

The sweetest

“And finally, after much fight, she was sacrificed.”

Estella looked at me with her big round eyes and sat up on the bed. I could feel a tantrum coming from a mile away, but to my surprise she hugged me fiercely; her tiny arms could barely circle my torso.

“Again, again!” she pleaded.

I shot Lovette a look and our eyes met in the mirror. She’d been braiding her red hair at our sister’s vanity, also listening to the story. It was getting late and we still needed to finish getting ready for the ball. Finally, she shrugged. I tilted my head to Estella. Her blue eyes shone with excitement and her smile almost didn’t fit her little, chubby face.

“Alright, but it’s the last time,” I warned her, caressing her black hair.

Lovette had been the only one to inherit our mum’s genetics – the lustrous scarlet hair that shone in the sunlight and her now attentive grey eyes that stared into the mirror, focused on the task at hand as if she also didn’t love the story.

I set down the book on my lap – I had read this so many times now that I had memorized the story – and Estella reached for my blue skirts, attempting to grasp my hand. After tucking her in once more, I started telling the story she so desperately loved.

“Once upon a time, there were six gods. The gods of fire, water, air and earth, and the ones of life and death –”

A tiny yawn from Estella interrupted me. Lovette took the cue to leave the vanity and sit down by the bed, placing her head on my lap and the book on her arms.

“They ruled our world, gave us all we needed, but one day the men got angry,” I resumed. Estella gasped like she was hearing this for the first time. “They were not happy with how the gods were leading the world. So, they asked the mermaids from the deep ocean for help, in exchange for gold and jewels “ – I widened my eyes – “and pirates’ treasures.”

Estella took the blanket to her face, hiding a giggle.

“Shhh,” Lovette asserted. Her eyes were closed, and by the looks of it she would fall asleep before Estella, but our little sister didn’t have a ball to attend, and we did.

“Persia, continue.”

“The mermaids agreed, blinded by greed and jealousy, and they turned against their queen, the goddess of water, Coralia.” I paused momentarily as Estella hid her face in her hands. “The mermaids took her to the surface and watched as the men transformed her into a human and sacrificed her body into the water. They drowned her but also set her free in her home.” I let a silence linger as tension built with my sisters’ eyes fixed on me. “Some say this is merely a legend and that the goddess is at the sea with this a simple tale to scare the sailors of her fury. Others say the men grew angry because the goddess of water was getting close to the god of death, and this was killing all the navigators through the seven seas. We will never know.”

“Do you believe in this?” Estella’s eyes were big and curious.

I offered her a smile and placed a kiss on top of her head. “That’s a topic for another night.”

Lovette proceeded to do the same, and after I blew the last candle, we left the yellow room. We lovingly referred to it as that as everything from the wallpaper to the vanity, the bedsheets to her clothes were yellow, which we had never fully understood Estella’s obsession with.

I left the door ajar and Lovette looked through the small gap.

“She’s not moving. I do hope the tale didn’t scare her,” Lovette commented. She was the middle sister and was always worried about us since she believed I couldn’t take care of the important duties with Father and look out for them both. “But who will look out for you?” she would ask. Many times, I told her I could take care of myself, yet she insisted that she could do it as well.

“You know how much she loves the story. It’s not possible that after hearing it so many times that she has only become scared today.” I tangled Lovette’s arm in mine, dragging her across the corridor to our bedrooms.

She frowned. “I suppose you’re right.”

Before she could enter her bedroom, I stopped her. Looking into her eyes was almost like looking into the mirror, the shape and expressions of our faces were the same, but my eyes were vivid, the sea gushing an exotic island, where hers were the sky before a

storm. I placed my hands on her bony cheeks, wanting to grab her attention, and her frown deepened.

“One of your braids is higher than the other; I’ll call Vivianne to help you with that. That green aqua dress you chose is beautiful. Don’t overthink it and don’t change it three times. Add a little colour across your cheeks and you’ll look even lovelier.”

She sighed and with the dim candles lit around us I could see the dark circles under her eyes. “Thank you, Persia. I’ll meet you here before we go down into the ballroom.”

I left her with a nod and went into my bedroom.

The smell of flowers inundated the space, yet it wasn’t the same scent as the one left by Vivianne’s usual cleaning supplies. As I walked in, I caught a glimpse of my maid setting up a bouquet of flowers on my wooden desk. The wildflowers were perfectly arranged in a green vase, featuring most predominantly my favourite colours: pink, blue and white. The bouquet exploded with other colours too, including red and black. They were not the common flowers that are bought, not the type that can be found in a florist – at least not at this time of the year. No, these flowers had been specially picked. For me.

On the right, I noticed Vivianne, our maid, had tidied up my bed, all the pillows that I had thrown to the floor last night back in their place. I prepared myself for the reprimand I thought was coming.

Upon noticing my presence in the room, Vivianne turned around, startled. “Miss Persia, you won’t need to bathe, will you? We both know you’ll only leave the tub when the ball is over.” She theatrically snatched my arms, spinning me around the room without care as if we were at the ball.

A smile sprouted from my lips at watching the cheerful Vivianne trying to ease my mind. She’d always had a second sense for these things – she called it a mum instinct. Vivianne began working for Father shortly after the heartbreak of losing her only child, who was still a baby. In time, she grew deeply affectionate towards me and Lovette, who were just six and five years old then. She used to say we returned her smile. Her smile only became bigger when Estella arrived in the family

With a quick movement, she prevented my hip from smacking against my white vanity – which Love had taken the permission to doodle around with a brush and pink paint – and sat me on the bed, well knowing a few more spins would cause me to get sick to my stomach. She pulled the blonde hair off her face, trying to catch some air.

I tilted my head towards the bouquet. "Who are those from?"

"Theodore, Your Grace," Vivianne answered, still without air.

My fingers fidgeted with the silk blue blanket of my bed. Theo hadn't visited in months now. Almost half a year. "They smell nice."

Vivianne gestured towards the wardrobe. "Now, let's get down to what truly is important: what will you wear? In less than an hour the guests will be here." She gasped, recalling her previous question. "You won't bathe, will you?"

I shook my head. "I bathed earlier today."

She arched a brow, unconvinced.

"Love needs your help with her hair," I added.

My maid squinted her eyes at me, looking for the truth in my face, but I averted my eyes and looked to the panelling on the walls and the creaking wooden floor and finally out the window, seeing the grey almost black sky through the flowy curtains. No birds flew across the sky; they had all migrated to a warmer place in the west.

Vivianne marched to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Miss Persia, raise your head, put up your hair and be...?" She waited for me to finish, her eyes sparkling like dark pearls.

"And be kind," I finished.

She touched the tip of my nose with a finger and left the bedroom.

Vivianne had started to repeat the sentence every time I got in trouble with my sisters or would exaggerate on the dose of mischief handled through the estate, and now it had stuck with her. Needless to say, it had also stuck with me, almost like a mantra.

For a moment, I considered running a bath, but like Vivianne had said, it'd take a long time, so I merely chose a pearly dress from my wardrobe – one that had been made for me when Mum called the best tailor in Etandiza to the estate. It ought to be one of the most beautiful gowns I owned; it had a corset embedded – which meant Vivianne didn't need to choke my lungs as she had to in regular dresses – and included strappy sleeves which fell below my shoulders. Lovette had giggled uncontrollably when she had first seen me wear it.

Looking at myself in the tall mirror in front of my bed, I found that the dress had grown small, or at least that it didn't fit me properly anymore. The heart-shaped bodice could

barely fit, my chest swelled beneath the fabric, and the corset pulled tightly, hugging my curves like it was afraid my torso would escape. The layers of skirts, which started at the waist, still floated like petals in the wind.

Like Vivianne had told me, I put up my black hair. I united the strands that fell in front of my eyes at the back and tied them together with a carefully selected pink bow from my collection. After brushing the remaining hair with water and oil when dry, I sat at the vanity to add some colour to my pale cheeks and a silver touch above my eyes.

Before I left the corridor, I put on silver heels, a splash of perfume on my neck and wrists, and passed by my desk to smell the flowers.

Lovette was still in her bedroom when I came outside, and I found myself alone in the empty corridor. The music had started in the ballroom and from the second floor it sounded like a whisper lost in the wind, being a comforting melody. In front of me portraits of our ancestors decorated the walls. A family portrait was hung before our bedrooms, with Father, Mum, me, Lovette and baby Estella. Father was at the back, by Mum's side. He wore a suit with our Gydin family crest – a flame covered most of it, but on top, three lines resembled the wind and on the bottom a wave and a rock were represented: the four elements. There were families that chose to dedicate themselves to specific ones, but my family had never liked to choose. Nobody was so religious these days and we devoted ourselves to what we thought right, or like that I chose to believe – I couldn't exactly remember the last time my family had done something 'good' without a reward. Back then, when religion was more than something distant, the elements had gods, like the one from Estella's stories. And magic was like breathing air. Now, it was locked away under a seal of shame and fear.

In front of my parents were me and Lovette raising Estella up in the air, big smiles ran across our faces. Mum's hand was in my hair, she wore a golden dress, and her red hair ran down her shoulders in two beautiful braids like the ones Love was wearing today.

"Time passes by," my sister said behind me, a nostalgic tone in her sweet voice. "We will be late for the ball if we stay here." And we couldn't afford making Mum and Father upset; they would already be there, wondering about our tardiness. Balls always seemed to lighten up their moods, so we couldn't ruin it.

Luckily, she hadn't changed her dress, which would have taken many more minutes, and she had followed my advice and added colour to her cheeks. Vivianne had fixed her braids and now two shell clips held them in place. She smiled through her tired

eyes. I knew she loved the balls, but it seemed like she was making an effort to even stand.

I offered her a smile. Even if I wanted to focus on the duty that awaited me, I felt like Love needed me now.

“Did Theodore leave you flowers, as well?” she asked as we climbed down the stairs to the first floor.

I didn’t answer for one second, thinking how much of a trap the high staircases were for young ladies like us wearing heels. Even with the velvet red carpet flowing down on them I could still feel myself trembling with every step.

“He did, yes,” I answered eventually.

Lovette squeaked with excitement. “The roses are gorgeous!”

As we entered the ballroom, I didn’t mention mine weren’t roses.

The dance floor, marked by its ample space in the centre of the room, was already covered in silk and bad odour. I never fully understood how nobles could own such voluptuous gowns and expensive suit but let them reek with sweat. I had read somewhere ‘*the higher the status, the worse the smell.*’ In front of this area were the musicians; the piano was the main attraction, but it was surrounded by violinists and cello players.

Father stood at the guests’ entrance, greeting them with a polite smile, and my sister followed my lead as we crossed the ballroom. He was speaking to Lords from Hopeshire and before I could greet our guests, I watched Love eyeing their son, Julius Raith, from head to toe. She cleared her throat, most likely not to comment on how his shoes didn’t match the blue suit he had picked. I wondered how much time she would be able to keep the thought to herself.

Father showed us a proud smile, placing his hand lightly at the small of my back, signalling it was my turn to talk to the guests. Chin high, back straight, shoes pointing towards them. I knew we had very important business with this family. The Raith family was the leader in the mirror industry which was a success in Hopeshire where they had many beaches with different coloured sand – not like here, up in the mountain – so, we did high investments and had an entire room dedicated to mirrors. It was surprising how much time Estella enjoyed spending there...

My tongue unravelled on its own and spoke to them with my trained expressions, dictation and smile. I knew I was saying something appropriate by the smiles of Lord

and Lady Raith, but I wasn't listening to myself. Through one eye I watched Julius taking Lovette on a dance and through the other I scanned the ballroom, wondering if Theodore had arrived yet.

"The Gydin family hopes you enjoy the ball," I finished saying, spreading my arms out to the ballroom.

Our guests moved inside, and my face felt too warm, courtesy of the gigantic fireplace at the back of the room and the people already gathering and dancing and eating. I looked around, searching for Mum through the crowd and hoping she would delight the guests with her presence.

"Very well, Persia," I heard Father saying regarding my greeting of the guests. I knew that was as many words as I would get from him tonight.

Before I could put my arms down, I felt myself being swirled around, high in the air like I was bound to touch the ceiling or at least the golden chandeliers that hung from it like gigantic drops. Two strong hands held me up, placed on my waist, and when I looked down, I saw a familiar face.

"Theodore!" I exclaimed as he placed me on the ground.

His smile could barely fit his face and even now with my two heels on the black and white mosaiced floor, he hadn't taken his hands off my waist. He wore a black suit, and his brown curly hair had grown since the last time I saw him, almost looking like it formed a crown on top of his head. His eyes stared into mine; his pupils were so dilated that most of the brown had been consumed by the black.

"I need to finish greeting the guests," I said quickly, looking beside me where a river of people was thickening.

"You may take this dance, Persia," Father accepted for me – something Theodore hadn't even offered – and shook his hand. "Theodore Levan."

Just like with the Raith's, we had the Levan family as business partners. They were a *very* wealthy family. Father always invested in them because their business was growing, becoming popular and the talk of the town. They sold horses, and who didn't want a horse nowadays? And the Levans were taking it a step further, breeding the horses to create the best creature possible for their customers. If the customers were travellers, the Levans would breed a horse with high endurance. If the customers lived in a small town, they'd breed a horse with extreme strength for domestic labour.

In one of his last visits, Theodore had trusted me with his new plans for the company. It would require a high investment, but it was taking a while to get the approval from his parents. He normally wouldn't want to discuss business with me, but this project had gotten him excited. *Too* excited. I didn't know exactly what it was, but he had hinted it wasn't completely ethical.

He nodded. "Your Grace." His hands circled my waist and spun me slowly, causing me to make a complete turn. His lips parted in wonder. "You look stunning, Persia."

I let him lead me to the dance floor, trying to rub the smug look off my face. "Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself, Theo."

"Always enchanting," he joked, placing my hand on his shoulder.

I arched an eyebrow. "Are we really going to dance?"

"Why, of course. It is a ball after all."

I couldn't argue with this logic. He twirled me around, leading the dance without even once making a mistake. I did like to dance, but Love had always been the best at it and Mum danced splendidly.

"Is your favourite colour still black?"

Theo sewed his lips, trying not to laugh. We did have an appearance to keep. "Gods, Persia, it's been five months, not years. Of course, my favourite colour is the same." If we weren't dancing, he would have slammed his palm against my forehead.

I shrugged. "I was just wondering."

Last time he had been here, he'd spent a week with us and there were still traces of summer. Now, it was late winter, and snow still covered the mountain, roofs and all the Estate, but it was predicted that soon it would start to melt. Maybe this time he would have a prolonged stay.

"Are you staying with us tonight?"

Theo opened his mouth, like he was offended I had asked. "I thought the invite had come from you, but apparently it was all your father's business."

The song had finished, and I mockingly curtsied. "Forgive me, my Lord."

A shy smile formed on his lips.

We stood there, unsure of what to do next. It had been a lot easier when we were kids, when we would run to the garden and play on the swings. Now, he reached for my hand and placed a kiss on top of it.

“I must get going.” His finger brushed against the bow on the back of my head. “You are always wearing one of these.”

“It’s my signature look.”

He gave me one final smile before leaving me by myself on the dance floor. Before I could get swiped away into another dance, I held up my skirts, following the trays of food and champagne that the servants held. I kept my eye out for Mum; she couldn’t see how I almost stepped on the noble’s feet, even if I really wanted to.

This corner of the ballroom was a welcomed change, smelling sweet and airy. Mum always planned the menu for the Friday balls and every time it was a different theme. Last week, it had been salty, the week before that spicy, and tonight cakes and sweets filled the round silver tables and the candles dispersed across the room were covered in frosting.

This sunken area was specifically dedicated to food and drinks. The chandeliers were smaller and hung lower, directly hovering above each table so that the food sparkled in all its splendour. The servants had strict orders to never let the end of the silver plates be seen and, as I reached for a cheesecake, I could see them running around worriedly. I watched them, leaning on a table; it looked like I was watching them joust, without them ever bumping into each other. I had no idea how they did it.

I snaked through the small tables. Mousse, doughnuts, bonbons... Where were the drinks? More importantly, where was Mum? I thought I could find her here since she rarely left the food area on these occasions. She was a true foodie, and sweets were her soft spot.

“There you are!” The voice coming from behind me was as sweet as her tendencies.

I put down the cheesecake and held two champagne glasses before turning around.

Tonight, Mum wore a yellow dress, perhaps hoping Spring would be marvelled by it and decide to shine the sun upon us earlier. Her dress was long and flowing and her hair was put up in two low pigtails. Love was by her side, commenting something with our cousin while looking across the room to Julius. They both burst out laughing, Lyra louder than my sister. From this scene I knew two things: Lovette had not kept her observation to herself, and it was not the first glass in Lyra’s hand.

“I was looking for you,” I told Mum, offering one glass to Lovette, who was empty-handed. She shook her head and tangled her arm in Lyra’s, storming off. I bit my tongue, not telling Mum I was worried about Love. She had her own things to worry about.

“Let’s dance!” Mum demanded, already spinning me around.

My stomach turned on its own. I couldn’t afford to make mistakes.

As Mum twirled me, I suspected I would see everything spinning when I laid down to sleep that night.

The champagne sprinkled around us and onto my dress, but before I could check if Father had seen it, we were already in the centre of the dance floor.

The night was a child.