

The Empire's Golden Boy

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by Izabela Raittila

Part 1. Ascension

Despite the lack of tears, Ducissa Ardia's face was a mask of grief. She made every attempt to maintain a somber appearance, as she walked through the streets of Ifirium, escorted by the imperial guard following her nephew Emperor Akim's funeral procession. It was important that the crowds saw her mourning the recently departed monarch. The truth was that Ardia had a difficult relationship with her nephew and his death felt like a relief, however she did care about who would succeed him as Ifresir. Akim had died childless and her husband Dux Tarjanis was the late Emperor's uncle. Akim, whose health was failing, after years of excessive alcohol consumption following the tragic death his beloved wife Empress Aminn, had originally named him as his heir. Sadly, Tarjanis had contracted smallpox two years earlier and died of the disease. This forced Akim to change his will, naming his cousin, their son Vecatian as his new heir.

On that windy September morning, Ardia and her teenage son were on their way to the palace crypt for the funeral ceremony, after which Vecatian would be crowned as the new Ifresir by the imperial guard doing the honors. The Ducissa had spent weeks preparing for the day her son would ascend to the throne. Everything had to be perfect, right down to the finest detail. She and her son wore their finest black robes with the Erocatien family crest, a black shield with gold crown adorned with golden laurel leaves. It took her handmaids several hours to style her hair. Vecatian was shaved, his ginger hair was neatly trimmed and she even had them manicure his fingernails especially for the occasion. Yet, as they strode past the city's main square, the eighteen-year-old Vecatian made no attempt to hide his frustration and discomfort. He wasn't particularly pleased by the constant attention, nor the fact that his mother had a habit of showing him off at every opportunity, stopping at what seemed like every street corner just wave at the crowds.

"Are we there yet? How much longer is this going to take?" he asked impatiently.

"Oh, holy Lord of the skies! Vecatian... have some patience. You should start behaving like a real Erocatien. You're the Ifrey Prisis, the Empire's Golden Boy, and soon you will be the new Ifresir," she said as they approached the gates of the white marble palace.

A servant let them in, and together with the rest of the procession, the guards escorted them to the family crypt. As they descended the staircase, Akim's coffin was placed on a platform in the center where the high priest stood. Ardia and her son took their places next to the priest as he proclaimed:

"Oh darkest of the Erai, Lord Makar, we gather here today to bid farewell to Ifresir Akim, son of Assilion Erocatien, as he prepares to enter your kingdom. We ask that your Morkrai servants grant his safe passage to your dark halls."

He turned towards the Ducissa.

"Does Your Grace wish to leave a gift for Lord Makar's queen in order to facilitate the Ifresir's trial?"

"Yes, of course, it's the least I can do for my dear nephew," she replied, promptly removing a golden bracelet from her arm. She handed it to the priest, who carefully placed in the Emperor's coffin.

With the ritual now complete, servants lowered the coffin into the empty spot in the tomb, next to that of Empress Aminn. Ardia and Vecatian remained silent while their guests paid their respects to the deceased Emperor, leaving flowers near the tomb.

After the funeral, the imperial guards escorted them and the other mourners out of the crypt, up the stairs and outside again, into the courtyard. The area was filled with imperial soldiers, all standing to attention, saluting them as they made their way to a platform with two thrones. They sat down, just as a tall, dark-haired soldier in his mid-twenties approached them, carrying a scroll and a golden laurel leaf crown. Ardia remembered his name; General Gekkanon, the head of the imperial guard.

He bowed to the duo, before declaring:

“Your Grace, as head of the imperial guard it is my duty to announce the new Ifresir, in accordance with the late Emperor Akim’s will.”

“Yes, of course, proceed,” she answered.

He opened the scroll and announced loudly:

“It states here, clearly written and signed by the Ifresir’s hand that:
I, Akim Assilion Erocatien, hereby declare my cousin Vecatian Lucius, son of Tarjanis Erocatien as my rightful heir. He is to succeed me as Ifresir upon my death.”

After this, he took the golden laurel leaf crown and placed it on Vecatian’s head.

“Therefore, I hereby crown you Ifresir Vecatian and pledge my allegiance to you as our nation’s sovereign. May your reign be long and prosperous. Long live the Ifresir!” he proclaimed kneeling.

All the soldiers and the funeral guests followed his lead, shouting “Long live the Ifresir!” as they knelt before their new Emperor.

The sight of an entire army, ten thousand soldiers, all kneeling before her son was her finest moment. Ardia couldn’t help but smile. She was now the Ifresija, the Emperor’s mother. This was the day she had been looking forward to for a long time. And this was only the first part of the celebrations. As per tradition, the new Emperor was crowned first by his army who swore their allegiance to him. Later there would be an official coronation, in which her son would be crowned by a high priest in front of the whole court. For now, they had two weeks of rest before the main event.

After the ceremony Ardia and Vecatian joined the other mourners in dining room for the ritual feast. Her son spoke little during the meal, only interacting with their guests to politely respond to their questions or accept condolences. Vecatian was worn out after a whole day of marching through the capital, and ate ravenously.

“Right, it’s late and I’m tired. Goodnight mother,” he announced whilst passing an empty plate to a servant.

“Goodnight my dear. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Ardia responded before taking a sip of her wine.

After bidding goodbye to their guests and thanking everyone for coming, Vecatian left the room. He slowly made his way up a staircase towards his cousin's old bedchamber. He knew the palace well, having been living there for the past eight years. Ever since Empress Aminn's death, Akim wanted to have his family close by and insisted that Vecatian and his parents moved into the palace from their villa in central Ifirium.

The room had been redecorated since the last time he was here, on the eve of Akim's death. Vecatian recalled how ghastly pale his thirty-five-year-old cousin looked, as he spoke his final words. Akim, the man whose reign had brought out the largest territory expansion the Empire had seen in over a century, was a like ghost, his eyes were bloodshot with tears, and he kept pausing to cough up blood. His final wish had been to be buried alongside his beloved wife Aminn. Her death had been the final nail in his coffin. The High Council urged him to remarry to produce an heir but he refused, saying that no woman could ever replace his beloved Ifresija. Instead, he spent the final years of his life, drinking vast quantities of wine, until his liver couldn't take it any longer.

Vecatian yawned as he sat down on a couch. A little too early for sleep, he couldn't think of much else to do. He rose from the couch and headed out into the corridor where he spotted a servant. He instructed her to bring wine and fruit to his room.

He returned to his new chamber, and glanced around in search for something to occupy himself with. He hoped to find something interesting to read, but there were no books at all. Despite being an avid reader at the start of his reign, with a vast library at his disposal, Akim had lost his interest in books towards the end of his life.

Soon the servant returned with a jug of wine, a goblet and a bowl of fruit. She left these on a table by the side of the bed and bowed to Vecatian.

"Is there anything else I can do for you Your Majesty?" she asked as she poured the wine into his goblet.

Vecatian smiled as he had a better look at her. She was pretty, around his age, average height with a slender build and long legs, with shortly cropped, chestnut brown hair and pale green eyes.

"Yes, I would like you to stay here with me for a while," he commented before helping himself to a bunch of grapes, "What's your name?"

"My name is Bria, Ifresier."

"Nice to meet you Bria. Please take a seat," Vecatian made a space for her on the couch.

She obeyed, and sat down next to him.

"You're Arhian aren't you?" he asked after taking a sip of his wine.

Bria nodded before adding: "Is it really that obvious Your Highness?"

Vecatian smiled at her again. In the eight years he spent in the palace, he had grown accustomed to hearing the distinctive dialect of the former independent military province. His cousin's wife had been an Arhian Princess and there were many Arhian nobles at their court.

"Yes, it is. Your accent betrays you. Only an Arhian would address me as Ifresier. Also, you have short hair. From what I recall, all unmarried Arhian women have short hair."

"That is correct Your Highness. Arhian core values are modesty, discipline, and obedience. We show our modesty by keeping our hair short and not wearing jewelry until our wedding day," Bria explained.

"I see... Fascinating," Vecatian tossed an apple core back into the bowl, "So, Bria of Arhia, you're a long way from your home province. Arhian law does not apply here in the heartland. I would love to see you with long hair, and I want you to grow it out."

"As you wish Your Majesty."

Vecatian drank the rest of his wine and promptly filled the goblet again before adding:

"Excellent. You're very pretty," he began to stroke her hair and delicate face, "I want you to stay here as my mistress. In respect of Arhian culture and their values, you will continue to wear plain clothes and I won't give you any jewelry. Instead, I will shower you with flowers. As a good and obedient Arhian girl, you will show discipline by cutting your hair whenever an Arhian noble comes to visit the palace. Then you will grow it out again once they leave."

Bria blushed and giggled, pleasantly surprised by the amount of attention. Vecatian swiftly downed the rest of his drink and placed the empty goblet on the table, before kissing her. Bria didn't resist and wrapped her arms around him. Vecatian didn't stop there though. They continued to kiss, as Vecatian tugged at her tunic and stripped it off before disrobing himself. Soon they were naked, locked in each other's embrace. They proceeded to make love on the couch. The young Emperor had never been with a woman before, and he enjoyed every second of it.

Afterwards, Vecatian sprawled out the couch with Bria in his arms. He took a few minutes to catch his breath as he stroked his lover's hair. They kissed again.

"Erm.. Your Majesty....I..." she began.

"Oh please, there's no need for such formality Bria, You may call Vecatian from now on..."

"Vecatian..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"It's late. I should probably go. The other servants are probably wondering where I am..."

"No, I want you to stay. You're my mistress now not a servant. I want you sleep here with me tonight."

"Alright, I'll stay," she replied as they rose from the couch and climbed into the bed. Vecatian smiled as he wrapped his arms around her before drifting off to sleep.

Vecatian couldn't recall the last time he slept as well as he did that night in Bria's arms. It was noon by the time he finally woke up and, much to his disappointment, Bria was nowhere to be seen. A door opened, and another servant entered the room with a new set of clothes, a fresh tunic and a pair of sandals. He bowed to the Emperor and left these on the bed before leaving. Shortly afterwards, Vecatian heard a knock on the door and a familiar voice calling out his name:

"Vecatian, is everything alright? May I come in?"

Vecatian swiftly dressed himself before replying,
"Yes, everything is fine mother."

Ardia opened the door and entered the chamber.

"I was worried you weren't feeling well since you didn't show up for breakfast this morning..." she sat down on the bed next to him.

"I'm fine mother. I must have just overslept..." Vecatian responded.

"I see... Well, I figured that you should eat something now. We have a long day ahead of us. One of my friends has decided to pay us a visit here at the palace. Drusilla and her husband Clavius will be joining us for lunch," his mother stated just as Bria entered the room carrying a bowl of porridge and a jug of apple juice and two cups.

She bowed to Vecatian, blushing as she placed the items on the table next to the bed. Vecatian smiled back at Bria before turning to face his mother.

"Right, well I better go and get ready. Enjoy your breakfast. I'll see you later," Ardia added.

"Yes, thank you mother. I'll join you later."

He waited until his mother had left the room, before greeting Bria with a kiss. He dug into his food, sharing some of it with Bria. After eating, he summoned another servant and ordered her to prepare a bath.

As the servant headed to the bathroom, Vecatian took Bria into his bed again. He simply could not get enough of her, his gorgeous Arhian girl with her flawless skin, soft lips that just beckoned to be kissed and the wide hips he loved to caress.

After love-making, they spent a few minutes leisurely soaking in the tub, kissing and enjoying the floral aroma until the water grew cold. Afterwards, they wrapped themselves in towels and returned to the bedchamber.

"Right, I have some time before this lunch my mother arranged. So, I was thinking maybe we could visit the library. I could use something to read. Maybe something about Arhian history?" he suggested as they got dressed.

Bria agreed and took his hand, as they strolled down the staircase, and towards the palace library located on the other side of the complex.

After a couple of hours of browsing from various books at the library, Vecatian reluctantly kissed Bria and bade her goodbye and headed to the dining room. She returned to his chamber with a three volumes of Arhian history, dating back to the time when the region was a separate kingdom ruled by the Laudinus dynasty.

Ardia was already in the room when he arrived. He pulled up a chair next to her and sat down, just as a servant entered to announce their guests.

“Your Majesties, the Marchio Clavius and Marchionissa Drusilla,” he proclaimed loudly.

The couple entered the chamber and bowed to the duo. Vecatian recalled seeing them with their daughter at the funeral, but he didn’t get a chance to speak to them during the feast. Drusilla had changed little in the eight years since he last spoke to her. She and Clavius had been good friends with his family for decades. They owned a large plot of land near the amphitheater in central Ifirium, very close to the Erocatien summer residence. Vecatian recalled the summers he spent chasing their ten-year-old daughter, the skinny, rosy-cheeked Loraila around their orchard. They would also swim in the lake and ride their ponies through the woods.

“Good afternoon Your Majesty,” Clavius greeted him.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again Ifresir and congratulations on your ascension to the throne,” Drusilla added as she handed a bouquet of red roses to the Emperor.

Vecatian took the flowers from her and placed them on the table before commenting,

“Thank you. It’s a pleasure to see you both. It’s been a long time. I hope that you have been well.”

“Yes, we have, Your Highness,” Clavius replied as they sat down just as the servants arrived with some chicken soup, sliced bread, butter and cheese.

Vecatian ate a few spoonfuls of soup whilst his mother spoke up:

“Yes, it has indeed been a long time, Drusilla... Too long in fact... Ever since Aminn’s death following the dreadful miscarriage, we’ve rarely left the palace. After the Morkrai took her away, heartbroken Akim started drinking heavily. Tarjanis really worried about him, so we agreed to move in to keep him company. Not that it helped much. Poor Akim was already beyond salvation. He left all his duties to my husband and High Council, and spent all his time drinking with whores. Three years ago, Akim nearly froze to death, after he sleep-walked into the gardens in the depths of winter. A guard found him lying on the ground by the fountain, after he had slipped on some ice. Then my dear Tarjanis came down with the red plague...” these final words caused tears to stream down her cheeks.

“I am terribly sorry for your loss, Ifresija,” Drusilla turned towards her friend, extending her arms.

Ardia spent a few minutes crying on her shoulder, before finally composing herself.

Vecatian finished his meal in silence and passed the empty plate to an awaiting servant. Like his mother, he had to admit that the past few years at the palace hadn't been easy for his family. He could only hope that the situation would improve now that he was the Emperor.

The servants returned with a selection desserts including honey cakes, a bowl of fruit, a variety of multicolored sorbets, cheese and sweet wine. He helped himself to a honey cake and took a sip of his wine.

Clavius spoke up:

“And how are you doing Your Majesty?”

“I'm fine...Well, as well as I can be under the circumstances,” Vecatian answered after eating, “I've just been so busy lately. First with Akim's funeral arrangements, now the coronation. I was in the library with Bria earlier, reading up on some Arhian history, in preparation for the High Council meetings.”

“Who's Bria?” his mother interrupted as she helped herself to a raspberry sorbet.

“Oh, she's my...em mm... my mistress...” he confessed.

“Oh I see... So that's what you were up to this morning. And here I thought that you weren't feeling well. When it turns out you wanted to roll around in the sheets with one of the palace maids.”

Clavius chuckled.

“Oh Ifresija, your son is still young. At his age, it's hard to resist a pretty face. I say great for him. He needs something positive in his life, especially after such a long period of mourning.”

“Yes, I agree. Besides it's perfectly normal and healthy for an Ifresir to have mistresses,” his wife added.

“Hmm...I suppose you're right,” Ardia muttered before taking another sip of her wine.

Clavius consumed a handful of figs and washed them down with some wine, before asking:

“Didn't Akim have some concubines as well?”

“Yes, there were a few... He may have rejected marriage proposals after Aminn's death, but that didn't stop members of his court from offering their daughters to him. He even agreed to have a few live with him in the palace. There were at least four at one point. All Arhian girls, from the noblest of families. I remember one was a real beauty with golden hair, a distant relative of his wife. I can't recall her name though... Cornelia...Arelia...” Ardia responded.

“Aurelia...Aurelia Cornelian of House Tarkin,” Vecatian mentioned, “Yes, she was with Akim for a few months.”

Vecatian tried to remember the last time he saw Akim with his mistress. It was at one of his cousin's parties. The kind of party that he had grown to loathe, as it didn't take long until things got out of hand.

Like all Arhian girls of noble birth, Aurelia was a virgin and had a very strict upbringing, free from alcohol or parties of any type. Back in her home city of Naitoria, she wasn't even allowed out of the household grounds without a male escort. But all that discipline fell straight out the window, the moment she had arrived at the palace. As pretty as she may have been, Aurelia was no Aminn, and Akim had no intention of ever marrying her. Instead, he used her for sex and took her to his bed that same night. And from the moment on it was a downward spiral, as Akim spent most of his time drinking with her in his lounge. Sometimes they would invite some guests over for a party where the alcohol flowed freely.

Vecatian had had the questionable pleasure of attending some of these parties. He remembered one in particular, where his cousin did his best to get him drunk on sweet wine. Aurelia was so inebriated, she kept giggling until she passed out in the Emperor's lap. Only fifteen at the time, two goblets of wine was all it took to make Vecatian queasy. The party ended abruptly when his father Tarjanis entered the lounge and saw the state his son was in. Furious and he lashed out at Akim. The Emperor apologized and had a servant escort Vecatian back to his room, where he remained for the rest of the night. Meanwhile Tarjanis stayed in the room, keeping a close eye on his nephew.

"Such a beautiful name. What happened to her?" Drusilla interrupted his thoughts.

"I don't know to be honest. I guess he just got bored of her and sent her back to Arhia. Her parents probably tried to cover up the scandal marrying her off to some wealthy noble..." he responded.

"That poor girl... Anyway, speaking of marriage... Have you thought out choosing a bride? Our daughter Loraila has come of age." Drusilla blurted out.

And there it was. The moment he had been dreading. His parents had been trying to arrange this union ever since he could remember. Vecatian allowed a servant to pour more wine into his goblet before asking,

"I will consider it after the coronation. And how is Loraila doing?"

"She's very well. Thank you for asking. She's at the bathhouse with some friends. She's grown up beautifully. Such a sweet girl. And smart too. She loves reading poetry and music. You should hear her play the lute," Drusilla replied.

"I would love to," Vecatian answered.

They continued chatting until everyone had finished their meal. Afterwards, Ardia and Vecatian bade their guests goodbye before going their separate ways. Ardia returned to her chamber, where she summoned her handmaids and began discussing the flower arrangements and other decorations for her son's coronation. Vecatian spent the rest of the day with Bria.

A fortnight passed as everyone began making the preparations for Vecatian's coronation. The Emperor left all the planning to his mother, preferring to spend his time with his mistress. It was delightful two

weeks of hot sex, swimming in his private pool, plus many hours of lounging around on the couch, reading books and cuddling by the fireplace.

Finally the big day came. On the morning of his coronation, his mother arrived with a dozen handmaids who helped Vecatian into his robes, a long black toga adorned with gold threads and the Erocation coat of arms. The outfit was so elaborate, it took over an hour to dress him.

“You look stunning my dear,” his mother beamed as one of the handmaids passed him a mirror.

He may have looked great, but Vecatian soon realized just how stiff and uncomfortable these robes were. He sighed, fidgeting as a handmaid attached a rose shaped, golden brooch to his toga, while another applied some make-up to cover-up the tiny smallpox scars on his face.

“I think I could use a drink...Some mead perhaps...” he uttered.

A handmaid obeyed, quickly leaving the room and heading to the kitchen. She soon returned with a goblet of mead which Vecatian downed in a single gulp.

“That’s better...Is it time yet?”

“Almost ready...” Ardia took a golden chain from one of the handmaids, “I want you to wear this. It was your father’s.”

Vecatian put the necklace on. Finally the handmaids escorted him and his mother towards the throne-room where the entire court was waiting for them.

A high priest of Lord Ifir greeted them, as they sat down on their thrones before beginning the ceremony with a prayer to the god of the skies. Vecatian tried his best to look poised and dignified, smiling and waving at the crowds, as the high priest placed the laurel leaf crown on his head.

The whole court reacted with a massive round applause and crying out cheers of “Long live the Ifresir!”

Vecatian glanced around the room, hoping to see some familiar faces, other nobles including some of his childhood friends. He spotted Loraila in the distance, as she stood up for a chance to catch a glimpse of the new Emperor.

After the ceremony, they all headed to the dining hall where a feast was held in his honor. Vecatian spent the first hour, eating and mingling with his guests, before deciding to sneak off into his chamber where Bria waited for him.

She threw her arms around him as soon as he closed the door.

“This outfit is ridiculous... Can you help me out of it?” he asked as he removed his sandals.

“With pleasure...” Bria grinned as she began to remove the ornaments, before unwrapping Vecatian’s toga.

Vectian quickly stripped of her tunic as they kissed. It took a while, but Bria eventually managed to undress him and they made love on the floor.

“Oh.. Much better...What a day. I’m so glad it’s over soon...” Vecatian whispered, stroking her hair after they had finished.

“Is it? I thought that this was just the beginning...Don’t you have to get back to your guests?”

“Yes, I probably should but not right now. Right now, I just want to be here, alone with you.”

They lay there on the floor for a few more seconds until Bria got up and began to get dressed.

“Right, it’s time for you to get back to the party.”

“Alright, I’ll go but on two conditions – I’m not wearing that outfit and you’re coming with me,” he donned his bathrobe before summoning a handmaid.

He ordered her to fetch a purple tunic for himself, a pair of sandals and a silken red gown for Bria with matching slippers.

The servant soon returned with the clothes, and left them on the bed before leaving the room.

Vecatian changed into the tunic and put his crown back on along with his sandals. Bria tried the dress on.

“You look lovely,” he whispered once she was ready.

“I...This is too much Vecatian. I can’t possibly go there with you. Your entire court will be there. All those noble families. I’m a nobody, just a servant from a poor background. Same as my mother. I don’t even know who my father is...”

The Emperor put his arms around her before replying:

“No, you’re not a nobody. You’re Bria of Arhia, my mistress. I’m the Ifresir and I want to show you off to my guests. Just remember you must address me as Your Highness in public.”

“But Vecatian, they will be other Arhians there. If you introduce me as your mistress, they will start asking questions about my heritage.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out. You came here as part of Empress Aminn’s household staff. From what I know of Aminn she didn’t just pick her servants from the streets. They were carefully selected. That means that you must have some noble blood in your veins, even if you’re a bastard child.”

“I guess it’s possible. I’m an orphan. My mother was a servant at a noble house.”

They kissed again, before stepping out of the chamber and heading towards the dining hall.

The musicians stopped playing as soon as they stepped into the hall. The whole court was silent as everyone stopped to bow to the Emperor. Vecatian casually strolled into the room with Bria, making their way towards where his mother and their guests lounged.

“Good evening my dear, I was wondering where you went off to,” his mother greeted him with a warm hug.

“Hello mother, I decided to have a little break... Oh and I would like you to meet my mistress, Bria of Arhia,” Vecatian announced.

“It’s an honor to meet Your Majesty,” Bria bowed to the Empress.

Ardia smiled as her son and Bria sat down. Vecatian accepted a goblet of wine from one of servants while a woman sitting opposite his mother spoke up:

“Good evening Your Highness...” she bowed before turning towards Vecatian’s lover, “So Bria, you’re an Arhian and yet I’ve never seen you at court before. Do you mind if I ask what is your full name and which house are you from?”

Bria was silent for a moment, pondering for a suitable response. There was a tradition for Arhian nobles to give their daughters three names, a given name plus the names of both their parents.

“Bria Larisan of House...of House Reinis,” she finally replied, stating the name of the nobleman whose villa her mother worked in at the time of her birth.

The woman took a sip of her wine before commenting,
“House Reinis...Interesting.. I never knew that Baron Reinis had a daughter..”

“Not with his wife, my mother was one of his mistresses,” Bria responded.

“Oh, I see... Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you Bria and Your Highness.”

Vecatian merely smiled, before deciding it was time to move on. He ordered the musicians to resume playing before taking Bria’s hand. They left Ardia with her guests and headed to the dance floor in the center of the room. They began to dance to the sound of lutes and lyres.

“Alright, so here’s the plan, you may not know who your father is, but there is one way to find out. We will need to find Baron Reinis so that he can confirm your story,” he whispered into her ear as they swayed to the music.

Bria nodded in response. They spent a few more minutes dancing, before heading to the other side of the room.

In his eight years at the palace, Vecatian had had a chance to meet most of the nobles of the imperial court and was well aware of some of the gossip that was going around. Reinis had a reputation for being a bit of a womanizer, who regularly cheated on his wife Baronissa Flora. It didn’t take the Emperor long to spot the Baron among the guests. Reinis was a tall man in his mid-forties with shoulder length, dark hair and a light stubble. He was certainly old enough to be Bria’s father. As the inhabitants of a former independent nation, Arhians had a tendency to keep to themselves, rarely

interacting with the citizens of other provinces unless they needed to. Reinis was no exception. When the couple approached him, he chatted to one of the Colonels in the Arhian army.

Vecatian waited until the Colonel left in search of more drinks before approaching the Baron.

“Good evening Your Highness, and congratulations on your coronation!” Reinis bowed as he greeted the Emperor.

“Good and thank you Reinis. Allow me to introduce my new mistress Bria.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet Your Grace...” Bria said politely.

Reinis smiled before commenting, this time in his native dialect:

“It’s always a pleasure to meet a fellow Arhian. Whereabouts are you from Bria?”

“I’m from Naitoria,” Bria began but Vecatian interrupted:

“Actually, that’s what I was hoping to ask you Reinis. Bria tells me that she was born in your household but she has no idea who her father is. I was wondering if you could shed some light on the matter. Is it possible that she could be your child.”

“Yes, it’s possible Your Majesty. I had no children with my wife but there might have been some with my mistresses,” Reinis replied before having a closer look at Bria.

“What was your mother’s name?”

“Larisa,” Bria answered.

Reinis thought for a moment. “Larisa... Oh yes, I remember Larisa...I spent a few months with her one summer whilst my wife was away visiting her mother in the east. So...When exactly is your birthday?”

“I’ll be nineteen on the tenth of May,” Bria responded.

“Hmm... Larisa never mentioned that she was pregnant. I had no idea. I didn’t see her after that summer. Flora acquired some new horses and sent Larisa to work in the stables. I’m guessing that’s where she gave birth. On the tenth of May eighteen years ago I wasn’t at my villa. I was with Flora at my brother’s wedding in Naitoria.”

Vecatian allowed a servant to refill his drink before responding:

“So... Does that mean you acknowledge Bria as your daughter?”

“Sure, why not? Daughters have their uses, Your Highness. I’m sure my wife will be thrilled to meet her. I’ll visit the courthouse tomorrow to sort out the relevant paperwork,” the Baron answered before turning his attention towards the girl.

“Excellent,” said Vecatian.

Bria hesitantly stared at the Baron for a few seconds, unsure of what to say.

“Thank you, Your Grace...” she muttered finally.

The Baron smiled and held out his hand towards her, “You may call me father... Now with Your Majesty’s permission, I would like Bria to meet her family and step-mother.”

Bria glanced back at her lover, unwilling to leave his side.

“You should go with him Bria. Don’t worry. It will be fine. I’ll see you later,” the Emperor gave her a hug.

“If you say so Your Majesty... I’ll see you later,” said Bria.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening Your Highness, and don’t worry I’ll make sure your sweetheart returns to you by the end of the night. ”

Bria reluctantly took his hand, and together they wandered off to a corner of the room. Vecatian watched for a while, as Reinis began to introduce Bria to other Arhian nobles including his wife. He returned to the table where his mother was sitting with Marchionissa Drusilla and Marchio Clavius.

“Welcome back my dear, I see Bria has found her family...” Ardia commented as a servant refilled her goblet with wine.

“Indeed, she has,” Vecatian replied after sitting down.

“Well, I must say she’s a pretty girl... But still, I think that you can do better than the bastard child of some low-ranking Arhian nobleman... Now that you’re the Ifresir you should consider choosing a bride. There are many girls here who would make a fine Ifresija, ” his mother hinted before taking a sip of her wine.

“I will but not right now. I need more time.”

“Fair enough,” Ardia replied.

Then Drusilla spoke up:

“Oh, I almost forgot Your Majesty. Loraila has a special surprise for you.”

At this point, the music stopped, and a servant stepped onto the dance floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Your Highness, Marchio Clavius’ daughter Lady Loraila would like to perform a short piece she composed in your honor,” he announced.

There was a round of applause and a familiar face appeared on the dance floor with a lute in her hand. The skinny girl Vecatian remembered from his youth, was now a young woman with luscious, curly auburn hair, blue eyes which sparkled like sapphires, dressed in a green silken gown.

“Good evening your Majesty and congratulations on your coronation!” Loraila bowed as she greeted him with a smile.

“Good evening and thank you. It’s a pleasure to see you again Loraila,” Vecatian replied as he raised his goblet towards her.

“And you, Your Highness, I hope that you enjoy my performance,” Loraila responded as she grasped the strings of her instrument and began to play.

The Emperor smiled, unable to take his eyes off her, sipping his wine as Loraila played a cheerful tune and sang a song based on a book they read as children. It told the adventures of two mountain Enai, they wandered through the Lavinum mountains, chasing a cave troll, hoping to retrieve a large sapphire he had stolen from them. Her sweet voice combined with the melodic sounds of the lute was one of the highlights of the evening for Vecatian.

He waited until Loraila had finished her performance before clapping along with the rest of the audience.

“That was lovely. Thank you,” Vecatian smiled.

“I’m glad that you enjoyed it Your Majesty,” Loraila replied grinning.

Once the performance was over Loraila returned to sit near her parents. Vecatian finished his wine and wanted to speak to her but was not able to do so because Baron Reinis had returned with Bria.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening Your Highness. Here’s your girl as promised. Goodnight!”

“Thank you and goodnight Reinis,” the Emperor answered.

Bria sat next to Vecatian before whispering in his ear:

“Do you mind if we talk somewhere in private?”

“Sure, let’s go the lounge,” Vecatian replied.

He bade his mother and their guests goodnight, before leaving the dining hall and heading to the lounge with Bria.

As soon as they entered the room, Bria fell into his arms. They hugged in silence for a few minutes before Bria spoke up:

“That was so awkward. The Baron only met me less than an hour ago and, yet there he was showing me off to all his friends and family like some prized possession.”

“That’s because you’re my lover. It’s a massive ego boost for any nobleman. Besides, look on the bright side. At least now that you’re his daughter you can attend more gatherings at my court without feeling embarrassed. Also, it won’t be long until he returns to Arhia.”

“I suppose you’re right. He plans to take me to the courthouse tomorrow morning, so that he can officially legitimize me as his daughter. Flora agreed to adopt me. She seems friendly. I like her. Apparently she can’t have children of her own and she’s always wanted a daughter.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you,” Vecatian whispered before giving her a kiss.

“Anyway, I think I’ve had enough excitement for one night. Maybe it’s time we went to bed?” Bria suggested.

Vecatian agreed and they made their way out of the lounge, up the staircase and towards his bedchamber.

True to his word, the Baron and his wife showed up at the palace the following morning, shortly after Vecatian and Bria had finished their breakfast. Reinis explained his plan to the Emperor, in addition to the courthouse, Flora wanted to take his daughter to a tailor and buy her some new shoes. Vecatian agreed on the condition that Bria would return to palace afterwards. He bade her goodbye and they agreed to meet up later.

There was a lot for him to do at the palace. His first task was to attend a High Council meeting to discuss the state of the finances along with other issues. The senators explained that prior to his death, Vecatian’s father Tarjanis did all he could to ensure the treasury was in good shape. There was also the issue of Arhia, a former independent province, which Akim had permitted to retain its culture and customs, not to mention certain laws that were unique to the region. Vecatian made it clear that he intended to continue his cousin’s legacy by maintaining good relations with Arhia. Its citizens would be allowed to keep their regional dialect and customs, but they would still have to pay their taxes as well as provide military aid to the Empire should the need arise.

After the meeting, Vecatian joined Bria for lunch. Reinis had signed the legal documents, legitimizing her as his daughter making her now officially Bria Larisan of House Reinis. Flora had signed the paperwork, officially adopting her as her child. Though pleased with the news, Bria seemed relieved to learn that the couple were planning to return to Arhia soon.

“I told them that I want to stay here in the palace with you. I promised to write to them,” she informed him once they had finished their meal.

“That’s great. I love you and want you stay here,” Vecatian put his arms around her.

And so it was that Bria remained in the palace as the Emperor’s mistress. In the months that followed Vecatian did his best to focus on his duties, attending High Council meetings, carrying out reforms, dealing with legal matters and various administrative tasks. Yet he spent all his spare time with his Arhian girl, making love to her as often as he could. One day Bria rushed out of bed, heading straight for the bathroom, where she vomited into the sink.

“Are you alright Bria?” Vecatian asked once he caught up with her.

Bria shook her head, “No, I feel sick. I think I might be with child...” she whispered.

Vecatian took her hand and slowly led her back to the bedchamber, whilst a servant cleaned up the mess. As she lay down, he summoned a doctor to examine her. The royal physician quickly confirmed their suspicions, Bria was indeed pregnant with his child.

The couple were delighted by the revelation and left an offering of flowers at the altar of the fertility goddess Lady Era-Gragiya. Vecatian informed his mother of the good news, but much to his disappointment, Ardia didn't share his enthusiasm.

"Just what this family needs. A half Arhian bastard...Bria is no better than Akim's whores. Your cousin would still be alive today if it wasn't for those wretched sluts. You should be focusing on choosing a wife from a good family, who will bear your heir instead of wasting time with this harlot," she scorned.

"No, it was Aminn's death and alcohol that killed Akim. How dare you say that about your own grandchild, mother? This baby will have my blood. Bastard or not, he or she will be an Erocation. My baby, whom I will love. I hope that you come to your senses soon, " Vecatian replied.

Ardia remained silent and this marked the end of the conversation. Angry, Vecatian stormed out of the room.

"My mother may not care about this child, but I do. Bria, I love you and this baby," Vecatian whispered once he was back in his chamber. He wrapped his arms around her, before putting one hand on her stomach in an attempt to feel the baby.

Part 2. Birth & Rebellion

The first year of Vecatian's reign passed by largely uneventfully. He focused on his duties, doting on his pregnant lover, eagerly awaiting the birth of his first-born child. Suddenly trouble began to stir on the streets of Ifirium. A nobleman named Ergon claimed to have strong family ties to the deceased Emperor Akim. Rumors began to spread that he was the Emperor's long lost son, fathered by Akim before he became Emperor and that Ergon's mother had married him prior to dying during the birth. These claims helped him gain supporters among the local peasants. He used his money to sway some of the upper classes with promises of favors and High Council positions under his administration.

Ergon and his followers took to the streets offering gifts and free food to those who joined their cause, claiming to act in the common folk's best interest unlike their elitist 'false Emperor' who favored the nobility. Vecatian made a public declaration to his court stating Ergon is a liar, motivated by greed and a lust for power. There was no real cause for civil unrest and yet Ergon used Vecatian's rhetoric against him. A couple of months later the situation finally escalated into a full rebellion against the Emperor, with riots and fights breaking out throughout the capital city.

As Ergon gained more supporters, he began to challenge the Emperor's authority and staged a coup, storming the palace demanding Vecatian's abdication. They were not able to capture Vecatian nor his family as they were fiercely protected by the imperial guard. General Gekkanon suffered an axe wound to his left arm, shielding the couple from the angry mob, as they fled from their bedroom to the other side of the palace. After the incident, Vecatian became concerned about the safety of his family and increased the level of security at the palace. From that point on, he, Ardia and Bria were never left their rooms without an armed guard.

This left Vecatian with no choice but to call the armed forces to restore the peace by quashing the rebellion, arresting Ergon and his supporters. As some of the imperial army had chosen to side with Ergon, Vecatian wasn't sure if he could trust them to carry out his orders so he also requested for military aid from Arhia province. The Arhians sent their finest soldiers, Atarai legions to deal with the problem.

Luckily most of the soldiers remained loyal to the Emperor and it wasn't long until they were able to regain control of the city and put an end to the violence in the streets. Outnumbered by the imperial army, most of the rebels surrendered. Ergon and some of the rebel leaders managed to get away. They remained hidden for days until an imperial army scout spotted them breaking into the temple of the sky god Lord Ifir. There, they barricaded themselves inside the building.

Meanwhile, Vecatian sent spies to investigate if there was any truth to the nobleman's claims. An investigation was launched at the courthouse and Lady Era-Gragiya's temple. After a thorough examination of various legal documents regarding Ergon's heritage, they found no proof that such a marriage had ever taken place. Nor was there any record of any family ties between him and Emperor Akim or any other member of the Erocatien dynasty.

Upon receiving the sufficient evidence to convict the nobleman, the Emperor sent a legion of Arhian Atarai to the site, tasking them with dealing with Ergon and his supporters. Ergon and the rebels were given two options, either surrender and return to the palace to stand trial for treason or die at the hands of the Atarai. Sadly, the majority of the rebels chose not to surrender, resulting in a massacre at the temple gardens. Forty rebels, all Gragiyan citizens were brutally slaughtered by Arhian soldiers, their blood staining the sacred grounds. The temple gate and main door were also damaged as the Atarai had

to use a battering ram to force their way through the barricades. Ergon and the other leaders were arrested and escorted back to the palace for their trials and subsequent executions.

Vecatian was present for every treason trial, watching with a stoic look on his face as the judge sentenced each individual to death by beheading. He felt no sympathy for any of them. As gruesome and harsh as the punishment was, the Emperor believed that they deserved it for trying to turn the nation against him. Yet, despite this attitude, it was tough for him to watch the executions, as it meant having to witness the criminals' families react to the death of their loved one. Ergon's wife and young daughter whimpered as he was escorted to the chopping block. As the executioner prepared his axe to strike the final blow, the rebel leader pleaded with the Emperor, asking if he could be buried with his wedding ring so that he may offer it as a gift to the Lady of sorrows.

Vecatian shook his head before yelling,
"No, I deny your request. You're a traitor not a martyr. You condemned yourself with your actions.. You're a criminal and you have no right for a dignified burial."

He ordered servants to remove all of Ergon's jewelry, which was thrown into the crowd. As a group of beggars rushed to snatch the gems, the executioner's axe struck Ergon's head, knocking it off his shoulders before falling to the ground.

Vecatian didn't stick around to see the reaction of Ergon's family nor for the burial. As soldiers shoveled, Ergon's remains into a shallow grave marked with a stone slab condemning his actions, the Emperor returned to his chamber where Bria rested.

"That was the last one, it's over now. We're safe," he whispered as he sat on the bed, wrapping his arms around her.

Bria remained silent as she embraced him. Vecatian gently placed a hand on her swollen belly, hoping to feel the baby. Now seven months into the pregnancy, Bria was struggling from back ache due to the excess weight and frequent stomach cramps. At times, back ache was so severe, Bria could barely walk to the other side of the chamber and spent most of her time in bed.

A servant entered the room with some food for the couple, but Vecatian sent him away. Watching the executions and constantly worrying about Bria and the baby, caused him to lose his appetite. Instead, he changed into his nightclothes and climbed into bed.

Vecatian got little sleep that night, as the events of previous week haunted his dreams. It wasn't the executions of the rebel leaders that disturbed him, but the knowledge that forty rebels had been killed outside Lord Ifir's temple. As much as he tried to think of something else, each time he closed his eyes, all Vecatian saw was a pile of butchered bodies scattered all over the temple gardens. Once beautiful flowers all stained with blood, as was the sky god's statue. Unable to sleep, he rose and headed to the corridor where he began to pace back and forth in an attempt to calm himself. Suddenly Vecatian heard Bria screaming and ran back into the room.

"Bria!" he shouted. The sight was so terrifying, he couldn't believe his eyes. His precious Arhian girl lay in a pool of blood. Vecatian cried for the doctor before rushing her aid.

The royal physician burst into the room. He did his best to help Bria, but it was too late to save the baby. Hours later, Vecatian's mistress give birth to a stillborn girl.

Streams of tears fell from his cheeks as he watched Bria hold the lifeless body of their tiny daughter, the child he had so eagerly wanted to meet.

"What have we done to deserve such cruelty?" he cried.

"The Erai must be angry and wish to punish us for the damage caused to the sky god's temple. By ordering soldiers to kill the rebels, you caused blood to be spilled on the sacred grounds," Bria whimpered still staring at their dead baby.

"If that is so, we must do something to appease them. I will ensure that all the damages are repaired, site is cleansed and blessed by the priests. But first, we must name and bury our daughter..." he whispered as the doctor approached them with a piece of cloth in his hand.

"Leela," Bria whispered, clutching on to the baby, reluctant to let her go.

"Bria... I know how difficult this is, but I need you to let Leela go so that the doctor can prepare her for the burial," Vecatian wrapped his arms around her.

Still sobbing, Bria stroked her deceased daughter's head, before finally handing the body over to the doctor. The royal physician wrapped it carefully in the cloth before leaving the chamber. Soon after he left, a group handmaids entered with towels and a bowl of hot water.

Bria continued to cry, as the handmaids helped her out of the bloodstained clothes and began to wash her body. Vecatian spent the rest of the day in the room, comforting his lover. Servants brought the meals into their room, but the couple were so overcome with grief, they barely touched their food.

As the preparations for Leela's funeral were underway, Vecatian went to see his mother, and informed her of the terrible news. Yet, much to his shock, Ardia was unmoved by the revelation. She agreed for Leela to be buried inside the Erocation family crypt but refused to attend the funeral.

"How can you be so cold and insensitive? Leela was your granddaughter!" Vecatian shouted.

"That child was a bastard, born of that whore of yours. Why should I care what befalls her in the Halls of Makar?"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. Leela was my child, your blood..."

Ardia remained silent until Vecatian finally gave up trying to reason with her and left the room.

An hour later, he and Bria descended into the crypt for their daughter's funeral. They wept as the high priest placed a golden necklace with a diamond stone into Leela's tiny coffin.

"Farewell little Leela, my beautiful girl. I hope that the grim judge will deem you worthy of a place in Lord Ifir's sky palace. You will always have a special place in my heart," Vecatian whispered.

"Farewell Leela...my sweet baby..." Bria whimpered as the servants lowered the coffin into the tomb.

After the ceremony, the bereaved couple remained in the crypt lingering by the grave of their daughter late into the evening.

The following morning, restoration work to fix the damaged parts of the temple began. In addition to this, Vecatian ordered priests and priestesses from across the empire to come Ifirium and bless the sky god's temple. Though the gardens had already been washed clean of the blood, the Emperor had the gardeners pour more water and scrub every part of the grounds with vinegar, erasing any trace of the massacre that had occurred. He and Bria left an offering of flowers at the altar of Lord Ifir's statue in the palace. They prayed for his forgiveness for the temple incident. In addition to this they also whispered a prayer to his daughter, the radiant Lady Vea, the goddess of the moon and dreams asking her to allow him a good night's sleep once more. Though these cleansing were enough to put an end to his nightmares, it did little to comfort his lover. Ever since the funeral, she wouldn't allow Vecatian to touch her or sleep in the same bed. A few days later, she moved into the room next door and refused to speak to him.

Vecatian thought things couldn't get much worse until his mother brought him a bizarre proposition.

"I think it's time that you chose a bride," she suggested one day as they sat down for their dinner.

"A bride? Have you gone mad? It's only been a few days since I buried my daughter and you're suggesting I should start planning a wedding!" he bellowed, appalled by the idea.

"It's also been a week since the executions, and the massacre at Lord Ifir's temple. These events are still fresh in the minds of our subjects. Our people need a distraction, something pleasant and joyful to help them forget the horror of Ergon's rebellion. I'd say that a wedding is exactly what this family and the empire needs," Ardia explained.

Vecatian sighed in response before finally digging into his food. Ardia stayed silent for duration of their meal before finally speaking up,

"I believe this is what is best for the good of the empire. You need a wife and an heir..."

Her son didn't respond, glaring at her as he sipped his wine.

"Now, I've selected four girls, all from noble families, each from a different province. I've arranged for them to travel here in two weeks time. I hope that you will at least consider choosing one of them as your Ifresija."

Vecatian sighed again before muttering under his breath, "Fine, if it pleases you, I will consider them."

"Excellent," Ardia smiled.

As the potential brides began their journey towards the capital, Vecatian tried to reconcile with his lover. After a few days of avoiding him, Bria finally let him into her room, and they were able to talk. Vecatian chose not to inform her about of his mother's plans for his betrothal until closer to the time. Instead, they had some lunch and spoke of their child.

“I miss her so much...My baby... She never had a chance to take a single breath before the Morkrai carried her away from us...” she lamented.

“I know...I miss Leela too... I pray that she is now at peace in the paradise of the sky god’s golden palace. Surely a soul as beautiful and innocent as her would be worthy of such a fate...” Vecatian wrapped his arms around her.

“I hope so...”

That night, she moved back into Vecatian’s chamber, and they finally slept in the same bed again.

As the time of the potential brides’ arrival drew near, one evening as they sat by the fireplace, Vecatian finally told Bria about his mother’s plan.

“I must marry and produce an heir for the sake of the empire, but I promise, this won’t change anything about our relationship. I intend to keep you as my mistress. You are and will remain the only woman I love,” he declared.

“I love you too Vecatian, but you know as well as I do that things will never be the same once you are married. How could I possibly compete with your Ifresiea?”

“You won’t have to. I will only be with her out of duty.”

Bria didn’t answer. She hoped that what he said was true. Yet deep down she worried that he might change his mind once he met and chose his Ifresija.

A morning after their conversation, Bria asked his permission to travel to Arhia to visit her father.

“I don’t want to be here when your potential brides arrive. I would be a distraction. I will only be gone for a few days,” she explained.

Though upset at the thought of being separated from her, Vecatian decided to respect her decision and granted her leave to travel to Naitoria. They bade each other goodbye and kissed before she set off in a horse-drawn carriage that same evening.

The following day, the four bride candidates arrived at the palace. Guestrooms were prepared for each of their girls and their parents. Ardia had arranged them to meet her son at different times on the same day, and requested they wait for the next day before he announced his decision. She devised a series of activities for each date, so that Vecatian had a chance to get to know them a little before making his decision. The first one was a lunch at the main dining room, followed by tea and desserts in the same room, an afternoon stroll in the gardens, and finally an evening of music and reading in the lounge.

As Vecatian got ready for his dates, Ardia walked into his chamber with a handmaid carrying a range of dresses and jewelry.

“Now remember, these girls have come a long way to see you. So please be kind to them even if you decide to reject them,” she showed one of the silken gowns to Vecatian, “I figured it would be a nice gesture to present them with a parting gift, as token of your appreciation of the effort they took to travel all the way here. That way they can leave here with their family dignity intact and we don’t lose the support of their parents.”

“I agree. Dresses and fine jewelry seem like appropriate gifts but what of the Arhian? She’s not permitted to have such things, doing so would be an insult to her culture,” Vecatian pointed out.

“Hmm... Yes, I see your point. No elaborate dresses or jewelry...How about flowers in that case?”

“Flowers would be perfect. What are the colors of her house sigil?”

“It’s a white eagle on a black background,” Ardia replied as she browsed from an array of necklaces, trying figure out which one would make best gift.

“White flowers in that case. Oh, and ensure that she meets me in the gardens. That way I can pick them out myself,” Vecatian replied.

“Yes, of course.”

Vecatian helped his mother choose two gifts for the girls: a silken pink gown with pearls and a golden necklace with rubies. Fully prepared, together with the handmaid, they made their way to the throne room.

Ardia and Vecatian sat on their thrones as a servant entered the chamber.

“Your Majesties, I would like to introduce Lady Justina, the daughter of Dux Kernis of Isfienia.”

A dark haired girl dressed in a burgundy silken gown entered the room and bowed to the duo.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Good afternoon Justina, and welcome to Ifirium. I hope your journey went well,” Vecatian greeted her.

“Yes it did, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent. Now I was hoping you would like to join me for lunch.” Vecatian rose from his throne.

“Yes, I would love to Your Majesty.”

Ardia smiled as her son took Justina’s hand, and lead her out of the throne-room, towards the dining hall.

Much to Vecatian’s disappointment, as pretty as she was, the girl from the mountain province of Lavinium wasn’t much of a conversation partner. Justina spoke remarkably little during their meal, nibbling away at her food and politely answering his questions. Vecatian found her presence rather dull.

After the meal, Justina kissed his hand and thanked him before returning to her room. Vecatian stayed in the dining hall and took a sip of his wine as the servant announced the next visitor:

“Your Highness, I would like to introduce Lady Daina, the daughter of Dux Dacian of Maeronium.”

A dark-skinned girl entered, draped in an outfit typical for a noblewoman of the Niralis desert; a long red linen cloak over her beige tunic, her hair hidden under a red, bejeweled headscarf with only her dark brown eyes and a small part of her face visible.

“Good afternoon Your Highness. It’s an honor to meet you,” Daina bowed to the monarch.

“Good afternoon Daina, and welcome to Ifirium. I trust your journey went well,” Vecatian invited her to sit.

“Yes, it did Your Highness,” she replied, pulling up a chair as the servants arrived with their desserts and tea.

This time Vecatian enjoyed the rendezvous. Daina was not only more talkative than Justina, she also had fascinating stories to tell about her native land. Unfortunately, the Emperor admired these stories more than her beauty.

Once they finished eating, she too kissed his hand and thanked him before heading back to her chamber.

The third date proved to be the most awkward of all. Vecatian entered the gardens to be greeted by not just his potential bride, but also her father.

“Your Highness, I would like to introduce Dux Armus and his daughter Nobelia Lauran of House Armus of Naitoria,” the servant announced.

Just as Vecatian suspected, the Arhian girl wasn’t permitted to travel anywhere without a male escort. The Dux and his daughter bowed to him.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” said Dux Armus.

Good afternoon, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to meet you,” Nobelia tilted her head towards him.

Vecatian smiled and greeted them in the same manner as the two girls. They proceeded to stroll through the gardens, Nobelia occasionally stopped to admire some of the flowers, whilst her father followed them close behind. Well versed in Arhian customs, Vecatian knew Armus would not leave his daughter alone with him, not even for a second. Yet he tried to make the most of the date, enjoying the pleasant weather and the stunning views. Nobelia was indeed a beauty. Sadly, character wise, she was similar to Justina, very well spoken and polite, but ultimately rather boring company.

After Nobelia and her father left, he spoke with the gardener about which white flowers would make the best gift for Nobelia. He finally settled on a selection of white roses, lilies and dahlias, which he ordered the gardener to cut and prepare a bouquet out of for the following day.

He left the gardens and headed back into the palace, towards the lounge. Vecatian made himself comfortable on the couch as the musicians began to play their instruments. As the sound of lutes, lyres and castanets filled the air, two servants brought a selection of books into the room whilst a third announce his final date.

“Your Highness, I would like to introduce Lady Loraila, the daughter of Marchio Clavius of Ifirium.”

Vecatian couldn't believe his ears nor his eyes when a familiar face entered the room. Loraila was dressed in the same green gown she had worn on the night of his coronation. The moment she saw his face, Loraila forgot everything her mother had ever taught her about good manners and court etiquette. She rushed straight towards the couch and threw her arms around him.

“Lucius...I mean Vecatian...I mean... ermmm...Your Highness...” she finally blurted out as he embraced her.

Vecatian smiled, delighted to see his old friend. Loraila found it difficult to pronounce his name when they were children, and had a habit of addressing by his middle name. He made room for her on the couch.

“It's great to see you again, Loraila. I still can't believe you're here...Hmm...Why don't we start again, this time using the correct court etiquette? Just act as though we have never met before.”

She nodded and stood up. This time, she bowed and greeted him in a stiff manner. They sat apart from each other, maintaining a formal distance. They spent several hours, chatting and browsing through poetry books as the musicians continued to play. At one point she asked one of musicians to lend her his lute and played a little song for the Emperor. Vecatian couldn't believe his luck and was now set on his choice. There was no doubt in his mind, he wanted Loraila as his Ifresija. At the end of the evening, he bade her goodnight before joining his mother for dinner.

The following morning, after breakfast, all four girls and their parents gathered inside the throne room. As each girl and her family was announced once more, Ardia and her son greeted them in the same formal manner. A handmaid entered with his chosen gifts.

“I would like to thank you all for coming. It was a pleasure to meet all of you but now the time has come for me to choose my bride...” Vecatian watched as the girls nervously stood in anticipation, eagerly awaiting his next words. “I want Lady Loraila to be my Ifresija.”

A polite round of applause lifted as Loraila made her way to the throne. She bowed and kissed his hand. Vecatian rose and grasped her hand as they stood together to face the crowd. Ardia smiled before whispering into his ear,

“What a wonderful choice. Loraila will make a fine bride. Well done!”

The rest of the girls clapped, and attempted to hide their disappointment as they accepted their gifts. Nobelia smiled as Vecatian handed her the bouquet, as did Justina as she received the gown and Daina as she lifted her cloak, allowing the handmaid to drape the new necklace. Delighted with the result, Clavius and Drusilla were embraced Ardia and Vecatian. Once the other girls returned to their rooms and began preparing for their journey back to their home provinces, Vecatian and Loraila spent time

together in the swimming pool. Ardia stayed in the throne room with Clavius and Drusilla to discuss the arrangement for the wedding.

“My mother told me about what happened to your daughter. I’m terribly sorry for your loss,” Loraila mentioned as they sat in the couch, wrapped in their towels, after a swim.

“Did you know that you’re the first person other than the priest to offer me condolences?” Vecatian grabbed a bunch of grapes from a bowl.

Loraila shook her head.

Vecatian quickly ate the fruit before replying,

“Well, it’s true. When my father and my cousin died, the entire empire mourned their deaths and everyone offered their condolences but not for my dear Leela. My precious daughter. It’s almost as though the only ones who loved her were I and my mistress Bria...”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. How awful. Speaking of Bria, where is she?”

“She’s not here. She’s in Naitoria visiting her father,” Vecatian answered as he got dressed.

Loraila dried her hair and put her tunic back before replying,

“That’s a shame. I was hoping to meet her. I don’t see any why we can’t all get along. I’ll be your wife and the mother of your heir. But she can remain here as your mistress. I know how much she means to you as the mother of your firstborn.”

“That’s very kind of you my dear. I would like nothing more than to have you both in my life. I can only hope Bria will feel the same way.” She snuggled up beside him.

By the time Bria returned a fortnight later, the royal wedding preparations were underway. Although the Emperor greeted her warmly, Bria was shocked to see how devoted he was to his new bride. Even when Loraila tried her best to be nice to her, she maintained her distance and moved into one of the servants’ rooms on the other side of the corridor, insisting that Vecatian should share his bed with his betrothed.

A few days later, the entire nation celebrated in the streets as a wedding was held at the palace. A priestess of Lady Era-Gragiya presided over the ceremony, after which Loraila was crowned as the new Ifresija in front of the entire court. Vecatian was overjoyed the moment he kissed his new Empress as the crowds erupted with shouts of “Long live the Ifresija!”

After the feast, Bria returned to her room alone whilst the newlyweds hurried to their chamber. For the first time since their date, Vecatian felt nervous. Although he had slept in the same bed as Loraila for the past few weeks, they hadn’t actually had sex yet and he knew she was a virgin.

If that wasn’t awkward enough, their elaborate coronation robes only exacerbated the problem as they were difficult to remove without any handmaids around to help.

“This is so weird,” he whispered once they had finally managed to undress themselves.

“Yes it is, super awkward. All the attention and the massive crowds. Well, at least we’re alone now. He wrapped his arms around her.

They kissed and slowly crawled into bed. Vecatian took his time, trying to make sure Loraila was comfortable as he proceeded to make love to her. He tried to gentle, yet he could tell from the look on her face that she wasn’t exactly enjoying it. Once he had finished, Vecatian lay on his back whilst Loraila rested her head on his chest.

After catching his breath, he whispered, “I’m so sorry. I hope I didn’t hurt you,” he whispered after catching his breath.

“No, it was fine. Honestly, don’t worry about it. I knew what to expect,” Loraila replied with a smile.

They kissed again before drifting off to sleep.

Once the bleeding stopped, the newly crowned Empress began to enjoy their love making and rarely left her husband’s side. Vecatian too was extremely happy and spent all his free time with her, leaving Bria to wander the palace alone.

One day, Bria finally decided to confront her lover in the corridor as he came out of a High Council meeting.

“I think it’s time for me return to Naitoria with your permission Ifresier,” she abided the court etiquette, addressing him by his title as there were other people in the corridor.

“You wish to return to Naitoria? But why?” Vecatian asked, surprised by her idea.

“Your Highness doesn’t need me anymore. You have a beautiful Empress. She will no doubt make a fine mother to your heir and other children. The whole empire adores her, including Your Highness’s mother. How can I possibly compete with her?” she explained.

“You don’t have to compete with Loraila. Bria, my wife is aware of how I feel about you. She’s not your enemy. In fact, she wants to be your friend. I want you to stay here as my mistress.” He tried to reason with her.

Bria shook her head, “No, I don’t want that. Not anymore. It’s not the same. I’ve seen the way Your Highness looks at her. She’s not one of your duties, you love her....Please Ifresier, just let me go. I want to go back to Arhia.”

She stormed out of the corridor and ran towards the main doors, opening them before heading into the gardens. Vecatian tried to run after her but Loraila arrived and stopped him.

“Lucius, you can’t force Bria to stay here against her will. Just let her be for now. We can all talk about this later, once she’s calmed down.”

The Emperor reluctantly agreed and, together with Loraila, he headed back to his room.

Meanwhile, Bria delved deeper into the royal gardens, until she suddenly realized she was being followed. She turned to see a man with short, mousy brown hair in his mid-twenties standing near an apple tree. As she came closer, he spoke up in her native dialect.

“Hello Bria, my apologies for startling you like this. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Larinus and I’m a Senator at the High Council.”

“Hello Senator Larinus. Why are you following me and what exactly do you want?”

“Well, I happened to overhear your conversation with the Ifresier and I may have a solution to your problem...” he began.

“Is that so? And what solution would you suggest?”

“You wish to return to Naitoria, but you’re not sure what awaits you there. As an unmarried girl your life will not be easy in Arhia. So here’s my proposition. The Morkrai took my dear wife and unborn child last year. After many months of mourning their deaths, I’ve had come to terms with my loss and I’ve been hoping to remarry. I wish to ask the Ifresier’s permission to grant you leave and allow me to marry you. That way you will return to Naitoria as my wife. Your father will no doubt approve of this match.”

Bria was silent, intrigued by his suggestion.

“I can assure you I’m an honorable man and I will be faithful to you. I’m not asking you to love me, I know that your heart belong to the Ifresier. All I ask is that you marry me and bear my children. Do this and I will make sure you are treated with respect. I am a wealthy man so you will have servants tending to your every need,” he added.

Bria pondered over his suggestion for a few minutes before replying,

“But why would you possibly want me? Surely there are other more suitable brides for you back in Arhia. I’m a legitimized bastard daughter of a Baron and I’m not even a virgin.”

“I don’t care about your heritage, nor do I mind that you’re not a virgin. I need a wife and a mother for my children. You’re fertile, having given birth to the Ifresier’s child before.”

“That child was stillborn.”

“I know... but it was a child, nonetheless. You’re young and healthy, so you can have more. Marry me and we shall pray to the Queen of the skies, asking her to bless our children so they will not suffer their same fate as their half-sister... Think about it Bria, you’re not going to get a better deal than this.”

Bria held out her hand towards his before responding:

“I accept your offer provided that His Highness grants me leave.”

“Excellent, you won’t regret this.” Larinus took her hand and shook it.

Having reached an agreement, they spent a few minutes walking through the gardens before bidding each other goodbye and going their separate ways. As a horse-drawn carriage arrived to take Larinus into the city, Bria agreed to meet him at the palace the following morning.

The next day, Larinus showed up at the palace shortly after Bria had finished her breakfast with Vecatian, Loraila and Ardia. He bowed to the royal family before explaining his proposition. Vecatian listened carefully whilst sipping some apple juice. Once the Senator had finished speaking, he turned to face his mistress:

“Is this what you really want Bria? Do you wish to marry this man and return with him to Arhia? I know that things have been difficult for you lately since the wedding. I’m sorry about that and I was hoping we could work this out. Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider and stay here with me and Loraila?”

“No, Your Highness, there’s nothing you can do to make me stay. I wish to have a normal life outside of the palace with a husband and family of my own. I want to marry Senator Larinus, with your permission of course. Please just let me go.” she replied.

“I’m sorry that it’s come to this, but very well. If that is your wish, you have my permission provided the wedding takes place here in Ifirium.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty. I will make the necessary arrangements for Bria’s family to travel here.” Larinus extended his hand to Bria.

“Good. Also, I would like you to have the Erocation summer villa as your wedding gift,” Vecatian added.

This prompted his mother to speak.

“Vecatian, that house has been with our family for generations. You can’t just give it away like that!”

“Why not? It’s been sitting empty for years now. It’s not like we have any use for it now, that we live in the palace. I’d say it’s the perfect gift for the couple. I will hire new servants to tend to it. This way you two will have a place to stay here in Ifirium when the High Council is in session.”

“What a wonderful gift, Your Majesty. Thank you,” the Senator replied.

“Thank you Your Highness,” Bria bowed her head to her lover.

This concluded the matter, and preparations for Bria’s wedding began the same day. A messenger was sent to deliver the news to Baron Reinis. After hearing the news, Flora hired a tailor make an Arhian wedding gown for her adopted daughter, an embroidered dress bearing the family colors, turquoise to match Reinis’ coat of arms. Arhian tradition also stipulated for the bride to receive a family heirloom as a parting gift from her mother. Larisa had died of a fever when Bria was only a few years old. Flora questioned the servants who raised the girl if Larisa had left anything of value for her daughter. She discovered the woman had little possessions and nothing of real value.

“Fair enough. I’ll provide the heirloom in that case. I’m her adopted mother after all,” Flora told her husband, before heading to their room.

She soon returned with a wooden box and opened it, revealing a silver necklace with an emerald stone.

“This belonged to my mother. She asked me to keep it and give it to my daughter or granddaughter some day.”

“That’s a fine gift,” Reinis replied.

Once everything was ready, the Baron and Flora set off towards Ifirium. Welcomed at the palace, they spent one night there. Bria was thrilled to see the dress and the necklace. Following morning, the wedding took place at the temple of Lady Era-Gragiya in central Ifirium with the Emperor and Empress as witnesses. Bria played her part well as she said her vows and kissed Larinus after the priestess’ blessing.

After the ceremony, the Emperor invited everyone for a feast at the palace.

“Congratulations to both of you,” Vecatian raised a goblet of wine to the newly-weds. Loraila also congratulated them.

The couple thanked them then Bria spoke up:

“Thank you Your Majesties. I am very grateful for everything you have done for me and Larinus.”

“It’s the least I can do for you my dear. I wish you and your husband all the best. You will always have a special place in my heart and I won’t forget the time we spent together,” Vecatian replied.

“Thank you. I too cherish the time I spent with Your Majesty. I wish and your Ifresiea good fortune. May the Erai grant you a long and happy life together.”

“Thank you, Bria. I hope you will be happy with your husband. I want you to know I never saw you as my rival. I only wished to be your friend,” said Loraila.

“I know Your Highness and I appreciate your honest friendship.”

The feast continued until the early hours of the morning. The couples and their families slept through the morning before meeting for breakfast, whilst the handmaids began to pack Bria’s belongings for the journey to Naitoria.

By the afternoon both horse-drawn carriages were ready. As the servants started to load her luggage into the carriage, Bria met Vecatian and Loraila in the courtyard.

“I guess this is goodbye,” he whispered as Bria’s father and Flora entered their own carriage.

“Yes it is. Goodbye Vecatian and thank you for everything,” she replied extending her arms for a hug.

They embraced and kissed.

“Goodbye Bria. Have a safe journey and please stay in touch,” Loraila spoke quietly as she give Bria a hug.

“Goodbye, Your Highness. I promise I’ll to write to both of you.”

Larinus entered the courtyard. As he neared, Bria turned and took his hand.

“Goodbye Your Majesties.” The Senator tipped his head in a formal bow.

Bria followed him into the carriage. The gates were swung and drivers cracked their whips and both carriages set off towards Arhia. Loraila and Vecatian remained in the courtyard, waving to the couple before heading back to the palace.

The couples kept in touch and regularly sent letters to each other. Less than a year after the wedding, Vecatian received a letter from Bria with news that she had recently given birth to the Senator’s first child, a healthy boy whom they named Rasmus. The Emperor wrote back, congratulating the couple before sharing news of his own. Loraila too was with child and her first pregnancy was going well.

One early spring evening, on the ninth of March, Loraila successfully delivered Vecatian’s heir. The tiny auburn haired baby Prince was named Vecatian II after his father. This time Ardia’s reaction befitted a new grandmother.

“Oh look at him...he’s perfect! Such a handsome little boy. The Ifrey Prisis. Well done my dear,” she whispered to Loraila, watching her breastfeed the newborn.

Vecatian merely smiled in response. He waited until his mother left once their son fell asleep inside his cradle, before whispering to his wife,

“Can you believe that woman? When Leela died, she didn’t even bat an eyelid and refused to attend her funeral. Now I have a legitimate son and she’s suddenly acting like a doting grandmother...”

“Oh Lucius, let it go. There’s no point starting a fight over this. Just think of our son,” Loraila glanced at their sleeping baby.

“I am thinking about him and our future children. I won’t let my mother spoil them rotten. As my heir, Vecatian can’t go around acting like a spoiled brat. He needs to know what it means to be the Ifresir,” the Emperor commented before rising.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to speak to someone about our son’s education. Don’t worry I’ll be back soon. I’ll see you later.” He kissed her.

“See you later,” Loraila replied before rolling on to her side, keen to catch up on sleep.

Vecatian left the chamber and made his way towards the lounge. There he summoned a servant and tasked him with fetching General Gekkanon. A few minutes later, the head of the imperial guard entered the lounge.

After bowing to the Emperor, he asked, “You wished to see me Ifresir?”

“Yes Gekkanon, as you have probably heard by now, my wife has just delivered a healthy son,” Vecatian announced.

“Yes I have, congratulations Your Highness!”

“Thank you. I am very grateful for everything you have done for my family. You have been a very loyal servant,” he continued.

“Thank you Your Majesty. I was only doing my duty, fulfilling the oath I swore to protect you,” said Gekkanon.

“Nonetheless, I cannot thank you enough for your service. This family owes you a great debt and now I have one more important task for you. I would like you to become my son’s mentor and advisor. Not only will you train him in combat, but you will also oversee his education. You will be responsible for choosing best tutors to ensure little Vecatian has a good knowledge of history, mathematics, geography, the arts as well as politics and court etiquette. You will ensure that by the time he succeeds me as Ifresir, he is ready for his new responsibilities.”

“I would be honored to serve as the Ifrey Prisis’ mentor, Your Majesty,” Gekkanon replied.

“Excellent. That will be all. Thank you Gekkanon. You may leave now,” Vecatian dismissed him with a wave.

Gekkanon bowed again before leaving the room. The Emperor returned to his chamber to find both his wife and little Vecatian still asleep. He climbed into bed and wrapped his arms around Loraila before dozing off.

Two weeks after the birth, baby Vecatian II was placed into a bath filled with laurel leaves and bathed before being wrapped in a purple robe. Loraila took him in her arms, and together with her husband, they marched to the throne room where the entire court gathered. Ardia greeted them with a warm hug as they sat on their thrones. The couple rose from the seats. Loraila held up the baby for the crowds to see whilst Vecatian proclaimed loudly,

“The radiant Queen of the skies has blessed our family recently. I am proud to introduce to you my son and heir, the Ifrey Prisis - Vecatian Assilion Erocatien.”

The crowd reacted with a massive round of applause, followed by shouts of “Long live the Ifrey Prisis!”

The couple looked on with smiles of their faces. Ardia too was overjoyed. Her son had accomplished something which his cousin Akim failed to do, to ensure that the Erocatien dynasty would not die out. Vecatian II would succeed his father as the new Ifresir, the empire’s golden boy.

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Emperor Vecatian art by Catharine Bowen

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