

## Ballad of Grief

### Part I

As the falling petals painted the castle grounds crimson, Ceyra adjusted her crooked tiara meticulously. The moment her fingers grazed the metal, she thought to herself grudgingly: *Cal's must be heavier*. She watched the coronation beneath lowered eyelashes, schooling her features into neutrality, hiding her resentment from the watchful eyes beneath. The sound of the zither grew louder, the chime of the gong grew nearer, and the peal of her heart grew stronger.

Ceyra looked around from her place beside the emperor's throne to the incoming masses: a thousand soldiers marching beside the eight knights who held up the ruby palanquin His Highness sat in. Scarlet lanterns lit the dimmed hall as the drawbridges were pulled shut. Echoes of the soldier's steps reverberated in the sweeping throne room as they approached the sovereign, setting the sedan chair down gently. Cal leapt out, kneeling below the Emperor.

It felt like a century before the monarch spoke. "Prince Cal Starbilt of the Eastern Sea, the Emperor deems you the Crown Prince of the Seven Seas." At his words, the prince straightened, bowing his head to accept a jeweled crown from the hands of his father. Immediately, clapping and laughter resounded in the wide halls of Misthold Palace. Folk music thundered through the kingdom and the crowd began to dance merrily, twirling in a sea of white and red imperial colours.

Ceyra's vision blurred. Brazenly, she lunged from her seat and towards the Lotus Garden doors. Despite protests from the Emperor and Empress, she ran even faster: somewhere, anywhere away from the room she would never sit in the middle of. The familiar sound of the garden's water fountain comforted her, and she slid down its side, the cold concrete a stark contrast to the warm rage broiling within her chest. Broken sobs racked her chest as she tried to wipe her tears away furiously. Only when the clanging of the glass door sounded did she look up, where she met a pair of hazel eyes, auburn locks, and a tanned complexion as familiar as her own.

"Ceyra?"

"Cal," she responded brokenly.

His smile transformed into a frown, perturbed. He opened his mouth, yet no words escaped through his parted lips. Then, "Let us talk? I know you deserve this as much as I do. I'm sorry."

His twin scowled. She stood, holding him in place with her eyes. "I would rather stray away from discussing any personal matters with the Crown Prince."

Pain flashed through his eyes. "Not to you, Ce. I'm still just your brother."

She smiled humorlessly. "A traitor can never be a brother. Please excuse me, your Highness." Her curtsy was curt, yet her legs were brisk as she fled from the gardens, leaving Cal with a stupefied expression.

Returning to her chambers, Ceyra's lady-in-attending helped her out of the heavy coronation skirts and into more agreeable silk dressings. Unusually, she remained rooted in place, even as the princess lay in bed.

"If I may, Your Highness?" She said measuredly.

"Hm?"

"I know of your anger towards the Crown Prince." The princess opened one eye at this. "What if you were to release your anger... harmlessly?"

Ceyra laughed languidly. "Ginny, I cannot possibly fathom what you mean."

"A simple spell. Turn him into a toad for a day."

The princess leapt up from under her covers. "A curse? How could I use my magic for such dirty tricks?"

Ginny smiled in jest. "I spoke only to make you smile."

That night, as the lotus flowers bloomed in the Princess's gardens, so did the seed that was planted in her mind: perhaps, she thought, teaching her brother a short lesson on camaraderie was better than a lifetime of resentment. The blinding light of the sun the next morning did not discourage her from visiting the apothecary.

"Princess Starbilt!" Doctor Reiny welcomed cheerfully as the bell chimed.

The girl smiled wistfully, reminiscing about her time at the apothecary. Ironically, the Doctor was the only one who taught her how to use her magic for good - to heal, rather than to hate. "Doctor, do you have any osmanthus leaves?"

"Let me see..." He turned, dutifully searching for her order. "What are you making, Little Ce? Is it for insomnia?"

Ceyra thought for a second. "Yes, I think it'll help me sleep better."

“Here.”

She thanked him, dropped two silver coins, and raced back to the palace.

Princess Ceyra picked the first book she found. Following the instructions under the title, “How to turn a man into a toad”, she diligently crafted a concoction befitting to (temporarily) immobilise the future Emperor. They would be even, her conscience finally at peace.

The Crown Prince did not, in fact, turn into a frog. Ceyra watched him day and night. On the seventh day, finally, he kept looking out the window towards a river during History lesson. *Perhaps little froggy misses home?* Ceyra laughed at the thought.

## **Part II**

Crown Prince Cal Starbilt fell into the Poir River that night.

The princess awoke to the startling sound of the unusual bustling movement of the palace men and women. Among the hushed whispers, she heard the faint words: “Drowning” and “Cal”, and her heart fell.

Ceyra ran even as guilt overtook her body, threatening to disarm her. Weeds of grass brushed past her feet as she sprinted through the lush forest, the intertwined vines snaking around the tall trees, concealing the moon’s light from the forest floor. A thousand heartbeats passed before she heard the cries of the river, falling to her knees at its bank.

“Cal?” She cried, peering into the endless depths of the water.

Her own hazel eyes stared back: the reflection of an Empress, adorned in black mourning robes. Ceyra screamed, scrambling away from the river. The abyss whispered to her. *Come. I have answers.*

Cautiously, Ceyra dared to face the water once more. The illusions were no more, gone as quickly as the refreshing wind amid summer. Was it truly there, or simply a trick of the mind, seeing what it wishes to see? The whispering grew louder and her mind grew weaker, unraveling before the enchantment of the whispers, like the pull of a river’s currents on a helpless creature. In a second she found herself flailing, fighting against the water. The princess was drowning, dying, yet she realised: she was breathing. Her incessant fighting ceased, and in the calm, she heard it; the bewitching voice that had taken over her mind and senses, compelling her to throw herself into the river.

*Ceyra, Empress of the Seven Seas*, it whispered.

### **Part III**

Sakuras were not common in the Eastern Sea Empire. When their scent clouded Ceyra's senses, she knew she was not home. Opening her eyes slowly, she winced at the biting cold, blinking away the snowflakes that drifted atop her eyes. Cherry blossom leaves fell from the surrounding trees, sinking in the frost. A familiar voice whispered to her unrelentingly. *Serve the Prince to gain your royalty. Toil for a wish and release the captive.* The princess stood up steadily, glancing at the forest around her. Instead of lush, green trees and sepia silt, she found snow-covered canopies and withered leaves. Her eyes darted north, where a village lay across a frozen river.

The bell of the inn chimed at the arrival of a stranger, her auburn hair enveloped in pink flowers and melting snowflakes, her stained lilac robes soaked with freezing water. The innkeeper cried out, "You poor girl!", immediately rushing to fuss over the princess. Ceyra smiled tightly in response, shying away from the older woman's touch.

"Aunt, I've only come here for a question." The innkeeper nodded, urging her on. "Where is the Crown Prince?"

The woman blinked quietly in response. "Where could Prince Dale be except behind the castle walls in the South?"

"Prince Dale?" Ceyra muttered under her breath, turning to flee the inn, making her way to the South. *This is not my world*, she thought, *but I can free my brother from it.*

The Central Empire in the South was a bustling region, the marketplace filled with common men and women, homes and shops surrounding the palace. Ceyra spotted the Imperial Palace from afar, its pointed glass spears reaching toward the sky like upended icicles crafted of fragile frost. She ran past shops, stopping at a local apothecary called *The Prince's Abode*. On its storefront, it read: *NOW HIRING NURSES AND MAGES.*

*Serve the Prince to gain your royalty*, the voices resounded in her mind.

Perhaps, if she became the Prince's pharmacist, meticulously concocting potions to treat his ailments... then, she could wish to save her brother and return home. Ceyra smiled, entering the place she knew only too well. And, toil, she did. Her hopes for a royal wish never dwindled, and she kept it close to her heart like a precious pearl. As the ivory rime turned to crimson roses and the crimson roses turned to yellow leaves, Ceyra remained a dedicated physician, attending to Prince Dale's every need.

“Doctor Ceyra,” he said one night. “I feel I must reward you for your efforts.”

The princess smiled, bowing her head slightly. “It’s my duty, Your Highness.”

“Please,” he responded. “No one was able to fix my sleep, yet you were able to do so in a matter of a few months.”

*In truth, they’re Doctor Reiny’s recipes, not mine!* she thought, but couldn’t keep the smile off of her face. The young woman beamed, finally speaking her one true wish out loud. “I hope to return home with my brother.”

In an instant, the Crown Prince’s eager expression vanished. His face darkened. “Princess Ceyra, I’m afraid you’ve overstepped. I only hoped to reward you for your good deeds.”

The color drained from her face. *He knows who I am?* After a few moments of silence, she responded, “Your Highness, I am a simple physician who wishes to free her brother from captivity.”

“What monstrous lies your tongue paints!” He clamoured, rising from his chair.

Ceyra took a step forward. “I’ve roamed these halls for months. Even as the seasons changed and your sickness worsened, I’ve remained by your side.” Her voice broke. “Why do you deny me the right to return with my brother, holding him captive?”

The young royals continued to stare at each other. Dale spoke. “Isn’t that what you did when you made him drink the poison? Now he is captive only to death.”

Her eyes widened. “What?” she breathed.

“Using outlawed magical books, killing your twin brother... all for a throne.” Dale sighed.

“What do you mean!”

“Your brother drowned, your mother passed from grief, and your father died from illness! Your kingdom is in shambles, and yet you dare ask us to use outlawed magic to revive him! Ceyra, we kept you here to protect your Empire. The river, it spoke to me, told me to keep you away...until now.” He looked out the window towards the South.

Ceyra fell back against the bookshelf, knocking over the Prince’s crown. It clattered to the ground, shattering into a million pieces. Dale walked over to her, towering over her figure. “Return. Rule your kingdom justly. The crown is yours. You’ve earned your keep here.”

*I was the captive all along?* she thought.

#### **Part IV**

As the falling petals painted the castle grounds ebony, Empress Ceyra looked at the incoming masses from her throne. A thousand soldiers marched beside the eight knights who held up the black palanquin His Highness lay in. The sound of the flute was faint, the chime of the bell was vague, and the peal of her heart was weak.

*To alter your destiny forcefully, she thought, means enduring consequences you never thought possible. This crown was not meant to be mine.* Indeed, as the fallen cherry blossom leaf longs for the abode of its former branch, so does the Empress mourn the loss of her family.