

F . S . W . A . P . A . H . W . A . F

By

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Being a princess requires you to always be neat, presentable and well mannered. Your hair must never be out of place, nor your makeup. Above all, you must maintain a degree of dignity that is expected of you, no matter circumstance or personal condition. Princess Cosmina, Third of her title, currently held no such standards. In fact, she was face down on a pillow, drool leaking from the edge of her mouth, Her hair spread out across the bed like a chaotic mass of tree roots and one leg was hanging off the side. She awoke with a snort and 'fwwwpppp' noise as the door banged open and Mildred strode in.

'Time to get up, your highness!' Mildred said, her shrill voice hitting Cosmina's ears and sounding like she was screeching. Cosmina made an 'uggghhh' sound and turned over, pulling her covers with her, burying her face back into her pillow. It was damp against her cheek thanks to the drool, but she had just reached peak comfort, so she wasn't going to move. The bedsheets were ripped from her so violently, Cosmina was surprised she wasn't sent spinning across the room.

'Up up up!' Mildred chirped, clapping her hands together as she let the sheets fall to the floor. With a groan that could only be described as unprincesslike, Cosmina swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, her toes sinking into the thick carpets that adorned her room.

'The water is hot and the soap is plenty.' Mildred said, taking Cosmina by the hand and leading her towards the door that entered the bathroom. She may be the world's worst alarm clock, but Mildred was one of the best handmaids that Cosmina had ever had and true to her word, the water was indeed hot. The kind of hot that is ever so slightly painful, but you just don't want to get out of it, as you know the world beyond is brutal, cold and mean. Unfortunately, Mildred insisted Cosmina get out of the bath and get dressed, picking her out a dress of the modern style, red, with frilly cuffs, neckline and hem, interwoven with green, vine-like decoration. Mildred then started work on Cosmina's hair, putting it into two long plaits, between which her tiara could sit. In what felt like no time at all since she had been rudely awoken, Cosmina found herself sat in her throne, situated to the left of her mother and father, King Horod and Queen Isabella. They sat within the grand hall, an enormous room, one of the largest within the palace, lined with hundreds of stained glass windows, tapestries, flags, banners, carpets, tiles, pillars, statues and guards. Cosmina had once, during a very boring gala evening, attempted to count each and everyone of the decorations within the room, categorizing them accordingly. SHE had lost track and therefore, count having reached over one-thousand, after the Duke of Terrifa had drunkenly stumbled into her and nearly knocked them both into the ice sculpture of the swan.

'Your Highness, please forg-' he had then belched, 'forgive me. I fear I may have drunk a bit too much.'

COsmina, who on the inside was a ball of pure rage, smiled sweetly and patted the Duke on the shoulder, 'No harm, no foul. Please, keep enjoying the evening.' she had said. The Duke had smiled, then turned and vomited into a tall vase just behind him. Thankfully, today was not one of the gala's, but something far, far worse. Today was suitor day. Where her parents would watch noble after noble saunter in, presenting whatever offspring they deemed worthy of Cosmina's hand in marriage. Ridiculous of course, as Cosmina didn't want to marry any strange

person, be they boy or girl, but someone she had a true, genuine connection with. Cosmina wanted to marry, for love.

One after another they came, showing off their sons and occasionally daughters.

'My son, Justin Jr' Baron Justin Sr said. The Baron was a man with a rather round head, while appearing to struggle to breathe and speak at the same time, 'has just returned from the north, where he fought off and killed a dozen orcs single handed, before taming and riding a direwolf back to our castle.'

Cosmina rolled her eyes, the thought of naming someone after yourself to her, was a sign of vanity and self-satisfaction. She looked at the young man...baron-to-be? Baron-let? He was tall and relatively handsome, with long black hair, slightly round features and an impressive scar. He wore armour so shiny, it was near blinding when he moved and it caught the light. Had he actually done any of these impressive feats, then he must have done so without taking any damage at all. Something that was not only highly unlikely, but made Cosmina consider that his defining scar may have actually been applied with makeup. Her father raised a hand and silenced the Baron, who had started to name the many other extraordinary feats his young son had done.

'Thank you my Lord.'

The Baron nodded, as did his son and they slid off to the side, to join the ever growing crowd at the edges of the room. Cosmina allowed her eyes to wander over the crowd, seeing the faces of her potential suitors and their parents or guardians, in all manner of race and creed. There were humans, elves, some dwarves and gnomes. There were also those of a slightly more unusual appearance. A single orc, some half orcs, a hopeful dragonborn and a centaur. The announcer's name roared through the room, cutting above the excited chatter of the crowds.

'Presenting, Lord Glimmeron Zepveil and son, Aether Zepveil.'

The doors at the end of the room opened and two figures entered the room. Both men were tall and proud as they journeyed the length of the hall, stopping as they reached the same spot as all the others.

'Your Majesties, Your highness!' Lord Glimmeron Zepveil said, with an elaborate and if anything, over the top, bow. His son didn't follow his father's example, choosing to instead give a modest bow.

'May I present my son to you.' He said, motioning for his son to approach. The younger man moved forward and bowed for a second time.

'Your majesties,' the younger Lord Aether said, his bright blue eyes flicking towards Cosmina, who felt a small tingle travel up her spine, 'Your Highness.'

He looked at Cosmina with those eyes as blue as the sky. Lord Aether was nothing to pass off lightly. The suitor just before him had been handsome, but compared to Aether, he was a troglodyte. His features were as if chiseled from marble, the pinnacle of natural beauty. He wore a sword and Cosmina had no doubt that he knew how to use it to maximum efficiency.

'I am most honoured to be here,' Aether said, eyes still fixed on Cosmina, 'And I would be further honoured should I be allowed the first dance with the Princess.'

There was a degree of muttering and exclamations from the crowd of other suitors, including one man who shouted 'The audacity!'

Cosmina's father turned his head ever so slightly, looking at her from the corner of his eye. She looked back and gave the smallest of nods. Her father turned back and, with his hand raised,

exclaimed, 'Princess Cosmina shall have first dance with Lord Aether. I make this proclamation, as he was the only suitor to ask.'

The room erupted in a low rumble of mutters, less annoyance at the king's proclamation, but more parents scolding their child for not doing the same and getting first dance.

The rest of the day for Cosmina consisted of smiles, dancing, drinking, dancing, lunch, more dancing, more drink, more dancing, supper and then a bit more dancing. She ended it with one more drink, before she was ushered to her bedroom by Mildred, who was there to ensure there was no hanky-panky between the princess and any of the potential suitors. As tradition had dictated, she had danced with each and every one of the suitors, starting off with the handsome and apparently go-getting Lord Aether. Not only had he been storybook handsome, but he had been a fabulous dancer, moving both himself and her, as if they were made of clouds. He made her smile, he made her laugh and she couldn't help but enjoy his scent, so sweet it was. No matter how good a dancer he had been and how much Cosmina yearned to continue the dance, she had to move on to the next partner. Some were adequate dancers, while others had a lot to be desired. One suitor, a young Lordling, had stepped on her feet no less than three times as they danced. Others had been perfectly nice, good dancers, some good conversations, as well as some excellent makeup and hair advice from a young Duchess but none had shone quite like Justin Jr. Just him holding her as they danced, she could feel his strength. With each and every suitor coming and going to dance with her, she wished it was Lord Aether.

The whole evening passed like a whirlwind and before she knew it, Cosmina was back in bed, staring at the canopy of her four poster bed. She had tried to sleep, but her mind was just far too awake. She couldn't get images out of her mind. They flashed and danced, they swirled around and around, keeping sleep a distant possibility. And in the centre of this great, roaring storm of thought, was him. Lord Aether. She had to see him again, her heart, her mind were yearning for him. She knew he was handsome, but this feeling, this was something new. She didn't know where it had come from, perhaps the drink and dancing had awoken it in her, but she was now certain, he was the one that she wanted. She slipped out of her bed and put on her silk robe, slowly and silently creeping past Mildred, who was asleep in a chair just by the door. Turning the handle as slowly as possible, Cosmina winced as the latch clicked, but Mildred did not stir. Cosmina slipped through the door and pulled it closed behind her. The palace was silent, the moon bright and visible through the windows, casting deep and dark shadows along the halls. Cosmina started to walk, placing down each step as if the carpet covered stone floor beneath her was likely to squeak like a floorboard and give away her whereabouts. She walked, she continued to reminisce, thinking back to the conversations she had with Aether as they had danced. His voice had been strong, yet calm and felt like a gentle massage on her eardrums. He had spoken of history, philosophy, literature and art. He had also instantly recognised her own perfume, a task not easily done in a room of many hundreds of other bodies. While she had danced with other suitors, Cosmina had done her best to keep her eye on Aether, going so far as to witnessing him eating. Even then, as he ate, he did so with a beauty that was beyond understanding. She did not dare say it out loud at this time, but Cosmina was fairly certain she was in love with Aether. Having passed through a number of corridors, descending two sets of stairs and avoiding far too many guards, Cosmina found herself within the guest quarters of the

palace. Here, each and every one of her suitors and their escorts had been given their own room, such was the grand scale of the palace of the King.

'The Maple Leaf room.' Cosmina whispered to herself, remembering the words that her beloved had spoken to her as they had danced. None of the room names were written on the doors, instead they were shown via a brass etching. Cosmina walked past a brass Oak leaf, brass willows and brass crossed swords. The rooms were named after all number of objects, some less considered than others, leading to confusion occasionally. The Rose room was often mixed up with the Rose Petal room, for example. Finally, Cosmina found it, the room with a brass Maple leaf on its surface. She raised her hand to knock, only to stop. She breathed quietly for several moments. Dare she do this? It was breaking all kinds of protocol and tradition. But she was longing for Aether so badly, her chest nearly hurt. Before she was even able to touch the door, it slowly opened, revealing Aether in all his beautiful glory. He wore a nightgown and little else it appeared. Cosmina did her best to remain calm, but even she could feel her breath catching in her throat and she felt herself staring.

'You came.' he said. Cosmina found herself nodding shyly, her blood pounding in her ears. Then he smiled and all the fear, the anxiety, melted away and was replaced by burning, longing passion. She stepped forward, into his embrace and pressed her lips to his soft skin. Her hands worked, causing the night gown to slip off his body and expose himself to her completely. She gasped softly as his tentacles wrapped around her and she looked up into his deep, blue eyes. In her head, she could hear him softly singing, his voice gentle and warm, a voice that only she could hear. As he lifted her off of the ground, the two of them floating in the air, she knew they would spend an evening of blissful passion together, their bodies, mind and souls joined. Then, come morning, she would inform her father of their intention to marry and spend their lives together. There would be those who would object to the union, who believed that Lord Aether was not a suitable match for the young princess and a more humanoid suitor was required, but Cosmina did not care. Aether may not have been perfect in their ideals, but he was to her. It was not a match that had ever been sung about, nor great tales written and there was a chance they may have to flee together, in order to live their lives and love in peace. Or, just maybe Cosmina and Aether would be the start of something new and beautiful, something as of yet, having been unseen. For she was a princess and he was a Flumph.