind to impersonate him?" asked Aurelius.

"We did-used every trick in the book, but he wouldn't say a word, practically mute," one official replied.

The officials were miserable. With Banon's lineage and ambition, his slipping away was a massive threat to the court.

Screwing up this badly, the officials in charge were in deep trouble-forget keeping their posts; they'd be lucky to keep their heads. If Banon wasn't caught and stirred

up more chaos, they'd face execution or exile, dragging their families down with them.

Nyx saw them trembling-especially an old guy with a white beard who looked ready to faint-and took pity. She offered some comforting words and urged them to recall any details that might help them make amends. Leaving the hall, Erik summoned Arlong and sent him with the shadow guards to investigate. If Banon had left Hilltop City, he'd have left some trace. Aurelius called in sharper folks from the Ministry of Justice and the Court of

Judicial Review, ordering them to grill everyone from Banon's old crew one by one.

"He had someone pose as him to trick the escorts-chances are he'll try that again, sneaking out under a fake identity," Nyx mused.

She couldn't do much to help with this, but she also couldn't just sleep while her partners were busting their butts. So she brewed a pot of hot tea herself and stayed up with them.

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"Master? Master!" Hearing a heavy thud from inside, his men called out a few times with no answer, then rushed in. They found Banon sprawled motionless on the floor, dead or alive, they couldn't tell.

"The prince-the prince passed out." They scrambled to lift him, hands slick with his sweat-he was drenched, like he'd just been pulled from a river. One gingerly touched his forehead, and his face cycled through shock, settling on pure terror.

By late July, the city gate guards reported Banon had returned to Hilltop City. No disguise, no tricks. After all that effort to escape and hide, he'd just given up and walked back in.

Nyx was floored when she heard. "What's his deal?" Surrendering like that didn't fit Banon at all.

"He's sick-really sick," Erik said. He'd gone to the gate himself to handle the handover and winced at the memory of Banon's skeletal, haggard look.

"Sick?" Nyx nodded-that made sense. "What's he got?"

"Dunno, and it doesn't matter," Aurelius said flatly. "He came back to Hilltop City because he's probably dying and wants to save his skin. But why should I waste an imperial physician on a criminal?"

Live or die, it wasn't his problem anymore. Whatever happened, Banon brought it on himself. Not killing him outright was already more brotherly kindness than he deserved. They'd dumped him at Four Peaks Mountain to fend for himself.

Nyx patted her partner's hair soothingly, not arguing. She'd just asked out of curiosity-she didn't actually care about the enemy's health.

A guy who'd done so much evil getting what he deserved didn't need her pity. The whole thing felt like a minor blip, and Nyx forgot about it fast.

Next time she left the palace, she swung by Marquis Anders's place to tell the heir he could pull the wanted notice from the next paper. He didn't need the heads- up-he'd already heard Banon turned himself in.

He crowed about it for a bit, crediting the newspaper's bounty power, showering Nyx with praise while secretly patting

himself on the back.

"Lady Nyx, let me treat you to a meal at the tavern!" he said, bowing dramatically with a flourish.

He'd done a bang-up job and scored some reward cash. Sure, he'd never lacked money growing up, but earning it himself felt different. He tucked the silver into his pocket, eager to splurge on Nyx.

Seeing him strut around like his tail was sky-high, Nyx smirked to herself but didn't turn him down.

Their first real connection started at the Mermaid Tavern across from the glass shop- where they'd patched things up and struck a deal. For this treat, the heir wouldn't pick anywhere else- only that meaningful spot would do.

Same top-floor private room. The owner personally brought dishes she'd like, plus a chilled ice bucket. Nyx fanned herself lightly, gazing out the half-open window at the glass shop across the street.

"Been open so long, and the glass business is still booming," the heir said, following her gaze to the bustling crowd outside. He tried to guess the profits and whistled. "Man. They're raking it in!"

"Lady Nyx, I've always been curious about something," he said, leaning in with a conspiratorial wink. "That glass business- is it yours?"

He had no proof, just a gut feeling. All the wild, amazing stuff in the world seemed tied to Nyx somehow.

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Nyx didn't expect him to be so sharp. She raised an eyebrow but didn't confirm or deny. To the heir, that was as good as a

yes.

His face lit up red, and he fidgeted, rubbing his hands. "I'd never tell a soul! My lady, could you sell me a life-sized glass statue? I want to give it to my dad for his birthday!"

A statue that big-outside palace tributes, it'd be one-of-a-kind in Hilltop City. His dad would be over the moon. After that, his dad might stop chasing him with a stick, yelling about what a rotten son he was.

The heir had been dying to get his dad a big gift for ages. Problem was, he'd haggled with the glass shop owner for years, and they always said they were out of stock or couldn't make it.

"Please, I'm begging you-name your price!" He clasped his hands, pleading with puppy-dog eyes.

If her partners pulled that cute act, Nyx would've melted. But coming from the heir, it just gave her goosebumps-she couldn't look at him.

"Your love for your father is really touching," she said, turning away with a faint smile. "Ask again in a couple months- maybe a miracle'll happen."

As for the price, she wouldn't gouge him-might even throw in a friendly discount. Not like she was hurting for cash.

"My lady, you make all this money-where's it go?" the heir blurted out, too excited to keep his questions in check.

Nyx's food, clothes, and stuff were top-notch, sure, but the palace covered that. She didn't seem to have pricey hobbies or live extravagantly like other rich folks.

"You've eaten up plenty of it," Nyx said, sipping her iced drink, unbothered by his nosiness. "The Ministry of Works has too."

Gunpowder, farm tools, printing, cement-research and infrastructure weren't cheap. She was basically robbing the rich to help the poor.

"Wait-that big donor Master Voss who sent supplies to the frontier army. That was you too?" the heir said, a lightbulb going off as he connected more dots.

At the sound of Master Voss, Nyx's face stiffened, and she gripped her fan awkwardly.

When she was cuddling both her guys at home, she sometimes felt like a big-shot with a harem. But hearing that title slapped on her for real, she felt a shiver of mortifying shame.

Nyx ducked her head and stayed silent. The heir took her reaction as proof.

His face lit up with awe and a touch of guilt. "I-I won't take reward money anymore." Forget rewards-he'd work for free. He'd do anything for Nyx.

"No need," Nyx said, waving him off as his emotions spiked. "Things are on track now-not much big stuff going on. I don't have a ton of places to spend it."

She liked keeping rewards and punishments fair. No point pinching pennies on his pay or bonuses.

Hearing that, the heir slunk back to his seat, nodding obediently. Then something hit him, and his brow furrowed. "Speaking of big stuff, my dad said the south's been a little shaky lately"

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A drear blew in from the window, smacking her in the face. But under her skirt, the ice bucket's cool air brushed her Aerator and cold at once-uncomfortable-so she shut the window.

hars ago with the south?" She hadn't seen anything about it in recent reports.

But this year's weather had been brutal. If it was this bad in Hilltop City, it would be worse down south. Farmers and Anorers still had to work in that heat-tons of them must've gotten heatstroke.

Axseed Sheld dropped the ball-hadn't thought it through before.

She need to figure out ways to help folks too poor to see a doctor, so small illnesses didn't turn deadly. If a family's breadwinner went down, losing their main worker, she couldn't imagine how rough life would get.

The heir scratched his cheek, mumbling, "Lately, seems like a lot of people in the south have been getting sick-some even

Axjoked, snapping her head up. "What kind of sickness? Heatstroke? Flu? Or plague?"

"I dunno," the heir said, fumbling. "My dad just heard it from some wandering trader-might not even be true"

No official reports of a plague had come from anywhere yet, but Nyx couldn't shake a bad feeling. She picked at her food a couple times, then lost her appetite. Her head was swimming with plague countermeasures.

Money and supplies were small potatoes-the treasury was thush, and she had cash to spare for donations. The real worry was if it spread too wide, too fast- medicines might not keep up.

Seeing her mood tank, the heir clammed up, regretting he'd brought it up. It was some trader's offhand comment-but it ruined Nyxx meal. If he could redo it, he'd have kept his mouth shut.

They'd arrived at the tavern all chipper, but left in silence, the air heavy. The owner started second-guessing himself and the taste of the food.

He chased after them a few steps outside, wanting to ask if he'd messed up somewhere. Just as he stepped out, he caught NY bumping into someone and rushed over. "My lady! Lady Nyx!"

Nyx got steadied from both sides while the heir chewed out the guy: "You blind? Watch where you're going?"

She suddenly felt like some spoiled bully and waved him off quick. Looking closer, the guy who'll crashed into her was a ragged, wild-haired beggar-clearly sick, coughing nonstop, shaking all over, drenched in sweat. She couldn't tell if it was

illness or lear

Two shadow guards pinned him down hard; a few others lurked in the corners, eyeing him. "My lady, this guy's suspicious. Well take him back for questioning"

Wide street like this, he dodged everyone else but slammed right into her-maybe he was up to no good. That got the heir Jumpy too. Forgetting manners, he scanned Nyx. Lady, you okay? Not hurt, right?

Nyx glanced down at herself-nothing seemed off. T'm fine."

She figured he was just too sick to see straight and stumbled into her by accident. But the guards' caution wasn't baseless. She sighed and only said, "Don't torture him. If he's clean, get him a doctor"

The beggar froze for a second, then dropped his head, letting his messy hair hide his althy face

Just a little biccup-Nyx didn't dwell on it. Back at the palace, both her guys were gone. A maid said respectfully, Aurelius and the General went to Four Peaks Mountain"

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'Four Peaks Mountain? Banon?' Nyx was surprised. She thought, "They'd actually go see him. Is he about to croak, and they are giving him a last goodbye?'

It didn't add up though. Pale Wolf might, but her little cat wasn't that soft-hearted- he wouldn't care if Banon lived or died.

Lost in thought, Nyx started feeling tired, her eyelids drooping. Before lying down, she had to bathe-couldn't sleep all grimy.

She told the maids to bring water, stripped down, and soaked alone in the tub. The hot water melted her limbs, making her drowsier-she just wanted to close her eyes for a quick nap.

Evening at Four Peaks Mountain was bleak and lonely, the dying sun casting an even deader vibe. The abandoned retreat hadn't been tended in years-weeds everywhere, a few scrawny trees clinging to rocky cracks.

From the rundown house came Banon's gut-wrenching coughs, sounding like he might keel over any second.

Hearing that tubercular racket from afar, the two men stopped outside, not bothering to step in. "Spit it out-what do you want to say?"

The crumbling walls didn't block sound anyway-they'd hear him fine. Both guys' faces were identically cold.

They wanted to see what brilliant last words Banon had cooked up-something they'd regret not hearing after all his fuss to summon them.

The coughing stopped; the room went quiet. Then came a wheezing, broken laugh, like a busted bellows. "You're here- good, good. Guess what I've got?"

Nobody answered. Whatever he had, Aurelius didn't care, and Erik couldn't be bothered.

The laughter didn't quit-it got wilder. "If all went well, Nyx should have caught the same thing as me by now! Aren't you curious how long she's got left?"

Nyx was their shared Achilles' heel. In an instant, both men's faces twisted. Erik yanked his sword from his waist, his glare practically feral.

"What've you got?" Aurelius asked, a furious smile curling his lips, the urge to gut someone alive peaking.

Banon clammed up, humming a tune instead-choppy and awful. "A frail beauty fades on her sickbed, morning clouds and evening rain all ceased. Past glories slip away in dreams, youth fades fast, a soul broken, hard to mend."

"I'm just a dead man walking-why waste time questioning me? Better hurry back to check on your woman," he said, then sneered, "But this thing spreads easy. Best lock her up like me and stay away."

He thought, 'You said you loved her and only wanted her. But now she's a danger. You will never risk your own life for her! Poor Nyx, scheming for them her whole life, only to end up alone like me-a condemned sinner.'

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Nyx stirred vaguely amid a noisy clamor, frowning as her lashes fluttered and her mind cleared. She felt so cold.

Water splashed, and before she could process it, strong arms hauled her out of the tub. They wrapped her in a blanket like a cocoon, dried her off, and dressed her in thick clothes.

Huddled in her partner's arms, dizzy and dazed for a while, Nyx finally pieced together what happened. She'd fallen asleep in the bath.

"Achoo, achoo-!" After a string of sneezes, she stopped, her little face scrunching up.

She'd felt the chill while dozing but couldn't wake up-just curled her hands and feet tighter. The bathwater had gone cold ages ago, and she'd soaked in it who- knows-how-long. Now her nose was stuffed, breathing rough.

"Ugh, I think I'm sick," Nyx said, struggling to breathe a few times before sighing. Embarrassed, she turned and buried her face in Pale Wolf's chest.

They had worked so hard to strengthen her body. But she was so stupid and caught a cold in summer. She felt ashamed.

He didn't say a word. Nyx waited quietly, but a weird feeling crept up on her. Maybe she was imagining it, but she swore Pale Wolf's hands were shaking. Not just his hands—his whole body seemed to tremble.

"What's wrong?" She looked up and flinched at his bloodshot eyes. "What happened?"

"Weren't they at Four Peaks Mountain? Did Banon pull something again?' she thought.

"Where's Aurelius?" Nyx asked, panicking as she glanced at the door. Straining to listen, she caught chaos outside—someone wailing in terror.

'Why are the maids crying out of nowhere? Did something happen to the Emperor?' she thought.

Nyx freaked out, clutching Pale Wolf and demanding, "What's going on? Don't hide it from me!"

She squirmed to go check outside herself. The door swung open, and the guy she'd been worrying about appeared, perfectly

fine.

"Nyx," Aurelius said, his eyes red too. He hugged her chilled body tight, murmuring low, "Don't be scared. I'm here—we're both here."

As he spoke, he cupped her face. Under her confused stare, he suddenly kissed her lips, pouring everything into it—like he wanted to carve her breath into his bones.

Nyx already struggled to breathe, and the kissing made it even harder for her to catch her breath. She didn't know what had gotten into him. Pale Wolf, who held her, soon started acting crazy too.

She had no one to turn to for help, like a little rabbit that had fallen into a den of beasts—small, pitiful, and helpless. They kissed her over and over, her face flushing red from holding her breath.

"You guys. You won't even spare a sick person?" she finally managed to free herself, glaring at them with misty, round eyes full of accusation. "Jerks!"

But the males didn't calm down. If anything, it was like she'd hit a nerve. One by one, they stared at her with frightening eyes, making every hair on her body stand on end.

"Spare you?" Aurelius gently stroked her face, nuzzling against her ear. "I'd never let you go, Nyx, no matter what."

He swore he'd be her man forever, in this life and every life after. She'd never shake him off.

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Work bram shon-conned leaving her mind blank. Her sweet little kitty suddenly started talking like some domineering medord. She wondered if something had possessed him.

She narrowed her eyes, studying her partner's face closely, searching for signs of a disguise. Before she could spot any hints of a mask, she lost her freedom again. Erik pulled her into his arms.

Be stayed siem, not saying a word, just kissing her nonstop while his chest heaved dramatically. It wasn't until Aron arrived with the imperial physicians that the weirdness finally stopped, rescuing Nyx from the chaos.

Long at the crowd in front of her. Nyx started questioning her entire existence. The whole imperial medical team was hem. Even the wine-bearded old director had come personally.

Yax called out to excuse him from kneeling before he could wobble down, granting him a seat instead.

Thank you. Your Ladyship, the old director said solemnly. He took her pulse with grave focus, giving her his full attention.

The other physicians stood by, observing her complexion and energy, listening as she described her symptoms. As they listened her expressions turned odd.

Why does it sound like Her Ladystup just caught a cold? they thought.

On the way be. Aron had made it sound like a dire emergency, and he didn't seem to be faking it. When they entered the ball and saw Auns and the general in their frenzied, despairing states, the physicians had been scared half to death.

Even though they suspected Nyx might just have a cold, they kept their mouths shut, silently wondering if their medical skills were baking

Confex pain of eyes ined on the old director's trembling hand as he took her pulse, pinning all their hopes on him. Time ficked by and for der gew bearer

Nyx's brand won't steady her, her nose itchy. She tried to hold it in but couldn't, turning her head to sneeze. Erik indignantly pulled out a soft handkerchief and wiped her face.

They were used to her by now—she'd been a mess in front of them plenty of times. Nyx didn't mind and felt no shame, letting her send her sneeze so neatly.

She & her used to it long ago. The physicians, though, couldn't get used to it.

Seeing the younger turn into a doting softie was something they'd witnessed before, but it still felt unreal every time. A few garrisonians couldn't help winking glances, and even the old director instinctively looked up.

How's Nyx's condition you ask as he lost focus, Aurelius's commanding voice cut in. The citi-
decorated, winged off his chair with a thud. "I am incompetent. The air started to freeze in
an instant. The handkerchief in Erik's hand tore apart, and darkness flashed before
Aurelius's eyes. He thought he couldn't be cured.

The route to their beloved might not have long to live, suffering through sickness until
the end, ripped their hearts then Tory wished they could take her place.

"My son new booking the old ducesor said, bowing low with shame. I've checked her
pulse repeatedly and still think it's just

Uld. I cut her any other pines"

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died and brilliant. After joining the imperial hospital, he quickly earned favor with whose
eyes, being respected figure. He'd always been confident in his abilities.

Bet with hearton and Cesena Yeed so on edge, and hearing Nyx's illness stemmed from
Banon's vicious scheme, it couldn't golkky he wensetsun ingles cold. Yet a cold was all
he could diagnose.

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What's wrong with a cold?" Nyx was still out of the loop. She looked around in
confusion. "Am I not supposed to have a

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All the physicians took turns checking her pulse, and their conclusions matched the old director's.

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The two males' eyes grew brighter, a flicker of hope igniting. Calming down to think it over, Banon's words might not be true. He could've just pinpointed their weakness, tricked them, and laughed at their panic.

Realizing this, Aurelius's aura softened. He ordered the physicians to prescribe cold medicine and dismissed them, then knelt halfway to grasp Nyx's hand. "Nyx, when you went out today, did anything happen?"

Nyx blinked, thought hard, and nodded. "The heir of Marquis Anders mentioned to me that his father heard from a traveling merchant that lots of people in the south are getting sick-some even died."

That was the most worrying thing she'd encountered today.

"Oh, and someone bumped into me. I wasn't hurt-he probably didn't mean it," she added, recalling the beggar's pitiful state. "He seemed sick, too poor to get treatment. The shadow guards took him for questioning, but they could call a doctor to check on him while they're at it."

The faint glimmer of luck they'd felt crumbled away. Aurelius barely held himself together, dragging heavy steps to summon the shadow guard leader.

"That beggar had a tattoo of Banon's deathsworn," the leader said, not daring to meet Aurelius's gaze, bowing low. "He's already dead

They hadn't even started interrogating him. Right as they began, his face went pale, he gasped for air, his breathing visibly weakened, and he died right in front of them. High fever, drenched in sweat, shaking all over, just like Banon.

Everyone's hearts sank to rock bottom. Except Nyx's. She frowned as she listened, finally piecing together why her partners were acting so strange. So, Banon had schemed to make her sick.

"But I still feel like it's just a cold," she said, touching her forehead and cheeks. She was a bit warm, but not badly. "I was out in the wind today and soaked in cool water for hours. I just caught a chill.

Her symptoms were clearly different from that guy's. Plus, the symptoms the shadow guard described sounded kinda familiar.

"What Banon had sounds like malaria, Nyx mused, digging through her mental knowledge bank. "If it's malaria, him touching me like that wouldn't spread it."

"It doesn't spread?" Erik's ears perked up. "Really?"

He trusted Nyx's words unconditionally, but this time was different-he worried she might be comforting him on purpose.

Nyx shook her head honestly. "It's not that it doesn't spread-it just doesn't spread that way."

Malaria wasn't like the flu; mosquito bites were its main way of spreading. Poor old director got dragged back that same night, summoned again to discuss some mosquito-borne disease with Nyx.

Tve heard of something like this before, but I've never seen this, mal-aria myself, the old director said, racking his brain. He vaguely recalled a medical text mentioning it, though not by that name. He couldn't remember the cure-just something about mosquito bites.

"Alright, go check your books again," Nyx said, sighing when he offered no real help. She decided not to cling to false hope. "I still think it's just a cold, but starting today, I'll isolate. No contact with outsiders until I'm better."

If she'd misjudged and it wasn't malaria-and she'd caught something-she could limit the spread by isolating. The shadow guards who'd dealt with Banon and the beggar deathsworn had to isolate too.

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Everyone else cleared out of the bedchamber, leaving the two males lingering by Nyx's side, one on her left, one on her right, refusing to budge.

Nyx squinted, pinching their ears. "You're really staying?"

These two had kissed her mouth even when they thought she had some terrifying contagious disease. They didn't say it outright, but their actions screamed they'd follow her to the grave rather than live without her.

"You're the Emperor. And you're a general guarding the nation. She rubbed their heads helplessly, her heart a mess of feelings. "You shouldn't risk your lives."

"There are plenty of emperors. If one's gone, another takes his place," Aurelius said, hugging her waist tightly, his voice

muffled.

Same went for generals-never a shortage. But Nyx was one and only. Once they'd latched on, they'd never let go.

Erik was clumsy with words. He couldn't say anything fancy. He just nodded quietly beside her, then suddenly started unbuttoning her clothes. He'd dressed her in them himself, so stripping them off was quick and easy for him.

"What are you doing?" Nyx's flood of emotions vanished in a flash. Startled, she yanked the blanket over herself. "I'm still

sick!"

'Did the shock turn this honest guy into a beast?' she thought.

Erik didn't get mad at being misunderstood. He looked serious. "Checking if you got bitten by mosquitoes."

Aurelius's face turned stern too. He mercilessly snatched Nyx's little blanket away. The bedchamber fell quiet, only the faint rustle of fabric breaking the silence.

The two males' gazes felt like they could burn, so intense Nyx couldn't speak. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell they were inspecting her carefully, terrified of missing anything.

Her jade-white skin was flawless, making a few red marks stand out. But on closer look, they realized those weren't mosquito bites-they were their own handiwork.

The result was good. All three let out a collective sigh of relief.

Nyx grabbed her blanket back, changing the subject to ease the awkwardness. "What's that noise outside?"

It came and went-sometimes she heard it, sometimes not. It sounded like wind, or maybe a cat meowing, or even someone crying in fits and starts.

She'd been too distracted to ask earlier, but now that things had settled, she remembered to bring it up. She'd never heard it before-only today.

"Is it loud?" Aurelius frowned, getting up to head outside.

He didn't answer her directly, but Nyx suddenly guessed it, eyes widening. "Are you punishing someone?"

'Punishing who? The palace staff serving in the bedchamber?' she thought.

She couldn't sit still anymore. She leaped up with a carp-like flip, only to be scooped back into Erik's arms and held down.

"They were lazy, didn't even notice you fell asleep in the water and caught a chill. They deserve punishment," Aurelius said gently, though his expression was icy.

Back then, he'd been furious and ready to kill. Bursting into the bedchamber, he'd seen Nyx curled up silently in the tub, her face deathly pale. Holding back his temper and not ordering the on-duty staff beaten to death was already him showing

extreme restraint.

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"I didn't take their lives-just a light punishment," he said, kneeling on one knee, brushing Nyx's hair softly. "If I'd failed to care for you myself, I'd punish myself too."

Nyx believed that. Her partners were capable of that kind of thing. Still, her little face paled, and she squirmed uncomfortably. "I fell asleep in the water myself." She was a grown adult-she didn't really need someone hovering over her. Catching a cold was obviously her own fault.

Seeing her so uneasy, Aurelius gave in right away. He called Aron over and told him to pass the word. Nyx showed mercy, sparing them the rest of their punishment.

"Her Ladyship says to take care of your injuries. You don't need to serve these days," Aron announced. The palace staff bowed in thanks, grateful she'd saved them from misery.

Aurelius rarely showed emotion. They'd served him for years and never seen him as furious as today. He'd been like a tiger cornered with nowhere to run-whoever crossed him would've been torn to shreds. Just thinking of those wild, reddened eyes made everyone tremble.

The Emperor who sparked such fear was now a soft little kitty, curling up in Nyx's arms, nuzzling into her chest. Nyx rubbed his tail tip, smoothing his fur, feeling a bit wistful. "You're isolating with me-what about morning court?" "Skipping court for a few days won't hurt," he said. Between state affairs and Nyx, he chose Nyx.

The ever-diligent emperor suddenly canceled court due to illness. It worried the entire court. Concerned memorials about his health poured into the palace by the cartload. Aurelius glanced at them and set them aside. He only bothered with the ones reporting real business.

Stuck in the palace with nowhere to go, Nyx got bored. To keep a certain Pale Wolf from sticking to her all day and going wild, she found things to do-tinkering with gauze mosquito nets one moment, researching quinine extraction the next. The cinchona trees brought back from Kellingtown had barely survived, and she nearly stripped them bald. She had more artemisia sent over and spent days with the old director and others from the imperial hospital, managing to whip up a few bottles of malaria medicine she wasn't sure would work.

"I will test the medicine myself," the old director declared boldly, staring at the pills, ready to pop one in his mouth if Nyx agreed.

Nyx laughed and sighed, "You're not sick-why test it?" There were perfect lab rats up on Four Peaks Mountain.

She tucked the bottle away and went to the next hall to find Aurelius. His desk was buried in memorials, and her male stared at one report, his face grim. "What's wrong?" Nyx stood behind him, glancing down. She caught words like "epidemic," "plague," and "several dead" on the

report.

"From the south?" she asked, frowning too.

Aurelius nodded, grabbing a stack of memorials from his side. "Zeniton, Lorderin, Fargo, Tymen-all hit with plague."

The further south, the worse it got, but being so far from Hilltop City, reports didn't come in fast.

"I sent people to check the north too. Some are sick there, but not many. It hasn't drawn attention."

Nyx flipped through the memorials. Some local officials had noticed a link between the disease and mosquitoes. A few doctors had even figured out on their

own to boil artemisia for patients, and some actually recovered. Looked like

malaria,

no doubt about it.

"Good timing-the imperial hospital just made some new medicine," Nyx said,

pulling out the bottle. "Let's find someone to test it quick. If it's fine, we can start relief efforts."

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Her cold was almost gone. Shell only had a fever for one night, sweating it out under the blankets with her males warm bodies After a few days of cold medicine, de washed to bouncing around.

Now she could not en go curde, but he even wanted to ride horses and feel the wind.

Leaving the palace gates she saw the majestic black horse Cloudie. Nyx darted over, pulling a small apple from her sleeve. Good Cloudke, this is all backs to you

Back in Kellingtown, riding Cloudie for fun had led her to stumble onto the cinchona tree by chance. Cloudie deserved major credit

The big black horse hadn't seen in ages and snorted happily, snatching the apple

from her hand. It wanted to share half with her and invite her to ride, completely ignoring its real master.

Nyx dedined the food-sharing but couldn't say no to riding. She hugged its sleek, strong body, stepping into the stirrup to dimb up. Before he could swing her leg over, someone grabbed her waist from behind and gave her butt a light smack.

Cloudle whipped its head around, ready to kick the bold jerk messing with Nyx. Seeing its master's cold face, it lowered its

Erik lifted Nox onto a smaller horse held brought, steadying her. "This is your horse."

Three years on the once-tiny foal had grown up. It was prettier than ever, with long, curly mane shimmering faint gold, unterly devoted to its master. Nyx adored it too, pulling another apple from her sleeve to feed it, listening to it crunch away.

Her little borse jimbo was perfect in every way-except it was too calm. As a foal, it used to romp around. Now grown, it only moved with elegance. Riding a horse like this, she'd never get the thrilling wind she craved. Feeling restricted, Nyx shot Pale Wolf an annoyed ghre

The male stood tall, unfared, saying the most outrageous thing in a dead-serious tone. "If you get sick again, I'll lock you up and kiss you every day."

Nyx's face flushed red. She turned her head, refusing to look at him. No way she'd let him kiss her.

She squeezed the horse's sides and took off without looking back. Her attitude was fierce, but Jimbo trotted along leisurely, barely faster than a person's walk Cloudie carried Erik, keeping a steady pace behind Jimbo. It kept trying to nuzzle

Jimbo's tail, getting swatted by that pretty golden fluff. Instead of getting mad, it got more excited.

Watching its shameless antics, Erik found it familiar-like looking in a mirror. Soon, a little white cat seemed to drop from the sky, landing in Nyx's arms, brazenly sharing her ride.

A light rain started falling on Four Peaks Mountain. Banon curled up on a cold bedboard, shivering as the dampness from the rain seemed to seep into his bones from all sides.

His body ached, his head splitting. He struggled to breathe, rasping. "Someone. Anyone. Water. Servants!"

No one answered. He jolted awake from his dream, eyes bleary, realizing he was no longer a prince-just a condemned commoner. His old servants and guards were gone. Even his last deathsworn had been used up as a pawn.

Left alone in this desolate ruin to fend for himself, watched by guards outside, no one served him. They only gave him enough food and water to keep him alive, letting him suffer in sickness.

The door suddenly swung open, wind and rain rushing in. Banon thought someone had brought water. He craned his neck

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eagerly, only to see a face he despised.

"Aurelius, what are you here for?" He glared at Aurelius with venom, then perked up. "Did Nyx die?"

Even a big guy like him couldn't handle the disease, barely clinging to life. A frail thing like Nyx croaking after a few days of sickness seemed totally reasonable.

Seeing Aurelius still looking healthy, clearly uninfected, Banon clapped and laughed, "You really d

eagerly, only to see a face he despised.

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"Look at you-not even that sad, huh?" Banon shook his head. "Royalty's heartless, as expected."

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As a fellow royal, he got it better than anyone. Aurelius had the same blood as him-naturally, they were cut from the same cloth. Nyx might've had a place in his heart, but it'd never outweigh himself, the throne, or the empire.

One Nyx died, another queen would come along eventually. The world's full of beauties-none might match her, but he could find traces of her in others. An emperor wouldn't die for love; he'd just fake some sentimental mourning.

"Come on, kill me to avenge her," Banon said, pointing at his chest, inviting Aurelius to stab. "It's the only thing you can do for her now."

He'd waited for this day too long, long past wanting to live, just lacking the guts to end it himself. The sickness tormented him beyond death. He craved a quick end. Dragging Nyx down with him before dying was his proudest scheme.

"Hurry up already. Maybe I'll catch Nyx on the road to the underworld," he taunted, grinning wickedly. "You broke her heart -maybe she'd rather run into my arms and be my ghost bride."

Setting aside hatred, Banon still remembered that first stunning glimpse-her delicate features, dressed in finery, sitting there like a goddess.

Every time he bedded the Voss sisters after that, he tried to find Nyx in their faces. But despite some slight similarities, they were nothing like her.

"The Voss sisters are still alive, right?" he said, pretending to be helpful. "They're Nyx's half-sisters. Not as pretty, but still beauties. I trained them well. If you miss Nyx, you could use them to take the edge off."

"Shut up," Aurelius snapped, too disgusted to listen. Smiling, he drew his sword and stabbed it next to Banon's head.

The sharp blade sliced off a strand of his hair. He felt a cold sting on his cheek, then pain-blood trickling down into his ear. His already trembling body shook harder. Fear gripped him, leaving him speechless.

"Aurelius?" Nyx tied up her horse and stepped inside with Erik, catching the scene. Her eyes widened in shock. She thought, "He didn't kill him, did he?"

She lifted her skirt and hurried over. Seeing the guy on the bed still breathing, she relaxed, grabbed Aurelius by the collar, checked him for injuries, and then pulled him away. "Stay back from him."

He hadn't showered for so long. He was filthy, sick, and probably crawling with fleas. She rarely judged people, but it was hard not to judge Banon.

Once a dazzling royal, he'd let himself fall apart without servants, losing all dignity. Noticing Nyx's look, the clean-freak kitty quickly retracted his claws, obediently stepping to her side.

Banon lay still, limbs rigid, staring blankly at Nyx's face. 'So alike. How can she look so much like her. Not just her face- every frown, every gesture, every move was identical.

After a long silence, it hit him. "No wonder you're not grieving-no wonder you scoff at the Voss sisters. You've already found a better replacement!"

"Replacement?" Nyx's ears perked up at the weird word. Her brain churned, finally getting it. She nearly lost it, thinking,

'Does malaria mess with his brain too?'

The two males flanked Nyx, shielding her from Banon's prying eyes. No replacement. There'd never be one. Nyx was Nyx.

Aurelius looked down at him, cutting through his delusions. "Deep down, you know you're a total loser. You're just lying to yourself, too scared to admit it."

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His thoughts laid bare, Banon felt stripped naked in public, his face turning liver-red. With all his strength, he lunged up like a madman, reaching to strangle Nyx.

"How are you still alive? Why didn't you get sick?" he screamed.

The weaker the body, the easier it was to catch deadly diseases. His loyal deathsworn, strong and fit, had all caught it from him one by one. He'd seen the signal that day-his plan worked. Nyx should've been dead already.

Before he could touch a hair on her, Erik smashed the sword sheath into him, knocking him flat. He couldn't even crawl. It was like his bones gave out too. He slumped into a puddle, eyes locked on Nyx's sleeve hem.

Her nails were so red-like the prettiest gems, a color he'd never seen. He mumbled, "She's a fairy. Fairies don't catch plagues. The fairy didn't choose me, so I lost the throne.

"She got mad at my scheming, so she cursed me with this sickness, making me suffer every torment. I disrespected a fairy- that's why I ended up like this."

Nyx couldn't make out Banon's incoherent muttering. She figured the shock had driven him nuts. Losing all curiosity, she waved outside, unwilling to look anymore. She called a young physician over.

"He's all yours. Give him the medicine twice a day, check his pulse once daily, record any changes, and watch for side effects," she said.

The young physician listened carefully, bowing. "I'll do my duty without fail." He was the old director's star pupil, skilled and trustworthy. Nyx felt good leaving it to him.

Banon lay limp, watching her skirt flutter away with a fragrant breeze, flanked by two fierce beasts. His soul seemed to drift off with her.

Someone shoved a bitter pill in his mouth. He swallowed it and closed his eyes, waiting to die. Days passed, but the expected poison never kicked in. Banon didn't die either.

Eating what he thought was slow poison twice a day, he didn't feel poisoned- instead, he started feeling better.

"What medicine are you giving me?" With some strength back, he finally emerged from his despair and spoke to the guy feeding him.

The physician's tone was flat. "Malaria medicine."

Banon didn't get what "malaria medicine" meant, but it didn't sound like poison.

He studied the man's face. "Are you one of my people?"

He didn't recall having a retainer or deathsworn who looked like this. But this guy saving him outta nowhere had to have a

reason.

The physician gave him a look like he was an idiot. "No."

"Then why are you treating me?" Banon bristled at the look, barely keeping his temper in check.

"Lady Nyx sent me to test her new medicine on you," the physician said plainly, then bent back to his notes without fuss.

Banon's pupils shrank. "Nyx is saving me?"

That realization hit, and all his anger melted away. A wild excitement took over, his mind racing with fantasies. 'She finally picked me this time? Does she want me on the throne?

"I'm better-I'm totally fine now," he babbled, grabbing the physician's sleeve. "Go tell Nyx I'll do anything she says from now on, anything she wants."

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Mortals couldn't resist a fairy. He'd learned that and was ready to serve her willingly. A fairy always rewarded her followers well

The physician's pen shook, a drop of ink splattering onto the paper. He set the pen down, checked Banon's pulse, stared at him thoughtfully, then nodded. "You're indeed better."

The trial was done, and the results were great. Once he reported back to Lady Nyx, this recipe could go to disaster relief, along with her mosquito-repellent formula. It'd solve the south's crisis.

"Take one last dose," he said, pulling out the bottle and handing over a pill.

Since it was a fairy's gift, Banon snatched it up and swallowed it without a second thought. Maybe his mindset had shifted- today's pill wasn't bitter. It even tasted sweet.

He couldn't sit or lie still, pacing the floor to burn off his joy, already picturing himself in dragon robes on the throne, Nyx in his arms as his queen.

A metallic taste surged in his throat, blood rushing up. Banon stumbled and fell, eyes wide in disbelief. He stiffly looked down, seeing his clothes soaked with blood spilling from his mouth. "Ny-Ny-"

The poison hit fast. Before he could even say Nyx's name, his face twisted, and he stopped breathing. The physician packed up his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and stepped over the body without a second glance.

From the day he got here, he'd known Banon was a dead man walking. Once the trial ended, he'd act. That was Aurelius's order. General Read had handed him the

poison.

At this point, no one else was to blame-only Banon himself. Even when he plotted rebellion, escaped Hilltop City after his crimes, and turned against Aurelius, the emperor had been lenient enough to spare his life.

He shouldn't have touched Nyx. He crossed Aurelius and the general's line. Death was certain.

**

Banon, confined on Four Peaks Mountain, dropped dead in the villa and was buried as a commoner.

Everyone knew he'd been gravely ill and near death. It made perfect sense, so no one cared. Common folk only mentioned it over tea, clapping and saying he got what he deserved.

By mid-August, the south started getting relief supplies-medicine, grain, and a recipe from the court. Newspapers ran detailed mosquito-prevention notices, listing the dangers of bites and ways to repel them.

With all these efforts, the epidemic didn't make big waves. By winter, as the weather cooled, it faded away.

The south had suffered, with many deaths and farmers losing workers. The court cut field taxes to half a percent for the next three years, letting people recover. Common folk were easy to please, thanking the wise queen and just emperor with gratitude.

The dead couldn't come back, but the living had to keep going. This year was hot but free of drought or flood-a rare bumper harvest.

As the New Year neared, festive joy erased the gloom of death. Smiles returned to people's faces, especially in the north, with Hilltop City buzzing the most.

The palace was lively too, brimming with cheer.

Nyx wore a dazzling golden robe, prompting the palace staff to bow repeatedly, saying they wanted to rub off some wealth luck.

Erik combed her hair, skipping heavy crowns for fluffy hairpins, placing them symmetrically on both sides.

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Nyx reached up to feel them, sensing trouble. A mirror check confirmed she looked like a rabbit spirit. Her ears were practically sticking out.

His skills weren't there yet. She pursed her lips, huffed, and looked away.

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"Don't like it?" Erik stared at her cute, pouty face, unable to resist kissing her, leaving two faint pink blushes on her cheeks.

"I made these myself," he said, touching the yellow fluffy bits. They weren't perfect-not as nice as Nyx's cheeks. If Nyx grew real bunny ears, his gift would pale in comparison and get totally outshined.

Nyx watched in the mirror as his veiny hands fiddled with the rabbit ears-stroking, petting, pinching. For a moment, she hallucinated they were really hers, feeling them.

She shivered, dodging his troublesome hands. "I don't dislike them." After lunch, she'd had some wine and felt tipsy. The males carried her to the

bedchamber for an afternoon nap. Her long hair soon tangled, and the fluffy hairpins scattered across the bed.

Night fell, and outside they lit bonfires for the courtyard ceremony. She dragged her wobbly legs out to see the fun.

"Want to check out the city tower?" Aurelius pointed to the highest spot in the palace.

Nyx loved going there sometimes for the view-it was great. Tonight's scenery was extra festive. Looking down at the city's sea of lights, then up at the starry sky, Nyx suddenly missed home.

Holidays always made her homesick. She missed her partners and cubs. This test had gone on so long. She wondered when it would end.

A warm chest pressed against her back, a familiar scent wrapping around her, giving endless comfort. Her fleeting sadness vanished.

"Nyx, I got you a gift too," Aurelius said through her cloak, rubbing his cheek against her ear.

A bright streak shot across the night sky. Nyx's eyes widened as a huge, dazzling firework bloomed in the darkness.

In decades of life, she'd seen countless fireworks, all kinds, but none thrilled her like this one. She spun around fast, meeting her partner's calm, deep eyes, like falling into a vast blue sea.

"Aurelius?" Nyx froze. "You got your memories back?",

Hearing that, a hint of surprise flashed in Aurelius's eyes. "How did you figure it out?"

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The moment the firework burst, sealed memories flooded back like a tide. He was just wondering how to tell Nyx when she saw right through him.

Nyx looked dazed, cheeks flushed, staying quiet. A young, tender partner was different from a mature male-subtle shifts in his gaze and presence. She had her own way of knowing.

Urgent footsteps climbed the tower, heading straight for her. Nyx looked up and saw Pale Wolf, clearly with his memories back too.

If the young general was a sharp sword, now Erik was a towering mountain-just standing there, endlessly dependable. Even Grayball, who usually ignored him, tucked its tail cautiously, trailing behind like he was the wolf king.

Nyx crouched down, hugged the wolf cub she'd raised from a pup, and kissed its head. It was huge now but still loved to act cute like when it was little.

"Goodbye, Grayball," Nyx whispered her farewell.

She was glad she could leave a projection behind to keep this clingy wolf company after she left, sparing its feelings. Behind her, Erik watched her cuddle the gray cub, his expression unreadable.

The oblivious Nyx said bye to the world, closed her eyes, and let Heavenly Law pull her and her successful partners out of the test. A test lasting three or four years felt like a long work trip. Back home, seeing a house full of males, Nyx felt an odd, shy distance.

"Tired, Nyx?" Zayne poured her a hot drink, taking her hand as he did.

A spark shot from her fingertips through her whole body. Nyx trembled slightly, sipped the drink, and hid her unease.

Back in her real body, her sharp sight, smell, and hearing all returned. She was hyper-aware. Even with her eyes lowered, she could feel those beastly stares locked on her alone.

A drop of drink lingered on her lip. All the males swallowed hard, tension brewing, like they were vying to lick it off.

Nyx quickly grabbed a handkerchief, wiped her mouth, sat up straight, coughed lightly, and got to business. "This time, I did the test with Aurelius and Pale Wolf together."

"Two? Together?" The males all turned to Aurelius and Erik, eyes probing.

Theon and Felix had tested with Nyx together too, but they shared a beast form and were uncle and nephew, so it wasn't a

shock.

But Aurelius and Erik were always at each other's throat. Everyone went quiet. The ones yet to test exchanged looks, their expressions growing wary and complicated.

Under one roof, they were all territorial, aggressive males. Fighting and jealousy were par for the course. If Heavenly Law paired them up for a test too, without memories, there would be all sorts of chaos.

"Did it go well?" Jaws asked, smiling calmly, though his heart wasn't.

Erik didn't waste words. He ripped open his shirt, showing the changed mark on his chest to everyone.

Compared to him, Aurelius was more refined, nodding. "Everything went smoothly."

Even sworn enemies like them didn't fail. The others instantly felt more at ease.

They sat and chatted for a bit, then rolled around on the carpet with the males' gorgeous beast forms. Nyx's awkwardness

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melted away. She stood, brushing off imaginary dust from her skirt. "I'm going to take a shower."

It was daytime now. She could nap if she wanted.

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Star Alliance's technology beat ancient times by miles. Back in a high-tech world, Nyx felt light, showering in hot water for ages, then slipping into bed with steam still rising off her.

Suddenly, she kicked something furry. She yanked the blanket back, eyes wide in shock.

"Ash?" she asked, then she thought, 'No, no-wait. Ash is grown, a big, mighty wolf like his dad. What is this tiny gray floppy thing?

In a flash. Nyx's mind spun wild ideas-like Ash sneaking a secret cub back for her to raise.

The little gray ball stirred, lifting its head, revealing deep blue eyes. "It's me."

That mature voice-she knew it too well. "Pale Wolf?" She leaned in, stunned. "How'd you turn into this?"

He was so small-just a cub.

"Zayne's lab made a new potion. Drink it, and you shrink back to cub form for a bit, Erik said, clearly not used to his tiny body. He stumbled a few steps and crashed into Nyx's chest.

His fluffy fur felt amazing. Nyx couldn't resist, took a deep breath, and reached out with guilty hands. She guessed Pale Wolf » did this to cheer her up after saying bye to Grayball.

"Any side effects?" she asked, touched but worried.

Erik shook his head. "Nope. Got it straight from Zayne."

Zayne was steady and reliable. Nyx relaxed, scooping the cub-form partner to her chest, kissing and petting him until little Pale Wolf's tail wagged like crazy, blurring with excitement.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a shadow by the window. She froze, slowly turning to look. A white kitty with a tiger-stripe forehead crouched there, blue eyes full of resentment, staring at them for who-knows-how-long-

Nyx stiffened. Alarm bells ringing, she crept to the window, opened it, and scooped the white cat in, striking first. "Why didn't you knock to let me know you were here?"

The little white cat drooped its head. "Didn't want to interrupt you."

Sun shone bright outside, but he looked like a soggy, helpless kitten, curling into a ball on the sill. She smelled jealousy. He looked so pitiful-so she didn't call him

out.

She gave in, pulling him into her arms. "Alright, you both can keep me company." One in her left arm, one in her right-prime fluffiness. Nyx flopped onto the bed happily, rolling side to side, feeling like a life winner.

The soft feel suddenly changed. The kitty stretched out fast, turning into a 6'3" male with shoulders too broad to hug with

one arm

Back in the Star Alliance, he could've dressed instantly, but he seemed to forget that.

Nyx felt her hands burn. She tried pulling back, but he grabbed her wrist without a word, kissing her fingertips. Memories of painted nails rushed back, unshakable.

Aurelius remembered that day too and didn't mind deepening it again.

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Still half-conscious, Nyx turned to Erik, catching his shocked, furious eyes. The gray cub spun in frantic circles, like Ash as at kid struggling to shift to human form, failing and fuming.

A wild but plausible guess hit Nyx. 'Can't shift back during the potion's effect, can he?'

Knowing Zayne's sneaky streak, even if he got along with Pale Wolf, he'd totally prank him. Pale Wolf, being so dense, probably didn't ask for details. It wasn't really a side effect-if he didn't ask, Zayne wouldn't tell.

Seeing the gray fluff ball seething, Nyx couldn't hold it in. Her shoulders shook with stifled laughter.

Next second, someone pinned her shoulders. Aurelius's gentle voice carried a threat. "What's so funny, Nyx?"

Nyx stopped laughing real quick. Aurelius wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb, glancing at his rival wordlessly, oozing provocation. Couldn't even turn human-he had no chance against him.

Maybe the rage sped things up. What should've lasted five hours wore off fast. The gray cub grew into a giant wolf, then regained human form.

Nyx was dozing off when she fell into a scorching embrace. Eyes still closed, she cooed instinctively. "Aurelius."

A gentle, amused voice answered from ahead. "I'm right here, Nyx."

She jolted awake, realizing something was off. Turning, she met a pair of ferocious wolf eyes.

After paying double for one stifled laugh, Nyx genuinely repented. She'd never mock her partners as dummies again. At least, not to their faces so obviously. For days, she dodged Aurelius and Erik, hiding with the other males for safety. Dealing with one was easier than two competitive jerks. As for the culprit behind it all, she couldn't muster a friendly face for him.

Zayne took some effort to catch Nyx. Looking a bit hurt, he gazed up at her. "Erik said you told him he's the best wolf."

That made Nyx grind her teeth. At that moment, if she hadn't sweet-talked Pale Wolf, not only would he have broken, she'd have shattered too. But seeing his tail wagging like crazy after she coaxed him, she realized later-he was jealous of Grayball.

Turning into a cub with the potion was partly to cheer her up, partly to prove he could replace Grayball. The goofy male was so easy to please. Even wronged, a couple sweet words had him dizzy with joy, obeying her every whim, stopping when she said stop.

"Pale Wolf is the best wolf." Nyx nodded firmly. And Zayne was a bad wolf.

"Why?" Zayne asked, playing dumb despite knowing, kneeling half-up to look at

her, all submissive. "Because he took the cub potion?"

"If you like it, I can too," he said, pulling a vial from his Space Button, clearly prepared.

Nyx loved cubs, and turning into a cub beast form did bring her something fresh. When he acted this meek, he didn't seem so bad.

Nyx squinted, an idea sparking. "Any side effects from taking it back-to-back?"

Getting a no, she grinned wide, clapping happily. "Then stay a cub and keep me company for a month, and I'll forgive you." Zayne's face froze, a rare crack. He caught her drift. For a month, he couldn't turn human around her meaning no

action.

Even when others got some, he'd be stuck watching, tortured. Even the toughest male couldn't handle that. Zayne nearly begged for mercy right then.

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But he held it together, downed the potion, turned into a little white pup, and whimpered, rubbing her ankle to butter her up. Sucking up now might get him forgiven faster, or he could drag everyone else into it as well.

That night, Nyx came out of the bathroom in a great mood, heading to bed. She lifted the blanket to climb in and froze.

Her big, soft bed was a mess of cubs sprawled everywhere, like she'd stumbled

into a Beastmen cub kindergarten. Her real cubs spanned ages-never this uniform chaos.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Only Seafarion didn't join in. He stood aside, looking guilty, like he felt bad his beast form couldn't join the matron-pleasing party.

He'd tried the potion too, but his unique beast form made it useless. Same went for Aurelius. He didn't need potions-He mewed once and nailed the cub act, a pro at luring people in.

Nyx was speechless. No need to ask-she knew who set this up. Knowing she loved cubs, even the less-dumb males didn't turn down Zayne's idea.

With so many cubs staring at her, Nyx couldn't bear to shoo any away. Knowing the risk, she let them all stay, even sad-sack Seafarion.

Late that night, the potion wore off, and things got predictably wild. Even Zayne snuck back to human form in the mess, and Nyx didn't have the energy to call him out. No comparison, no pain.

She'd thought handling Pale Wolf and the kitty together was a headache, but now, two males felt like a vacation. She didn't even want more rest. Fresh off surviving,

she gritted her teeth and told Heavenly Law to start the next test.

"Nyx?"

"Nyx!"

"Damn it! Where'd she go?"

Her consciousness settled into a body, and Nyx heard someone yelling her name, sounding frantic, with stomping steps and cursing.

After absorbing the world's memories, her face turned green. Last time's Cinderella stand-in plot was cheesy enough-she didn't expect this one to be even cheesier.

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The hotel hallway was dim. Nyx looked down at her cheap, dusty gown and sniffed the headache-inducing perfume, wanting to crawl into a hole. If she could, she really should've found a crack to slip into.

The guy shouting her name was her agent, tearing through the place looking for her, even roping in some waitstaff to help. He'd find her soon. If he caught her, she'd be gift-wrapped and sent to some big shot's bed tonight.

A deal between a pimp and a tycoon-she was a nobody starlet and had no say.

"Don't worry, Mr. Williams, I'll find her! She can't get far. Yes, yes, she's a bit wild, but she's gorgeous, clean-a blank slate. You said it yourself-taming a wild horse is the fun part!" said the agent.

Her agent was on the phone, groveling to someone higher up, laughing like a suck-up.

The footsteps got closer. Nyx's heart pounded like a drum. She tried to stand and run farther, but her body wouldn't move. She slumped on the floor, cursing the soap-opera plot in her head..

That damn agent had drugged her too. Her emotions spiked, and a weird heat surged through her. Her face flushed, her mind dulled, and she couldn't fight it. A big shadow loomed over her.

Like a startled bird, she shrank back, her messy hair swinging aside, revealing a stunning, delicate face. Their eyes met, and both froze.

"Little mermaid." Nyx's brain was mush. Staring up at that familiar face, she forgot where she was, blurting out a nickname she used to tease her male privately.

Seafarion's handsome face turned beet red. "Little what?" He didn't catch that her mumble, but the teasing vibe hit him way harder-like, times a hundred.

Before today, if anyone had talked to him that rudely, he was dead sure he wouldn't have let it slide, guy or girl. But staring at this cute face in front of him, he couldn't muster up even a speck of anger-go figure.

"Why're you sitting here?" he asked, trying to keep it together and look calm and collected, all concerned-like. "You feeling okay? Your face is super red!"

Before he finished, a pair of slim arms suddenly grabbed his knees, pulling herself up. But she clearly didn't have the strength-wobbled a few times and started tipping back.

All her fake coolness vanished in a flash. Panicking, Seafarion reached out on instinct and caught her, ending up with a full-on hug.

The wheelchair could handle both their weights no problem-Nyx was light, barely a burden. But the guy underneath her acted like he was under a ton of pressure-

stiff as a board, face flaming red, practically choking on air.

Too close. He'd never been this close to a woman before.

Her body was small and soft, radiating this weird heat that felt contagious, spreading to him fast. She reeked of overpowering perfume, but somehow, he picked up a faint sweet scent underneath it all.

His brain screamed at Seafarion to shove this random stranger off him right that second. But after hesitating forever, he ended up peeling off his suit jacket, draping it over her, and hitting the elevator button for the top floor instead.

The whole top floor of the hotel had just one suite-Seafarion's private spot. The trip back to his room had never felt so

endless.

He'd ditched the jacket, left in a thin shirt, but the heat wouldn't quit. He kept telling himself over and over not to let lust take over-be a gentleman.

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First, find her a safe place to rest, then get a doctor to check her out. Once she woke up, if she needed help, he could hook her up with a lawyer.

All his plans went blank the second a wet kiss landed on his Adam's apple-then it was game over, no control left. Nyx glanced down at the flustered, shy guy, a smug little grin flashing in her eyes.

+53

The drug wasn't as strong as she'd thought-she was mostly clear-headed now. But since Heavenly Law's cheesy drama had set the stage this far, not going with the flow and having a little fun with her mermaid would've been a waste of the vibe.

"Don't-don't do that." He was pinned in the wheelchair with nowhere to run. His eyes got all teary and red with panic. "You're not thinking straight-I can't."

He couldn't take advantage of her. His good upbringing made him push back hard, dodging her gaze, squirming like crazy to avoid crossing that line. Too bad Nyx had the "not sober" excuse to lean on-she had plenty of strength and tricks up her sleeve.

Being too smug came back to bite her-she couldn't get up the next day. Thick curtains blocked out almost all the sunlight, making it impossible to tell the time in the room.

Nyx had been awake for a bit, sprawled flat on the big bed, staring blankly at the ceiling, not wanting to move a finger. The spot next to her was cold, the pillow and sheets way too neat, like no one had slept there.

But Nyx was a hundred percent sure Seafarion had been by her side all night. She could tell he'd tossed and turned, not sleeping a wink.

When she'd stirred awake and shifted her leg off him, he'd bolted out of there like a scared rabbit. He was already hers- even if he ran, it wouldn't last long. Nyx wasn't in a rush to chase him down.

After lounging enough, she finally dragged herself up, washed up, and got dressed, then pushed open the bedroom door. A strange young guy was sitting stiffly on the living room sofa. Hearing her, he turned, a quick flicker of surprise crossing his face before it vanished.

"Hello, Ms. Nyx," he said, standing up and tossing out her name like it was no big deal, then introducing himself. "I'm Seafarion's personal assistant-Lancet."

"What happened yesterday was an accident-I'm sure you'd agree," Lancet said, skipping the small talk and getting to the point. "To protect both our reputations and the company's image, this shouldn't leak out at all. No unnecessary trouble or fallout."

A weird noise-like a cough-suddenly came from the study. Nyx glanced that way, and Lancet's spiel paused for a second. "What's up with the boss? Is he rushing me to wrap this up?" he thought.

He quickly looked away, cool as ever, and handed Nyx a folder. "This is the compensation Mr. Tanis prepared for you. Take a look—if it's all good, just sign it." The payout was so huge it was hard to wrap her head around-no one could say no to that kind of perk.

Nyx pinched the thick folder, opened it, and skimmed it. It was a confidentiality agreement-pages listing cash and resources as payment, just for keeping last night hush-hush and pretending it never happened,

"He told you to give me this?" asked Nyx.

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Chapter 419

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Meeting Nyx's half-smirking gaze, Lancet felt a weird pang of unease. He'd been in the game for years, but this was his first time dealing with something like this.

Seafarion was in his thirties, never had a woman around-some even whispered he might be crippled down there too, not just in his legs. Even Lancet, his right-hand guy, had half-believed the rumors.

When he got the call from Seafarion bright and early, he thought he'd misheard- or was still dreaming, Rushing over half-doubting, he found Seafarion holed up in the study, looking wrecked, with blatant kiss marks all over his face and neck.

"I took advantage of her while she wasn't herself-it's my fault," Seafarion had said, head down, drowning in guilt. "When she wakes up, handle it for me. Ask what she wants-I'll do what I can to make it right."

Lancet was floored, speechless for ages. It was real. His ice-cold, otherworldly boss had actually spent the night with

someone!

Keeping his professional cool, he barely held back a scream and the urge to spill the tea. He grilled Seafarion for more details, did some digging, and locked onto Nyx quick.

With her nobody-actress status, her sleazy pimp of an agent, and that soap-opera meet-cute with Seafarion, Lancet's face got grim-he figured Seafarion had

been set up.

"I think she might've targeted you on purpose-lured you in," Lancel said, rattling off examples of actresses in the biz hooking rich guys with booze or drugs. It was so common it was almost cliché.

That blunt move might work on tacky old tycoons. She'd have to come up with better than that to scam his boss.

Lancel was all fired up, but Seafarion just shook his head. "She wouldn't."

That hallway wasn't even on his usual route-he'd only wandered there last night on a whim, too tired from work to rest. That's when he ran into her.

She was the one who'd been set up. And he'd known it, yet still took advantage- tainted her.

"It's all my fault," Seafarion said, feeling like a total creep. "I should take responsibility, but "

But a born cripple like him, after doing something so awful to her-he didn't deserve her. Tying her to a guy like him for life would make her hate him.

Hearing "responsibility" drop from Seafarion's mouth, Lancel went numb. The world's richest guy falling for a one-night stand with a gold-digging starlet.

If Seafarion pulled it off, the media wouldn't even dare air it-it'd sound too insane to believe. For a scheming bad girl like that, he didn't need to feel so damn noble.

Seafarion was 100 pure-never had a woman around, didn't know how rotten they could be out there.

"I'll take care of it for you." Lancel decided, stepping up to deal with this shady chick for his boss.

Seafarion wanted to compensate her, so he would compensate her. He chatted up some pros who'd handled this stuff before, hashed out a confidentiality deal.

As long as Nyx played smart, didn't trash Seafarion's name or milk his fame, she'd get enough goodies to live plush for life- no lesson learned from climbing into his bed.

Lancel could picture her greedy smirk already. Once she saw that payout list, she'd light up, and if she was extra grabby, maybe haggle for more.

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But Nyx's whole vibe was nothing like he'd pictured-not even close. One look at her threw him off. She seemed gentle and calm, like a clear pond. Stripping away her background, just judging by looks, she actually matched Seafarion pretty well.

No wonder he'd fallen for it and swore she was pure as snow.

Lancet steadied himself, muttered some calming mantras, and rolled out his prepped speech. Seafarion's cough from the study threw him off for a sec, but he powered through smooth enough.

Handing her the contract, he let out a breath, waiting for her to slip up. She skimmed it quick, like she didn't care much, and asked in an odd tone, "He told you to give me this?"

His relieved breath hitched right back up. Lancet's expression wavered, but he faked calm and nodded. "Of course. He asked me to offer you some compensation."

"Please sign it-or if there's anything else you need, just let me know," he said, his tone softening a bit, more respectful.

All these years, Seafarion had only ever had this one woman-and even thought about marrying her. Sure, actually marrying her was a long shot, but who knows— she might stick around him later. As Seafarion's assistant, he'd have to deal with her eventually. Being nice now couldn't hurt.

Nyx smiled, didn't say more, took the pen from him, and signed on the coffee table.

She'd just started signing when a buzzing phone cut through the room. Her pen paused, and she looked up. "Whose phone's that?"

Lancet panicked a little, glancing toward the study instinctively. Realizing the sound wasn't from there, he scanned around, grabbed the vibrating phone from the bedroom, and handed it to Nyx.

Nyx went quiet, taking the clunky old brick of a phone from him. It was hers. She hadn't used a relic like this in years- holding it felt both familiar and strange.

The screen had spiderweb cracks but still worked. Guess she was pretty broke these days.

She stared at the caller ID-"Asshole"-for a while, digging through her memory until it clicked: her agent's fat, smug face. She swiped to answer. The other side had been waiting forever-call nearly dropped-before it finally connected.

After a couple seconds of silence, a furious rant blasted through the leaky speaker, echoing across the room.

"Run! Keep running! You're so good at it, huh? Why even pick up my call then? Nyx, I'm telling you-you can't escape! Mr. Williams's pissed this time. Go apologize nice and early, and you might suffer less!

"Hey, you hearing me? Gone mute or what? A broke-ass orphan like you-born to be toyed with-acting all high and mighty? Do you even know who Mr. Williams is? One word from him, and you're done in this industry!"

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Of The Bea 420

Chapter 420

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That ancient phone's battery was shot-unplugged all night, it was teetering on dead. Before Nyx could get a word in, it beeped twice, screen went black, and shut off. The yelling cut out instantly. The huge suite fell into an awkward silence.

Lancet looked at Nyx, his face a mess of emotions. He knew he'd misjudged her. Feeling bad and wanting to fix it, he offered, "I'll get you a better agent ASAP. If you want out of your company, I'll set up a studio for you."

"As for those threats, don't sweat it," he added. Truth was, he didn't even know who this "Mr. Williams" was.

There were many Williams in business and politics, but none of them could flex in front of Seafarion. Trying to snatch someone from Seafarion, that Williams guy didn't have the juice.

Nyx finished signing the confidentiality contract, grabbed her copy, and nodded at him. "Thanks for the help."

A company that raised a pimp like her agent was obviously a cesspool-sticking around was pointless, and bailing meant a fat penalty fee. Someone cleaning up this mess for her would be ideal.

Before ditching the company, Nyx planned to swing by one last time-pack up her meager stuff from the shared dorm. Oracle Entertainment was a small outfit, run by some rich kid playing around. No business sense-just wanted to pick girls and party with other sleazy bigshots.

They had two semi-known stars propping it up-third-tier at best. The rest were nobodies, scraping by worse than streamers or influencers. No resources, no cash to break contracts-most artists saw no future, gave up, and holed up in the dorms, wasting away.

Nyx used to be one of them. Most faces in the apartment were familiar, and a few swarmed her the second she showed up. "Nyx! You're back?"

"What went down yesterday? Mr. Haidt took you to see Mr. Williams?"

"Was it Hurricane Tech's Mr. Williams? Isn't he with Jane? Why'd he switch to you all of a sudden?"

The company was tiny-gossip spread like wildfire overnight.

Hurricane Tech's Mr. Williams was a big-shot in Broskel, "dating" one of Oracle Entertainment's stars, Jane Dorma. ing, sure-but yone knew it was a sugar-daddy deal. One after money, one after looks-hardly a stable relationship at all. So, Mr. Williams eyeing the younger, prettier Nyx wasn't a shock.

"You stayed with Mr. Williams overnight?" someone asked, sizing her up, testing the waters.

Not all of them were ambitionless flops. Plenty were just stuck without a break, dreaming of snagging a rich backer to shoot to the top. If Nyx hooked Mr. Williams, she was about to replace Jane as the new star.

Nyx faced a mix of concern, curiosity, and jealousy from all sides and shook her head. "Nope."

She looked so chill the jealous stares faded a bit. No point lying about something like that.

"Yeah, makes sense. If you'd landed Mr. Williams, Mr. Haidt wouldn't be raging today."

"So it didn't work out? Mr. Williams met you and wasn't impressed?" "Oof.

"You didn't piss him off, did you?"

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"Mr. Haidt's been stomping around looking for you since morning, cursing up a storm-he's pissed. Watch out later."

They were chattering away when a door got shoved open hard, slamming the wall with a loud "bang." Seeing the worn-out woman inside, the hallway went dead quiet.

J-Jane."

She was their senior, way more popular than them. Awkward as it was, after a beat, they forced out greetings. Jane didn't bother glancing at them-just glared at Nyx with pure spite.

What a young, gorgeous face-eighteen and fresh as hell. No wonder one photo had Mr. Williams hooked. She'd pulled every trick to keep her sugar daddy, but this kid acted all high-and-mighty like she didn't want him-making Jane look desperate and pathetic.

Since last night, the company chat had been buzzing with gossip like flies. She'd smashed her phone but still couldn't sleep.

Closing her eyes, she felt mocking stares piling on-everyone ready to kick her while she was down. She'd stayed up all night, too scared to leave her room, until Nyx-the one who'd stolen her man and screwed her over-showed up. Then she couldn't hold back.

"Playing innocent, huh?" Jane sneered, sizing Nyx up. "Think I can't tell if you slept with him?"

She'd been around the block-nothing got past her. Nyx's legs were trembling a bit-had to have worked hard last night. She was all pure on the outside, but probably wild behind closed doors.

"Mr. Haidt's mad-bet you didn't satisfy Mr. Williams, huh?" she said.

Maybe Williams liked Nyx's stubborn innocence, but once he had her and the fantasy broke, he wasn't happy. Thinking Nyx might've busted her ass all night for nothing, Jane couldn't help gloating.

She was about to keep taunting when she spotted someone coming and dialed it back, nodding at them. "Hey, Mr. Haidt

He wasn't her agent, but she always played nice with Mr. Haidt, the industry's big-shot pimp—she didn't want to cross him. Might need him later to bounce back, hook her up with a new rich guy.

Mr. Haidt usually grinned at big names like Jane, but today he blew her off like she wasn't there. He stormed in under everyone's nervous stares, kicking up a breeze, heading straight for Nyx. He stopped, panting hard.

Seeing his huge hands and Nyx's slim frame, folks winced-nobody wanted to watch her get slapped silly, Mr. Haidt's temper was no joke-he'd hit people before.

All eyes locked on them, tension thick as hell. Only Jane looked eager, not caring she'd been ignored-just wanted Nyx to crash and burn.

Staring at that ugly, hateful mug, Nyx squinted and cracked her wrists. She sized up her current strength-turning this agent into the "Dead Pighead" from her phone wasn't going to be an issue.

But Mr. Haidt plastered on a greasy smile. "You're back! Where'd you go last night? I couldn't reach you-worried me sick

kid

No smackdown, no yelling. His tone was downright friendly-nicer than he'd ever been to Jane.

Half an hour ago, he'd been set on teaching Nyx a lesson, but then Seafarion called him up personally-said Nyx got bought out, wasn't his problem anymore.

Nyx was out of the company. Thirty million in breach fees wasn't chump change-nobody just pulled that out of nowhere. Dylan Haidt was dead certain Nyx was a broke nobody-no way she'd coughed up that cash herself.

She'd downed spiked booze last night and didn't come back-maybe stumbled into some big shot's lap by dumb luck.

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Someone dropping thirty mil cold for a girl after one night, either they had serious clout or were totally smitten with Nyx.

Either way, it was enough to make Dylan tread carefully-she wasn't a little fish he could mess with anymore.

To thrive in this biz, you had to read the room-Dylan was a pro at playing the wind. He acted like he'd never cussed her out on the phone, pulling a concerned big-brother vibe.

Nyx raised an eyebrow. She marveled at Dylan's shamelessness-and at Lancet's speed. He'd sorted her mess out that fast. She wondered if she should still beat up Dylan. She was here already-might as well.

Going legal took time, and since the crime didn't stick, the punishment wouldn't be harsh enough to cool her anger. Violence was bad, sure-but damn, it felt good.

She rubbed her fists slowly, ready to swing, when someone bolted from the hallway's end. "Dylan! Dylan!"

The guy practically tripped over himself getting to Dylan, whispered something frantic in his car.

Dylan's face dropped. "What'd you say?"

He yanked out his phone, glanced at it, and took off before Nyx's fist could land- running like the devil was after him. Dylan came and went in a flash-everyone was clueless what happened. They turned to Nyx and saw her opening her door, packing up.

"Where are you going?" someone asked.

The dorm was a shabby twenty-square-meter room, mostly empty. Nyx just tossed her odds and ends into a bag, rolled up her bedding, and she was set.

She packed while answering, "I'm out of the company, so I'm moving out."

"You quit?"

The hallway erupted.

"How're you paying the breach fee?"

"You quitting the biz? That cuts the fee, but it's still thirty mil otherwise."

"Even quitting's five mil! Where you getting that cash?"

"You really didn't snag Mr. Williams?"

Now they all doubted Nyx was straight with them.

"If she didn't land Mr. Williams, why was Dylan kissing her ass?"

"Besides him, who'd cover her fee?"

"Who would give her a place to crash?"

"Nope, Nyx said, cool as ever. "They tried something illegal-I'm heading to report it later."

But before she sued Mr. Williams, it looked like Mr. Williams would be finished.

A scene popped into her head-Seafarion with his icy pretty-boy face, swirling a wine glass, dropping the classic CEO line. "The Williams Group is no more." She nearly cracked up right there. Watching Nyx go from stone-cold to giggling, bragging about suing Williams and Dylan, they figured she'd lost it.

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In this line, if you stayed a nobody too long, your head got messed up-happened all the time.

53

So is the quitting real or fake? Maybe Nyx snapped, and the higher-ups decided to shelve her-kicked her out of the dorm too, they thought.

As for Dylan's nice act, probably just him playing it safe-didn't want to set off a loose cannon. It was never wise to piss off a person with nothing to lose.

A bunch of them started looking at her with pity-some even helped pack her stuff.

"Thanks," Nyx said, glancing up at the few kind faces, meaning it..

They waved it off. "No need-don't mention it."

"Where

you moving? Got a place?"

"We can't help much."

A sweet girl driven nuts by this grind-it was damn shame.

All packed-three boxes total-Nyx pulled out her phone to call a moving truck to her new spot Lancet set up. Then a smooth, mature woman's voice cut in. "Nyx here?"

Everyone turned-gasps all around.

"Marilyn Bond!"

"It really is Marilyn!"

"Holy crap!"

Nyx looked over-a tall, short-haired woman, sharp and polished, maybe early forties. She blanked for two seconds, then pulled the info from her memory. Marilyn Bond, legendary agent.

Everyone in the biz knew her-she'd worked with top stars and actors. Even if you didn't know her face, you'd heard the stories. Seven years back, her daughter got sick, and she'd quit to care for her-dropped off the map since.

Tons of folks tried dragging her back-none pulled it off. No one'd have thought she'd pop up at a dump like Oracle Entertainment.

They couldn't believe their eyes-felt like a dream. They weren't even worthy of brushing up against a big shot like her. "Over here," Nyx said, raising a hand. "Hi" If she had to guess, this was probably the new agent Lancet nabbed for her. Marilyn's eyes landed on her, sizing her up subtly, her expression softening. "I'm Marilyn-just joined your studio. I'm your new agent."

She stepped aside, waving over two young folks behind her-a guy and a girl.

Guy's name was Gavin, girl's was Helly-Nyx's
new assistants.

"Til handle the luggage, boss-you rest," Helly said. She wasn't tall, but damn
strong. After greeting Nyx, she hoisted two big boxes like nothing and headed
out.

Gavin was a beat slower and grabbed the last box awkwardly and hustled after
her.

The gawking artists couldn't keep up with the whirlwind-watched Nyx get whisked
off in a fancy van with her crew, peeling out. Even when the exhaust faded, they were
still dazed.

"Why's some retired fossil coming back now?" Jane's shaky voice snapped them
out of it-they turned to her. "It's been ages

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-who knows what connections she's got left? Just a name, that's it!"

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