

Chapter Twenty-One: Raven Empress

A low rumble passed through Elinor's chest, with the thunderous heavens roaring over the polished white capital of Lumina as she entered the thumping rain. Cool liquid struck her skin, the musky scent of the storm filling her lungs with the gale, lifting her braided hair back.

Silky dress pressing against her legs, Elinor held up her hand, a chain pulling her into the sky and over the carved wooden railing of the balcony. Shouts from the princess' magic knights and city guards came from behind her, but she was far too focused on the emotional red-haired teenager below.

The rush of wind pressed the thick, pelting droplets against her face as she flew through the air, the flashes of lightning overhead illuminating the overcast city. Soaring over the sidewalk and into the street, she closed in on Heather, back turned to her in her twisting descent.

Stabilizing herself with a sharp updraft of wind, the redhead spread her arms out wide, slowing to hover over the drenched road, only for Elinor's boots to land on the girl's unsuspecting back, driving her into the stone.

"Wha—aaah?!"

Heather's stifled scream was followed by fits of violent coughs and tears as Elinor bent one knee onto her lower back to maintain her balance. Sliding a short distance to a stop atop the slick street, Elinor smoothly rose to her feet and used the princess' side-turned head as a platform to reach the ground.

Her wet dress slid over her as Elinor took a few steps and turned to face the recovering girl, instructing her butterfly to move underneath the back of her gown.

"A disappointing reaction time to be insulting me," she chided, green flame-wreathed hands clasping behind her back as the heavens cried over them, and dozens of gasps came from the restaurant's deck-enjoying patrons. "Get up, Princess... We're not finished with this lesson."

"Ack! Haaa-haaa. Y-You have no idea what you've just done," Heather snarled, pushing her slick bangs out of the way as she struggled to rise, face showing minor friction burns and outfit ruined. "I don't care who you are... I am High Princess Heather Mes Alciel! My brother is the Crown Prince!"

A tempting smirk lifted Elinor's lips as she screamed, drawing quite the crowd. Nobles of all social standing exited the high-class establishment to see what the commotion was about.

As if to illustrate her power, the teen raised her arms high, generating a flurry of cycling air. Raging orange flames lit in her palms, growing into a fireball the size of a carriage, evaporating the water soaking her fanned-out locks and hate-filled, blazing eyes center on her.

"You will burn!"

"Princess, don't!" Elinor didn't bat an eyelash as the magic knight jumped out of the balcony with surprising speed, flying over the inferno to land between them. "Please, calm down! This is the Raven Empress! Your father will... Empress? Please, let me—"

"Shut up and let her make her own decisions."

His mouth snapped shut, a quake running down his spine as Elinor strode forward, eyes telling him to back down. The crowd was only increasing with the giant ball of fire inside the rain storm. And, suddenly, all of the water falling around them parted as Castria floated out of the restaurant.

"As you... command."

A dome of temperate weather cast over the street with Castria's illuminated blue highlights drawing eyes and mumbles; the liquid slid over them in a bubble, the storm's sounds dying down with red rays cast over them from the inferno's reflection.

"Benjamin? Look at me!" Heather snarled in confusion as he motioned for the guards and Magic Knights exiting the building to stand down. "Why aren't you arresting her?"

"Why are you looking at him?" Elinor didn't skip a beat, wearing a smile as she drew the princess' unsure eyes. "Isn't this what you wanted, Princess Heather? You're a bad girl who chose violence. Is this the extent of your resolve?"

Heather took a step back, flame decreasing in size a little under her intense gaze, and she glanced at the nervous knights and nobles.

"Eyes here, Princess," Elinor prompted, her snapping fingers making the girl flinch, "they aren't going to save you. Throw your little candle... and test an immortal."

"I-I don't need to—I have..."

"Haaa. Pathetic."

Enjoyment falling, Elinor lifted a hand high and tightened her fist; the giant flame died with a whimper as the ominous clinking sounds of chains broke through space connecting to the girl's hands and feet, pulling them taut.

[**Limit Break Activated: Chain Break I**]

Benjamin and the other knights tensed, hands going to their swords.

"Empress, you can't!"

Elinor simply turned her icy gaze to the man and held out her hand, her crown flaring with Death Energy as she reformed it into her original, spiked design, and Black jumped down from the upper levels to join her, holding a plate of snacks that she was munching on.

"Give me your dagger." The closing-in soldiers came to a stop at the captain's inaction. "I will only ask once."

"Benjamin!" Heather cried, panicking and unable to focus her emotions as tears now ran down her scratched-up cheeks. "Help! Benjamin, I can't use my powers! Benjamin!"

The man's shaking hand went to the knife at his belt, stone eyes drilling into hers, making Elinor wonder if he would stab her; at least that would be interesting. No, she had to make her reputation crystal clear, who she was, and what it meant to disrespect her.

"I... understand that the princess was in the wrong, Raven Empress, but you can't think His Majesty would approve of going this far. We do not want a war with your empire."

She was actually somewhat impressed that he kept his emotions in check as he handed her the butt of his weapon, stunning the princess, and even many of the guards, yet the Magic Knights all begrudgingly stood down. Many of the more agitated Tempest swiftly backed down upon hearing her name.

Castria hovered down in a flutter of wind, hands held tightly at her front as she spoke through the Nexus; the peasant girl was totally petrified at how aggressive she was being, but there was awe sparking within her.

"You... aren't going to kill her, are you, Empress? I-Is that what you're supposed to do when—"

Watch silently and observe, Elinor interrupted, flipping the dagger around her fingers with some practice; her training in weapons was paying off to show the soldiers she was not just a figurehead. *You must show others that it is not worth the trouble of making you their enemy.*

All eyes were on her as she stood in front of the chained princess, suspended in the air.

“I-I’m sorry,” Heather sniffed, freezing as Elinor held the flat end of the princess’ slick chest. “Please, don’t kill me!”

“What makes you think I’ll do something as simple as killing you? Quit crying. It’s unbecoming for a princess. And *never* apologize unless it is sincere with intent to change your behavior.”

“Huh?” The teen squeaked as Elinor took the knife, grabbed a bundle of her own dress, and stabbed it through. “What... are you doing? Ack!”

The redhead choked as Elinor tore off the fabric at her knees before tossing the knife to Famine, who caught it in one hand, just finished with her snack. “Get the girl ready for the lesson.”

“Yes, Empress.”

Bewildered whispers and stares were cast around them, and Elinor walked a few steps away, Benjamin following. She sighed when a private communication transmitted to her dad, and she leveled a displeased glare across the street at the bubbly woman who exited a store, holding the brim of her giant witch’s hat.

“My, what trouble are we in now, Empress? Yikes, did I do something wrong?”

“Elinor?” Her father mumbled, over half a mile away with the noble boy, getting their inn settled. “What’s happening?”

Just disciplining a princess. Nothing for you to be concerned about, Dad. We’ll catch up soon.

“No, if there is combat, then I need to be there in case something unexpected happens. Elinor... why didn’t you tell me?”

Tiffany stiffened at the visual daggers she sent the woman, making her former mother force a laugh and show an apologetic smile before sending a private message. “*Sorry, Empress! I should have checked first.*”

Because you’re overprotective, she truthfully said with a short sigh, turning to study Black trimming the princess’ somewhat revealing gown. I know when I’m out of my depth. Actually... maybe it would be good for you to join us. I can give more of a show.

She smiled as her father grumbled something and picked up his pace, spurring Julian on.

Cole finally made it to the ground level, rushing over to look between the strung-up, trembling princess, her skirt being cut away, and Elinor’s already torn dress.

“What do you plan to do, Empress?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Benjamin said, now in a more respectful tone since she stated she wasn’t going to end the girl’s life. “Public humiliation?”

Elinor returned her gaze to the princess, ignoring them as Black finished her task, ever the efficient one. Moving to stand before the girl, she looked into the terrified teenager’s shaky eyes, the sweeping presence of Tiffany, Castria, and Famine joining her.

“Why don’t we start at the beginning, Princess Heather... Who am I?”

She gulped, choking out her answer. “T-The Raven Empress. I-I am sorry, Empress—” Heather’s jaw snapped shut at the agitated click Elinor made, a lump forming in her throat.

“This is your moment in front of an immortal, Heather. You’re lucky stormy weather puts me in a positive mood. Witch Queen Tiffany...”

“Right away, Empress. King Edmon is on his way. Should I call for General Ash to join us?”

At the prompt, the woman snapped her fingers, creating a large orange flame that enveloped Elinor, shocking the onlookers as all the liquid and dirt was pulled away, leaving her perfectly dry.

“No,” Elinor returned. “Heather, do you know what it means to be an empress?”

She nodded, throat sticky as she answered. “You... command multiple kingdoms and their rulers... Kings and queens serve you,” she bit her lip, likely suppressing the urge to apologize again, yet Elinor’s shaking head made her twitch. “A-Am I wrong?”

“*Very* wrong,” she said, tone low and serious as she turned to walk in striking distance of the surrounding Magic Knights. Increasing the volume of her voice, she addressed those present. “I want you to look at Queen Tiffany and Princess Castria as an example. What do all of you think an empress is... What is it like to walk in my shoes?”

All hushed chatter died in her slow circle as **[Imperial Majesty X]** projected her presence to the crowd, the dull sound of thunder, wind, and rain filtering back into the foreground as she spoke to the still throng.

“Are you an empress when you walk the streets, and they’re singing your praises? La-la-la. Is it when they’re screaming your name out loud? La-la-la. Is it the empire that reflects the empress, or does the empress reflect her empire?”

She stopped in front of Heather as she looked up at her. “When an empress looks weak, her empire looks weak... What defines an empress? It is when they can uplift and change weak, unstable kingdoms into giants. Do you understand what that means?”

Heather’s soaked hair bunched against her shoulders as she shook her head, shrinking lower as Castria, Tiffany, and Black stood nearby, showing off their unique personalities; her new Queen of Storms was taking in every word as if gospel.

Shifting her focus to Benjamin, her bright lime-green eyes fixated on him as he mumbled, “It means... you cannot look weak or back down from a challenge. You cannot allow the foundation of stability in the respect you’ve earned to crumble by allowing disrespect because that reflects across every kingdom under the name Raven Empress. But... mercy can also be granted.”

A short chuckle shook Elinor’s chest as her gaze drifted back to the princess, still suspended midair with dozens more Tempest and nobles being drawn to the drama.

Castria’s vision narrowed, rising to the sky. “*A threat above us—lightning, as strong as Julian’s mother. It’s gathering fast!*”

“*Absorb it,*” Tiffany prompted.

“*That’s advanced; I can’t do that!*”

“*The pendant can.*”

Her father’s voice followed. “*I’m almost there!*”

I trust you, Castria, Elinor said. *It’s time we bring this show to the next stage.*

Green flames intensifying around her hand, she said, “Mercy is only granted to those who prove they’re worthy of it, so allow me to be blunt with the fight *you* have picked, Princess Heather... How could you have known you picked a fight with death herself?”

[Life Tap III]

Heather gasped as Elinor's ethereal grip tightened around her heart. Her skin turned placid, and wrinkles formed, Heather's eyes becoming hollow. The girl's vibrant red hair shriveled, coloring gray as her muscles deteriorated, fat reserves swiftly drained of life.

"Empress!" Benjamin cried, lurching forward to study the princess as her body slowly began to age and wither before the nobles' petrified gazes. "Empress, please, take me instead! Surely there is some room for mercy!"

"You control a little fire and wind, Princess... I control the balance of life and death. I command nations and armies. You decorate tea parties. We are not the same. Yet, someone seems to think your life is worth more than mine."

Benjamin's frustrated tears ceased as he looked to the heavens, and the Magic Knight jumped to her side without hesitation, a golden dome closing around them, yet Castria jumped into the air before it enclosed her.

"Princess," Benjamin shouted, his convictions tested to their limit as he protected the person killing his charge. "Maliki! Get a—"

A young man flew out of the sky, riding a whirlwind and charged with an enormous amount of energy. "Heather!"

"Prince Drew!"

A streak of light blinded the area, the deafening rumble making several nobles fall to their butts, but Elinor's didn't blink, watching the floating young woman and man above locked in a battle of elements. A chain of energy passed between them, disbelief on Drew's face as all the force he'd gathered was redirected into Castria's similarly shining figure.

Blue crystals trailed across the air, a shimmering explosion erupting against the prince's back and encasing him in thick, icy chains. Her father followed, passing Benjamin to grab Castria as she fainted, the Magic Knight catching Drew in his fall.

Elinor ceased her drain as the calming dome shattered, the storm sweeping over them again; she retained the half-dead princess' life energy in her butterfly, waiting to be released. Using the bugs instead of absorbing life energy herself had its benefits.

Her father hopped off a street light beside her, Castria held protectively in his arms. "What is going on, Elinor?!"

"I told you the empress has a plan," Tiffany huffed, brushing back her bangs as the rain returned. "Mmm. Poor thing is totally out cold, and as an undead, too."

How is she? Elinor asked, observing the teen heroine.

"I think she'd be dead if she were alive. Overall, she did beautifully!"

Elinor puffed out a long sigh as she turned to Benjamin, holding the prince, imprisoned by ice chains from her father, which was a new ability he had yet to show her. The rain and wind had picked up, drowning out sound, yet a few of the observing Tempest recreated the environment.

"What am I going to do now?" she asked, staring at the prince and princess. The man was weakly trying to break free, which was a testament to his willpower, unlike his sister, who crumbled under the slightest pressure. "What a mess."

Benjamin lowered his head, not looking at the wheezing princess as one of the Tempest floated over, clearly someone of some importance. The one thing that did cease the prince's struggles was the sight of the princess, muscles going slack at the mortifying sight of his aged and decrepit little sister.

"Heather... W-What did she do to her? Benjamin, I-I can't gather the elements—these chains are..."

“Prince Drew,” the noble said with a distasteful growl, “it would be best to refrain from making this situation worse than it already is. Please accept my most humble apologies, Raven Empress. Something like this would have never happened if—”

“Such a disrespectful and pathetic show of loyalty,” Elinor muttered, cutting him off and casting her gaze on the rest of the quite strong nobles, who were all more than likely far more advanced than the prince or princess. “Not *one* of you so much as lifted a finger to bring my wrath upon you until now, when it benefits you?”

“Excuse... me, Empress?” the nobleman whispered, following her gaze to the weeping prince. “Naturally, we knew better than to stand in the way of the Raven Empress; your reputation precedes you.”

He managed not to flinch as her sharp gaze snapped at him. “Obviously, not enough. Am I to assume that all the Tempest here had no intent of stopping an assassination attempt on my life?”

A chilling breeze came from her father’s arctic aura, fully armored and moving to stand behind her. The nobles looked at one another, unsure how to respond, yet Elinor was happy to answer as Julian flew over the crowd.

“No. Not one warning, which you all knew well in advance. No. Only the Magic Knights came to my defense, which is... telling. How should I respond, Benjamin? Hmm...”

All of the nobles looked from her to their strung-up, crippled princess, but Julian soon took all eyes, and Elira rushed through the parting throng to reach her sister, Black assuring her she was perfectly fine.

“Princess Castria! E-Empress, King Edmon, what is happening? Is—is that Princess Heather?! Prince Drew... Mmm. Raven Empress, I have a request, on the grave of my father.”

Yet, unlike all the nobles present, Julian surprised Elinor. Spotting the atmosphere and caged royalty, he dropped down on his knees and bowed his head to her.

Lips rising, Elinor had to laugh at how much could be gained with a tiny show of power with total confidence; almost any of these nobles were strong enough to eradicate her, likely having already gone through The Tower College. This was the perfect out.

Elinor took on a fond tone. “Your father was a great man who I did respect. Are you asking for mercy for their sake?”

“I am.” He swallowed, fingernails digging into his palms. “I’ve known Princess Heather as children, and she may have a temper, but... No. I ask for mercy or to share in her punish...” he trailed off as Elinor released her butterfly and chains, deactivating her Limit Break.

Youth returning in a rush, Heather gasped as Julian dove to soften her fall; the princess collapsed atop him, choking and crying in confusion, she clung to the noble boy.

“J-Julian—t-thank you... Thank you!”

“Heather! Heather...” the prince trailed off as Elinor approached them, placing a hand on her hip and leering down at them; he hid his chills well. “I won’t apologize; I’d do it again, *Raven Empress*.”

Interest rising, Elinor’s smile grew. “I like that... Owning one’s actions is vital for a ruler. King Edmon, release him.” The chains shattered, and Elinor motioned for them to rise. “And I wouldn’t be thanking Lord Julian just yet, Princess. We aren’t finished. You chose violence against an empress, Princess, and you must follow through with that to *earn* my mercy. Stand.”

Benjamin held his hands behind his back, gripping his wrist and likely trying not to show any emotion. Magic Knights, city guards, students of the College, and many more nobles were

now standing around the street, floating in the sky, and waiting for the next event with bated breath.

“Prince Drew has shown me the metal of your kingdom. Magic Knight Benjamin has shown me the honor of it. And Lord Julian has displayed the courage to entreat me by using all the good karma his father had built with me to spare your life, so I have returned it.” Elinor peered into the soul of the red-haired girl, seeing her terror. “What have you learned, Princess Heather?”

Holding onto the back of Julian’s shirt as her brother quickly moved to hold her protectively against his chest, Heather cleared her throat, thunder shaking the sky overhead.

“It’s... not enough. I chose violence. I will look... weak if I don’t follow through.”

Elinor sighed, a slightly disappointed note entering her voice as she put a hand on her hip. “Close, but not right, Princess. You *already* look weak. I’ve long crushed your spirit. Will you remain down or rise?”

Whispers flew around the nobles and viewers as Heather’s eyes widened. “I can’t!”

“You did!” Elinor snapped. “I could take your life without so much as snapping my fingers, as I already displayed. This is *your* grand stage, Heather. A true empress stands before you with her empire behind her. If you are a princess, then meet me as you would if your kingdom depended on it.”

She could practically see the hammer that struck the teen girl’s chest now everyone looking at her with terror on their faces, and it was obvious what was on their minds; there was no way the drums of war with a mysterious sorceress from overseas that could drain the very life essence from people rested on this spoiled brat’s shoulders.

Holding the trembling Tempest’s gaze, Elinor laughed. “No powers. No abilities. No help. You challenged me for a place at that table up there... Follow through. This is what I want.” Rolling around her neck, Elinor took off her crown and handed it to Tiffany as a show before checking the security of her braid. “A raw brawl with an empress. Show me how much that table means to you.”

Heather took a step back, shaking her head as voices called out to her. “No, I-I’ve never fought anyone I-like that...”

“You have to, Princess Heather.”

“She’s given you an out!”

“Punch her! Use your fists like the peasants!”

“There’s no way you can beat her if she uses her powers!”

“I-I can’t!” she whimpered, but Julian grabbed her wrist to keep her from retreating. “You don’t have to win, Heather. You just need to follow through.”

Her brother nodded, gripping her shoulder. “He’s right, Sis. We’ll be here the whole time. Dig down, and use your anger; keep your fists up, and watch her, not her fists!”

She gulped, glancing around at the nobles as they snickered and laughed, no doubt whispering to one another and taking bets on how badly she’d lose.

Elinor snickered, pulling their attention. “You have some cute cheerleaders. How many people do you think get the chance to box with an empress in front of so many onlookers? Decide now: die for certainty and turn me away from your kingdom, or fight me, and maybe I will let you live. I will accept *nothing* but your all.”

Heather took one last look at her brother and Julian, taking strength from them as she swept back her hair and nodded. “Fine! It is my favorite place... I can’t lose it!”

“That’s it,” Julian grinned, “and don’t mind the chatter. Just focus... not, heh, that I know much about physical confrontations.”

“Remember,” her brother advised, rubbing her shoulders as she took a deep breath, “relax a bit, breathe a lot, and keep your hands up. Actually...” He leaned in and whispered to her, narrowed vision centered on Elinor.

Elinor smiled as the girl swept her wild locks behind her ears and looked a little unsure, but nodded before shuffling forward; she almost tripped in her heels and cried out, face turning the color of wine. It was sweet to see how attentive her big brother was.

“Black, go help the poor girl.”

“Sorry...” Heather mumbled, cheeks darkening as the nobles groaned or snickered.

Castria stirred, causing her big sister to hiss and try to support her. “Don’t... say sorry.”

“Careful... huh?”

“Don’t say sorry,” she repeated louder, drawing the princess’ frown. “Do better.”

Elinor nodded. “Wise words, Princess Castria. You did well.”

Relief came over her Queen of Storms as she cheered inside; apparently, the Crown Prince was a bit of a prodigy among prodigies and three years into his study at The Tower, yet she’d managed to take his full blast. Elinor didn’t want to ruin her confidence and remind her that she’d *basically* died doing so.

Black finished tying off the girl’s hair into a bun, using some stringy material Tiffany had given her from her bag. It seemed to be a newly discovered fashion trend because a few of the men and women were whispering about it.

“Ready?”

“Yes, Empress! What next?”

Elinor bounced on her toes before doing a few skips to do a wide circle around the princess, stretching out. The girl started to copy her stretches, only to show off just how less flexible the princess was. It made her brother nervously cross his arms. Benjamin and he leaned in to mumble to one another, and it was obvious what the Magic Knight said by the prince’s increased anxiety.

She closed in, and Elinor grinned, throwing a few test jabs, hissing out air. “Hands up, Heather, I’m coming in from the right, so dodge right.”

Throwing the jab, showing a telegraphed right hook, murmurs came from her advice as the princess took it and stumbled away, yet Elinor was hot in pursuit. “Watch your step! Left, left, right—think back to how it felt when I sapped the life out of you. Too slow!”

“Huh—ack!” Light jab connecting with her nose, Heather fought back tears, trying not to panic. “Ouuu! Why are you telling me what to do?”

“Because it’s no fun to just curb-stomp you,” Elinor laughed, circling the nervous princess, keeping her guard up. “Answer my question. What did you feel?”

“Ahh!” She dodged a telegraphed left jab, scrambling away as her ripped skirt fluttered in the sharp gale. “C-Cold! Hopeless... scared... So cold.”

“What did you see?” Elinor prompted, Castria listening intently with several other key figures as Elinor pursued the totally inexperienced princess. “What did you regret?”

“I... I regretted... a lot! Ack! My nose again?! Ouuu...”

“Breathe! Breathe! Watch your legs.”

“Ahh!”

Tripping her onto her butt, she cried out but still rolled backward to evade a kick, Elinor slowly increasing her tempo.

“Don’t think. Act! What did you regret? Faster!”

“Mmmgm! My butt—I-I want to make my mom proud! I... I don’t want to fail! Ack-ack!” Elinor delivered a heavier blow to her unprotected side, emptying her lungs of air and likely making her see stars as she gagged, stumbling to the side.

“Get up, or I’ll stomp you—woah there! Not bad.”

“Ack-ack!” Tears falling from her eyes, she tried to kick her, still wheezing as she scrambled up and away. “That’s it, throw some jabs and kicks to keep me from closing in. Don’t stay back—go on the offensive—c’mon! That’s it, swipe, swipe—c’mon, are you trying to claw me? Keep those fists loose until the hit...”

Gradually picking up her pace, it didn’t take long for the princess to be red-faced, breathless, and stumbling around. She came in for a reckless lurch for her neck, attempting to use her slightly larger build to tackle her and grapple, but Elinor was satisfied with the show.

Slipping under her arms, a swift, upturned palm connected with her chin, snapping her neck back and making her eyes roll back as she crumpled to the ground.

“Heather!”

Prince Drew rushed forward to check his exhausted, unconscious sister, Julian right by his side; through the Nexus, she could feel Castria’s slight annoyance at her crush’s genuine concern. There was some deeper history there, Elinor was sure.

“Hey, Heather!”

“Queen Tiffany, see to her,” Elinor prompted as alchemists ran to inspect the princess. “Benjamin, a moment of your time.”

The Magic Knight only hesitated a second before joining her, seeing the wealth of support that went to the star-seeing princess.

Stepping into the restaurant, Elinor paused at the door when a rush of strength flooded into her, and Roman’s earlier statement about other ways to get stronger returned.

[Level Up - Level 18]

[2 Stat Points Added]

[3 Stat Points Available]

[4 Feat Extensions Available]

[1 Equipable Feat Choice Available]

[Monarch of Death III - Increased to E-tier]

[Life Tap III - Increased to D-tier]

[Butterfly III - Increased to C-tier]

[Artificial Body II - Increased to S-tier]

[Enhanced Construct II - Increased to E-tier]

[Chains of the Damned II - Increased to E-tier]

She hadn’t felt close to another level, yet by solidifying her reputation here and winning this battle, she’d gained an enormous amount of EXP. It wasn’t just the princess she was fighting but all those watching; she appeared to have made an impression.

Elinor took them to the back table on the first floor, where Roman sat, still engaged in his meal as he leaned against the wall, wearing a grin. “Done already, Empress? A lot more merciful than you usually are.”

“Indeed, I was,” Elinor stated without a hint of weariness as she smoothly sat and addressed the knight. One of the serving attendants was swift to come to her side yet lost his tongue in the conversation he overheard. “Am I right to assume that Heather’s temper, reckless disregard for others, and disrespectful tendencies come from her mother?”

Benjamin’s mouth tightened, keeping his gaze on the floor. “I cannot speak ill of the queen.”

“Answer received,” she sighed. “Inform His Royal Majesty that I refuse to set foot in the castle until the queen makes a formal *and* public apology on behalf of her daughter. Princess Heather need not be punished since I have already seen to it.”

The Magic Knight’s lips drew in. “Am... I to also express your view on apologies, Empress?”

“If you feel so inclined,” Elinor returned, eyeing those who peered inside. “Make it clear I do not require His Royal Majesty’s apology and that I commend the heir he has raised. He has piqued my interest.” She took a deep breath in the short moment of silence. “Haaa. It is a shame.”

“A shame, Empress?” Benjamin asked.

“Heather has potential. The fear her mother has instilled in her will be difficult to overcome for the poor girl; it is blocking her growth. It is fortunate that she has Prince Drew and Lord Julian. And... perhaps, if my trip proves fruitful, and I am satisfied, Princess Castria might stay to provide her support. Hmm... Bah.” Waving her hand, she dismissed him.

“That is all... And, Sir Benjamin.” He half-turned to leave before pausing to look down at her sober, cold emerald eyes. “If I do not see the queen *precisely* as disclosed within three days... I will make my departure.”

Throat dry, Benjamin nodded. “I will let them know, and, Empress, I will leave a squad for your protection so this doesn’t happen again. Have a lovely night.”

Elinor folded her hands in her lap, a delightful sensation making her feel ten pounds lighter as her gaze followed his exit. “Well, I am quite enjoying myself. What about you, Roman? What plots are you spinning?”

He sipped at his cup with a low chuckle. “I underestimated you yet again, Empress. What an introduction. There are concerns, though.”

“Not wrong...”

Turning inward, Elinor kept her cool expression. Playing a strong hand had its advantages; only hers happened to be a bluff.

Yes, showing her power over life and death was a big card to play, but then again, if it was pushed, it could end badly for them. There was also the other potential force Roman could have solicited to raise Castria to keep in mind.

This move made her enemies and allies, and more importantly, it gave her a lot of immediate power. Since she was only here for several days, she had to build herself up as quickly as possible. In addition, her Death Pool reserves were limited in this world, and Ash would have to find some way to replenish it in the next twenty-four hours.

In any case, her reputation here had been built long before her arrival; she would have been executed on the spot otherwise, and this wouldn’t have worked. Her thoughtful eyes

wandered to the Legend, enjoying his meal across from her; it showed Roman's forethought and understanding of her style.

He could say he underestimated her all he wanted, but had he really?