

## The Leader of the World

By Nancy Fite

“Now remember, when the representatives arrive, you have to smile.” Jenny, my PR manager, reminds me for the fifth time today. I nod seriously and practice the motion. Jenny’s perfect mask cracks slightly to reveal the disgust in her eyes, before quickly reforming. “We’ll work on that.” She says patiently.

I don’t know what’s wrong. I forced my lips to curve upwards in a way that showed my teeth. That’s what smiling is. From what I understand it’s a tactic meant to make people like me. All a part of the long game strategy to ensure they do not try to overthrow me. It’s not like they could, anyways. Otherwise I would help them.

The coronation is in a few hours. It’s supposed to officially crown me as the Supreme Emperor of the Earth. Officials from each former country will come to represent their people groups. I don’t know why they bother with the ceremony. What will they even crown me with? The Crown has been on my head for over a month and it’s proven to be very non removable. I should know. It’s been giving me a headache for weeks.

Still, I follow Jenny through the corridors of the palace. Wow, a year ago, I’d never have dreamt I’d one day step foot inside Marinvia Palace, much less own it. Technically I own everything. That painting, that street, that ocean. I even own Jenny. That’s why I’ll never tell her to do anything. Cause then she’d have to do it.

I wonder who will be there at the coronation. Diane won’t. She hasn’t been able to look at me without throwing up since Brynn. I miss Brynn. She would’ve come to the coronation. Even if she hated me, she would’ve shown up. If only out of a misplaced sense of duty to protect me.

Like I should’ve protected her.

Jason might show up. I don't know. He spends most of his time at various bars nowadays from what I've been told. Still, the few times I've caught him sober, wandering around the palace, he's latched onto my arm and followed me around without letting go for hours on end. The first time it happened a couple of guards tried to pull him off of me. Three of them wound up in the hospital. One will never be able to walk again. No one bothers Jason anymore.

Kai will be there. I know that at least. He hates me more than death itself, but he hates the idea of my ruling alone even more. I've seen him in the library more often than not, drafting bills of laws that will limit my power as much as is magically possible. Reading letters from dignitaries I see him steal from the stack on my desk. Pouring over any mention in myths and fables about how to kill an immortal being. He'll probably lead a coup against me by the end of the year.

After today, he'll be my First Advisor.

And of course Thalia will be there. Why not? Once my leadership is official her's will be too. I'll let her and Kai run the world for the most part. I'll get them all set up with as many magical artefacts they want and as much authority as I can give them. Then maybe I'll join Jason at whatever bar he's going to that day. Drown my sorrows with the one person who doesn't completely despise my presence now.

But that's for later. For now I put one foot in front of the other as I'm guided through the halls of my palace by Jenny, pretending to listen to her and nodding in all the right places. We stop once or twice and I practice smiling at various reflective objects. A window, a vase, a glass of water someone handed me at some point. I don't dare look at any mirrors. If I do, I'll see myself too well. And I'm not ready to face Brynn's murderer.

Tonight I will be named as the Supreme Emperor of the Earth. Tonight I will be under the scrutiny of every pair of eyes in the world.

Tonight I am going to hold my head up high despite the weight of the Crown attempting to drive me into the ground.

Tonight I am going to smile and wave like I haven't spent the past five years crying myself to sleep. Like I haven't betrayed everything I once stood for and everyone who once loved me. Like my best friend and the love of my life aren't plotting my demise. Like the man who's been with me through every battle isn't clinging to sanity by a thread. Like my big sister didn't die in my arms leaving her widow unable to meet my eyes.

No, tonight none of that will be reality. Tonight I will be strong and brave and kind. The picture perfect ruler. I will promise the world that my reign will be long and prosperous. And if that is true, good. And if I go to sleep when it's all over and never wake up again? Well, that's even better.