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One more minute.

I need only one more minute and I'll be prepared to face this day. This type of meditation, eyes closed, inhale, hold for five seconds, and exhale, usually works for me. I would keep at it until I'm calm and feel like myself, but my uncle interrupts me.

"Mary-Mary-Mary Elizabeth! You better not have fallen asleep."

Like I could sleep in this car. I refuse to open my eyes before I'm ready. I perform an over-exaggerated nod before putting my head back against the headrest. "I may become a queen today, Uncle. Let me enjoy my last few minutes of being insignificant."

When I begin to feel centered, I let my eyelids flutter open. The limousine barrels down the paved double lane road at a speed I don't like and nightmarish fantasies of the limo careening off the cliff side as the guiderail gives way flash through my mind. Is the driver is trying to make contact with every pothole? Being bounced around every forty seconds isn't helping my anxiety. My uncle takes it all with his normal stoicism, a fixed sternness that makes the lines around his eyes deepen. The sun is relentless, streaming through the car's untinted windows. Winding streets lead to the many high-rise apartment buildings that dot the landscape in this, my new country. I allow my head to fall to the side. My uncle focuses his attention on me and concern fills his eyes.

"I'm cool, Uncle Braden. I'm anxious for negotiations to be over with."

“Mary Elizabeth, I need you to pay attention. This meeting is to finalize negotiations. You can help by not refusing them for a third time.”

I should be listening to him, but something else catches my attention. “What is that?”

My uncle doesn’t answer me right away so I look to see if he heard me. By his puzzled expression I can tell he did.

“What do you mean, Mary Elizabeth?”

“That mountain in the distance, what’s it called?”

He removes his phone out of his breast pocket and glances at it before shoving it back in place. “It’s not just a mountain. It’s a volcano.”

“Is it active?”

“Mary Elizabeth, I know you just got here and there’s much you should see...but I need your attention...”

He has some of my attention, but not all of it. I can’t give up all of it. I need some for myself. I’ve let him keep me isolated. I should be taking this country in, at my own pace. Instead, I’ve let my uncle dictate it to me. I want answers, even if he considers them mundane.

“Is. It. Active?”

He keeps his cerulean eyes trained on me, blinking a few times before he answers. “Yes, and it’s called Krachig.”

“Oh. I’ve never been around one. There are no volcanos near Detroit. People live so close to an active volcano?”

His mouth returns to a stern hard line and his eyes never leave mine as he answers my question. “Yes, I know there’s a lot you haven’t seen of Obduro but we need this contract signing to go well. I don’t think we’ll get a fourth chance.”

“The first two offers were egregious. I didn’t choose to do this to be ornamental. I want to do so something; make a difference, help people. I don’t want to be a do-nothing queen, whether they like it or not. Do you think they’re as anxious as I am, if at all?”

He nods several times before he answers. “Yes, but not for the same reasons. It’s been three months since the election and everyone wants to see you settled, including the Councilmen. It’s their job to finish this contract. Publicly, I don’t think the delay looks good for them.”

The familiar reassuring warmth has made its way into his voice. Uncle Braden’s words always carry the corresponding effect for his intent and I get myself under control with a deep breath that I hold for five seconds. It doesn’t always do the trick; that pent-up hairball of tension is churning somewhere inside of me. I look to my uncle; his stoicism is an example I should follow. He takes notice of my regard, and now I owe him an explanation.

“I don’t think I’ve properly thanked you for this opportunity.” I smile, hoping that will lighten the mood.

“You don’t have to thank me, Mary Elizabeth.”

I shake my head. “Yeah, I think I do. You plucked me from an obscure life as a nurse and delivered on everything you promised. That deserves thanks, I think.”

“Let’s get through the next few hours. You can thank me afterward.”

“Ya know, I didn’t believe you.” He trains his eyes on my face and waits for me to elaborate. “I hadn’t seen you in years and then there you were. On my front porch. Telling me that if I came with you I could be a queen.”

“Do you regret your choice?”

“No. Never, but how did you do it?” His eyes steel over while the corners of his mouth flicker down.

“How did you make this happen for me? That’s the part I can’t figure out. How did you get the people of this country to vote yes, for me?”

He breathes in, deep, holding it for as long as he needs. His hesitation causes me to anticipate a detailed explanation. Instead, he says, “Don’t worry about that, Mary Elizabeth. I have my part. Your part is to be a queen.”

He turns his head away from me, indicating this part of the conversation is over. The limousine continues its rapid pace through the narrow claustrophobic streets. Cars are parked on both sides and I keep expecting someone’s side mirror to get taken out.

“There aren’t very many people out on the streets.”

“It’s Sunday morning, Mary Elizabeth. Most people are attending church. Something you should think of doing too.”

“I don’t go to church. You know I’m not into that.”

His only response is to shoot me a look that communicates, “Shut up.”

“You’ll learn though. You have to. This country’s religion is unique, a combination of all the different nations and their religions that have come and gone over the centuries. Your citizens take a great pride in their faith.”

I decide to change the subject again. “I like how the streets are so clean, not one cigarette butt or soda bottle.”

“The city council has strict rules about litter. Just about everything within city limits is tightly governed. Littering, trash pick-up, noise levels, there’s even an eleven o’ clock curfew within the city. But that’s only in Pecora, since it’s the capital. Space is limited here, which is why the buildings are so close together. Most of them are interconnected.”

The limousine pulls up to our destination as I’m trying to digest my uncle’s words. For being a major government facility, The Assembly House looks more like an elementary school house from the 1950s: two stories, red brick, with double black doors for an entrance. Two unadorned windows frame the doors. The only element that gives it any kind of official governmental appearance is the large rotunda looming in the background. This is the front façade of the major governmental building of my new country. The United States Congress has the Capitol Building and this is what my new country has.

Uncle Braden’s phone in his left hand, dictating a to-the-point list of orders to whomever he is talking to. Then the phone disappears back into his suit jacket and ten seconds later the entrance door is opened by an Assembly page. We have to wait thirty

seconds longer for the driver to open the car door for us. It's a courtesy I will have to get used to and that will take some time. Uncle Braden is adamant: queens shouldn't open their own doors. I permit myself to take a moment. A breeze picks up and I can smell the salty sea air. It's faint, overshadowed by the scent of the gardenias which grow wild all over the islands.

I obtain some relief from the oppressive sun when the air conditioning envelops me in a crisp coolness as we enter the reception area. Two TVs hang from the ceiling, side by side above several worn beige office chairs are positioned around the small room. It's underwhelming but functional, like they didn't want to spend too much money. I recognize the man standing at rigid attention behind the counter. His nametag says ROBERTO. He's been on duty every time I've been here. The page leads us to the small, central elevator. Uncle Braden and I board it alone; the page remains on the ground floor. The elevator is small and efficient. Before I can appreciate the space, the door opens at the second floor.

Across the hall from the elevator is the main conference room. The double wooden doors are open, inviting us inside. I take a deep breath and stride forward, head up, shoulders back. It's a large room and makes the center conference table, that seats up to twenty people look small. Several large black and white framed photographs line the walls. My uncle told me they were taken by some local photographer. There are four men in the room, strategically seated around the conference table. The four men rise to their feet with no prompting when I walk in. I take a moment to look around and greet each of them in succession with a smile and a nod. Two of them are the assembly councilmen who have been elected to negotiate my sovereignty contract. The remaining two are my current unofficial advisors.

My uncle and I take our seats across the table from the two councilmen, who each in turn sit. One of my advisors is on my right and the other on Uncle Braden's left, the four of us versus the two of them. This should be the third and final negotiation. I'm not doing this shit again next month.

I seat myself across the table from Chief Councilman Martin Morris, who begins by sliding one folder to myself and another to Uncle Braden.

"Miss Mills, we believe we have a final draft that will be satisfactory to all. Mr. Donovan and Mr. Bretton have already looked it over and they are satisfied."

I glance to my right and Mr. Donovan returns the look, letting a slight smile spread across his narrow face. He's got a good face and he controls it well. His dark blue eyes never reveal what's going on behind them. A sturdy jaw gives his face a trustworthy appearance, one that I enjoy looking at and calms my nerves so that I can think.

"I hope so, Councilman Morris. It's been over ninety days. The citizens of Obduro are tired of waiting."

"Mary," Mr. Donovan says, "they addressed the issues you had with the previous contracts. You will have some opportunities toward legislative and executive, as requested."

Mr. Alexander Donovan has a deep voice that is light on the Obdurian accent due to his years of travel and living abroad. The cadence of his speech makes his words flow like a poet's. It's something that I find myself growing to appreciate.

I flip the folder open and start scanning the text for the mentioned passages. I can sense their eyes on me, a feeling that my uncle says I should get used to. "The first contract

reading was like a slap in the face, gentlemen. Seventy-six percent of this country voted me in, worlds away from what you told me to expect.”

The two councilmen give no response. I glance up to see their eyes darting to one another before settling back upon me.

“Before the vote, I possessed no real expectations. Now I’m brimming with expectations...aspirations.”

Chief Councilman Morris clears his throat, keeping it brief and quiet. “Of course, Miss Mills. We welcome you to participate—”

“Do you? Really? That first contract was only five pages long.”

It wasn’t good and they knew it, but I got their point. They want a figure-head, the face of the new and improved nation of Obduro. First Lady influence with none of the appeal.

“I will not be a damn mascot.”

The two men in front of me freeze and I smell fear. No not fear, terror. I adore that smell.

Chief Councilman Morris adjusts his tie before he leans forward, placing both of his hands on the table. He keeps to a solid wardrobe, dark suits with a red tie. Everything is tailored to perfection. He’s trying to look older, more experienced. It’s why he keeps his dark hair slicked back, at least that’s the impression I get.

“Miss Mills, please. We now understand. Please, take a look, please.”



I make it a point to hold his gaze for five seconds before I do as asked. The number of pages has increased by a dozen and they include most of what I have asked for. My judiciary power would be limited but I do acquire the right of pardon and I will be able to break a tie in the assembly, in the event of one. I gain the right to appoint imperial and court officers, plus I get full regalian rights, which include all crown assets acquired under my sovereignty.

The “hold out” strategy has paid off. I look at my uncle. His features are like a statue. Only his blue eyes communicate his opinion. His silent determination leads me to the natural conclusion he wants: agree to this. My other advisor, Douglass Bretton nods his head when I turn to him. The look on his young face is the opposite of that on my uncle’s. There’s no sternness, only perpetual optimism that adds to his youthful appearance.

I continue to read and re-read a few paragraphs until I’m ready to go forward. “Thank you, Councilman Morris. I am content. I will need a pen.” The councilman slides a weighted ballpoint pen across the table. It is a game changer and feels like it. I rifle through the paperwork until I find where I am supposed to sign on the last page. I pause, trying to remember what’s missing.

“What about a salary? I asked about a salary.”

The councilmen’s faces react with surprise then devolve into sheer panic. Their startled silence carries on longer than I like. Councilman Peers summons his courage and speaks first.

“Miss Mills, unfortunately, there are not enough funds in the open accounts, at this time...”

His deadpan delivery does nothing for me. I don't hear the rest of what he's is saying. My attention is diverted. I was really looking forward to having a salary so I could hire a staff. Volunteers aren't going to get all the work I need done and I can't do it all myself. What should my response be: graciousness or tantrum? I let my eyes scan the document again and they land on a single part in the contract, "full regalian rights to all crown assets acquired under Her Majesty's sovereignty..." I decide on the former. "That makes sense, Councilman Peers. I think I can work with that."

I scrawl my name at the bottom of the last page and print it below the signature. The finishing touch is adding my initials to every page. There's a swelling in my chest, which I'm sure shows on my face. I feel my smile growing wider as I initial every page in succession. It's time to see what a new queen can get up to.