

The Queen's Duty

By DarkeyeV2

The Great Hall is bathed in golden light and heavy, savory air where the scent of roasted venison and spiced wine hangs thick enough to taste. Great platters of meat and mountains of glazed fruits are already scattered across the long tables, in the heat of a thousand beeswax candles. The music of the lutes is almost drowned out by the boisterous laughter of the court, a sound that has become louder and more reckless with every week of the new peace. Halfway down the high table, Lady Seraphina sits with her ivory fan tucked under her chin, while Elina and her maids move between the tables, shoulders straining under the weight of silver trays, the head servant's face flushed from the heat of the kitchens and her jaw set in a line as she dodges a wandering hand to her buttocks.

The heavy oak doors at the far end of the hall finally swing open, and the room falls into a momentary lull. Queen Aurelia enters with a slow, swaying gait that is as much a result of her new weight as it is a conscious effort at royal grace. Her gown of deep crimson velvet is pulled taut across her widened hips, the fabric smooth and unyielding with every step she takes toward the dais. The corset beneath is snugly laced, providing a firm support that she hasn't quite grown used to yet, though it hasn't reached the point of true discomfort.

Stopping at the foot of the throne, her hand wanders to the soft, rounded swell of her belly beneath the velvet, accompanied by a small, apologetic wave to the room.

"Oh, please, do keep eating," she says, her voice a light, airy lilt that carries easily through the sudden quiet. "I simply got a bit turned around in the west wing. It seems the corridors are much longer than I remember them being this morning."

She settles into her throne with a sigh, the velvet cushions compressing under her, her chestnut hair purposely carried aside to allow a pair of dark eyes to fix themselves on the banquet at hand.

"Is there any of the honeyed ham left, or have you all been terribly greedy while I was away?"

An hour later, her fingers drum an impatient rhythm against the armrest of her throne, her gaze flickering past the half-eaten platters toward the kitchen entrance like a child awaiting dessert. When Elina approaches with a fresh decanter of wine, the queen leans forward abruptly, her corset creaking faintly as the motion forces a soft exhale from her lips. "Oh, Elina," she sighs, batting her lashes with exaggerated innocence, "you wouldn't let them finish the almond tarts without me, would you?"

One hand drifts again to her midsection, absently pressing against the stiff brocade where the seams strain ever so slightly. She shifts, trying to find a position where the boning doesn't dig quite so sharply, but gives up when a servant appears with a steaming trencher of venison. Her earlier pretense of apology evaporates as she waves off the bowing steward without looking, already reaching for her knife.

"Honestly," she murmurs to no one in particular, sawing lazily at the meat, "if they wanted punctuality, they shouldn't have made the pastry kitchens so close to my chambers."

Elina approaches the high table, the heavy tray of wine decanters pulling at her left shoulder. She sets the silver down with a dull, heavy thud that rattles the silverware, ignoring a Baron's startled glance. Protocol demands she retreat to the shadows; instead, she reaches for the linen napkin that has slipped from Aurelia's lap, her fingers brushing the coarse wool of her own kirtle against the soft, expensive velvet of the royal gown.

A sticky smear of glaze clings to the corner of the Queen's mouth. Elina knows it's something from whatever stolen treat delayed her arrival. For a heartbeat, her hand hovers, her thumb rough, poised to wipe the sweetness away herself - a remnant of childhood intimacy warring with the rigid line of her shoulders.

But then she thinks of the lye soap scrubbing her own hands raw in the scullery, and the smell of grease that never quite leaves her fingernails. A far cry from the princess's radiant skin.

Queen.

Queen, Elina. Not a princess anymore.

She pulls her hand back. Instead of touching, she snatches a clean cloth from the table and holds it out. "I'm fairly certain the pastry kitchens are on the ground floor, Your Majesty."

Aurelia's fingers close around the proffered cloth, the fine linen a stark contrast to Elina's calloused palm. As she dabs at the sticky residue, her tongue darts out to catch a stray flake of pastry, the action unconscious and childlike. The Queen's brow furrows slightly at Elina's words, a flicker of confusion passing over her features before it's smoothed away behind a mask of regal composure. Yet even as she maintains her outward appearance of cool control, Aurelia's mind wanders, conjuring vivid images of the bustling kitchens below - the heat of the ovens, the heady aroma of baking bread and sugar, the temptation of countless untouched tarts and cakes waiting to be sampled...

She shakes her head slightly, as if to clear away the enticing daydreams, her double chin wobbling with the movement.

Aurelia blinks slowly at Elina, her gaze unfocused and hazy from the rich food and wine. For a moment, she seems not to register the meaning behind the words, her brow furrowing slightly as she tries to process the information. Then, understanding dawns and she lets out a breathy, tittering laugh, the sound ending on a slight hiccup.

"Of course they are, silly Elina! I know that perfectly well." She reaches out and pats Elina's cheek with the cloth she's been handed, leaving a faint smudge of glaze on the servant's skin before she even begins to use it on herself. "I merely meant... oh, what was I saying? Ah yes!" She straightens up suddenly, nearly knocking over her wine goblet in the process. Some of the red liquid sloshes onto the white linen tablecloth.

"Oh dear! I mean... Ahem. As I was saying, if you hadn't made such delicious treats, I wouldn't have gotten so... distracted." She mimes air quotes around the last word, her tongue sticking slightly out of the corner of her mouth in concentration. Then, seeming to forget her own actions, she turns back to the feast laid out before her, spearing a large chunk of honey-glazed ham with her fork.

The heavy velvet of the gown feels like a second skin, trapping the heat of the hall against Aurelia's body. As she leans forward to spear the ham, the corset shifts, the busk pressing hard against her stomach, reminding her of the volume of food already settling there. What a fool she has been! She knew she had a banquet this evening, why did she

call for those pastries to her chambers? She can feel the lace of her bodice digging into her underarms, a constant, friction-heavy presence that makes her want to squirm.

She takes the bite, the salty sweetness of the glaze coating her tongue, and for a moment, the annoyance of the corset and the heat of the room fade into the background. She chews slowly, her eyes drifting shut as she savors it, her posture slumping just enough to let her belly push outward, relieved of the constraint of holding herself upright. Around her, the murmur of the court resumes, but it's boring as usual, distant, muffled by the fog of her own consumption. She is vaguely aware of Seraphina's gaze burning into the side of her face, or of those two lords by the end of the table, but it's all so, so easy to ignore when there is still a trencher of venison sitting within reach.

Aurelia swallows the ham with a satisfied hum, the rich grease coating her lips and prompting her to lick them clean with a slow, deliberate motion. She feels the heavy, warm weight of the meal settling low in her abdomen, pressing insistently against the rigid front of her corset. It is a tight, full feeling bordering on uncomfortable, yet she finds herself shifting her legs, allowing her stomach to push outward more aggressively against the brocade, testing the strength of the laces.

Her gaze drifts lazily from the trencher to her left, landing on Lady Seraphina. The Countess sits upright, spine rigid as a poker, her silver gown gleaming under the candlelight without a single crease. Aurelia lets out a soft, breathy sigh, reaching out to grab a goblet of wine with one hand while the other wanders beneath the table to tug at the fabric of her skirt where it bunches uncomfortably around her thighs.

"You look terribly stiff, Seraphina," Aurelia says, her voice thick and slightly muffled as she tears a chunk of bread from a roll and dips it into the juices on her plate. "It's a celebration, you know. You could try to look as though you're enjoying yourself." She pops the bread into her mouth, chewing with open-mouthed enthusiasm before gesturing vaguely with the half-eaten roll toward the dance floor.

Seraphina does not turn her head immediately toward the Queen; instead, her eyes simply slide towards Aurelia. The ivory fan in her hand snaps shut, a single, sharp report that cuts through the nearby chatter, though her expression remains frozen in a polite, unreadable mask. She watches the Queen chew, observing the way the crumbs catch on the lower lip and the slight heave of Aurelia's chest against the restrictive boning.

She leans forward an inch, just enough to bridge the gap between their tables without compromising the straight line of her spine. Her fingers, adorned with heavy sapphire rings, trace the rim of her own untouched wine glass, collecting a bead of condensation that she rolls between thumb and forefinger. The smell of roasted meat and the Queen's perfume – something cloying and floral – mix in the air between them.

"The stiffness, Your Majesty, is merely the armor required to survive such a... historic display of leisure," Seraphina says, her voice low and smooth, pitched to carry only to Aurelia's ears over the din of the hall. She flicks her gaze briefly to the half-eaten roll in Aurelia's hand, then back up to the Queen's eyes. "And I am enjoying myself immensely. It is rare to see history being written with such an enthusiastic display."

The words "historic display" drift into Aurelia's ears, but they bounce off the fog of gluttony that has settled over her mind. She knows, somewhere in the back of her thoughts, that Seraphina is making a pointed comment about the treaty, or perhaps the court, or the way she is eating – honestly, it's hard to keep track of all the things people find to criticize. A flicker of annoyance tries to spark, a remnant of the princess who was drilled on courtly wit and repartee, but it is instantly smothered by the warm, heavy satisfaction in her belly.

She offers Seraphina a wide, vacuous smile, the kind that usually accompanies a nod of agreement even when she hasn't heard a word. It's a smile that doesn't reach her eyes, which are already darting back toward the platters. The effort to formulate a clever retort, or even a coherent defense, feels like wading through deep mud. Why should she have to defend her happiness? Once again, she is the Queen, for god's sake. If she wants to make history with a fork and a goblet of wine, then history can just sit down and watch.

The silence from the Queen is answer enough.

Elina steps back into the servant's aisle, the rough hem of her kirtle brushing against the polished stone floor. She watches Aurelia's gaze slide away from Seraphina, the Queen's attention already fracturing, splintering off toward the nearest platter of dripping capons. The smile plastered on Aurelia's face is wide and empty, a mask of indulgence that fits her far too well these days.

She feels a muscle in her jaw jump, a sharp twitch that she forces down by pressing her tongue against the roof of her mouth. She reaches for the heavy silver pitcher of water on the sideboard, the metal cool against her palm, a stark contrast to the flush rising on her own cheeks. She remembers the way Aurelia used to practice speeches in the garden, reciting lines about duty and statecraft with a stick for a scepter, her eyes bright and

fierce. Now, the only fire in those eyes is reflected in the candlelight dancing off the grease on her chin.

She moves to the table, her shadow falling over the Queen's plate. She doesn't wait for permission or a request; she simply pours the water into the goblet, the stream clear and steady, cutting through the red dregs of wine.

Aurelia watches the liquid rise with a detached sort of fascination, her head tilting slightly to the side. The condensation from the pitcher beads on the outside of the silver, cold and inviting, and she finds herself reaching out to wrap her hand around the base of the goblet, seeking the chill against her palm.

She lifts the cup, her wrist wobbling under the weight, and takes a long, gulping draught. The water is shockingly cold against her throat, a sharp contrast to the heavy, spiced warmth of the hall and the food sitting heavy in her stomach. She lowers the cup with a wet gasp, a droplet escaping to run down the curve of her chin and disappearing into the soft fold of her neck. "Oh, that's better," she breathes out, her voice coming out in a rush. "Everything is so... warm tonight. Don't you think it's warm? Come now, don't be shy! It's a celebration dear, no point in looking so prim."

She shifts in her throne again, the wooden frame creaking in protest. The corset feels like a tight band around her middle, squeezing the contents of her stomach upward. She places a hand on the table, fingers splaying out, and knocks a discarded chicken bone onto the floor.

Elina watches the bone skid across the stone, coming to a rest near the toe of her boot. She doesn't bend to retrieve it immediately; instead, she leans in closer, bracing a hand on the edge of the heavy table, ignoring the laughs from the minor duke seated further down as some other lord makes a joke that rattles the table. The proximity allows her to smell the roast garlic on the Queen's breath, mingling with the cloying scent of her perfume.

"Of course, my... my-oh, for fuck's sake, it is a banquet hall, Aurelia," she says, the name slipping out before she can catch it, too familiar and too sharp in the open air. She doesn't correct herself, her eyes fixed on the Queen's flushed face. "There are three hundred bodies, two roaring hearths, and enough candles to burn the whole castle down. Of course it's warm. You're the one who insisted on wearing the velvet from the winter wardrobe, and don't try to deny it." She reaches out, her fingers brushing the Queen's wrist to push the water goblet back into a safer position, her touch lingering for a second on the soft skin. "I know you too well. And if you keep squirming like that, you're going to snap a lace before the boar's even been brought out."

Aurelia pulls her hand back as if Elina's touch has burned her, though the lack of real heat in her expression suggests the motion is more about the shock of being spoken to so plainly than any true offense. She glances quickly down the table to ensure none of the stiff-backed lords heard the slip of her name, then turns a pout back toward the servant.

"You aren't one of my dressing maids, Elina," she huffs, crossing her arms over her chest, though the position only serves to lift her breasts higher, forcing the top of her corset to dig uncomfortably into her soft underarms. "You handle the platters, not the laces. Honestly, everyone is an expert on my wardrobe tonight." She drops her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, leaning forward despite the creaking protest of her stays. "Is it... is it really that noticeable? The tightness, I mean. I thought the velvet was quite forgiving, no?"

At that, Seraphina glides from her chair with a practiced, seamless motion, her silver gown rustling like dry leaves over stone. She arrives at the Queen's side just as the servant retreats, her timing impeccable. There is a high, bright flush on her own cheekbones that has nothing to do with the heat of the hall, and her pupils are wide, swallowing the dark irises. She holds a half-empty goblet of wine in one hand, the stem pinched delicately between her fingers, though she sways slightly on her heels, catching herself with a subtle shift of weight.

"Do pay attention, Aurelia," Seraphina murmurs, her voice a conspiratorial trill that rises and falls in pitch, the consonants soft and blurry. She leans heavily on the back of the Queen's chair, her face hovering near Aurelia's shoulder, smelling faintly of expensive perfume and sharp, fermented grape. "The Duke of Oakhaven is telling that story about the hunting dogs again. You must laugh when he pauses. It is - *hic* - " She pauses, straightening herself up. "As I was saying, it is tradition."

She fans herself rapidly with her free hand, the air currents stirring the loose tendrils of hair at her temples. She turns as if to return to her seat, but then drifts past it, opting instead to descend upon another group of ladies further down the hall.

Elina steps into the vacant space, her shadow falling over the abandoned seat. She reaches out to collect the half-empty goblet Seraphina left behind, the base of the glass sticking slightly to the tablecloth from a spill of sugary wine. As she pulls it free, she

catches a roll of the eyes from Her Majesty herself.

Her shoulders shake, a silent, rhythmic tremor that runs through her back and down her arms. She clamps her lips shut, pressing them into a thin, white line to keep the sound from escaping, but the laughter bubbles in her chest anyway, hot and sharp. She wipes the table with a rag, her movements jerky and uncharacteristically clumsy as she fights to compose herself. She glances at Aurelia, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and for a moment, the rigid mask of the servant slips entirely.

"Your Royal Highness," she manages to get out, her voice strained and breathless. "Do try to remember the laugh. I wouldn't want your reign to end in tragedy because you missed a cue from a drunk countess." She swipes the rag over a final stain, her head ducking low to hide the grin that splits her face. "Truly, the weight of thy crown is staggering."

Aurelia catches the tail end of Elina's snicker, her eyes narrowing into a skeptical, half-lidded glare that lacks any real heat. She knows that tone - that sharp, familiar lilt that used to accompany their childhood games when Elina was winning. She lets out a long, suffering sigh through her nose, the sound audible even over the rising din of the hall, and picks up a cluster of grapes, inspecting them with exaggerated scrutiny.

"Oh, go on then, laugh at the poor, overworked Queen," she mutters, popping a grape into her mouth and chewing it with slow, deliberate petulance. "It's all very well for you. You don't have to worry about grain tariffs or... or hunting dogs." She pauses, swallowing, and her expression softens, the corners of her mouth twitching upward despite herself. She leans back, the corset squeezing her ribs, and props her chin on her hand, looking at Elina with a grudging smirk.

"I suppose it is a bit funny," she concedes, her voice dropping to a confidential whisper. "I thought I'd be doing... more. You know? Important things. Ruling. Instead, they sign a piece of paper saying I don't have to do anything but sit here and look rich and fat. Well, the 'fat' part I didn't really intend for but... well, I don't have to explain myself to you!" She gestures vaguely at the empty space where Seraphina had been. She sighs. "And she's right, you know? These things are... well...essential, apparently."

She takes a swig of her goblet, but the wine tastes sour. Aurelia feels a strange pang in her chest, not indigestion – though the sausages from earlier are certainly protesting the addition of grapes – but something sharper. A pang of guilt.

She remembers the mornings spent in her father's solar, staring at maps with borders that looked like jagged scars, listening to tutors drone on about logistics and harvest yields. She had been so ready to take that burden, to wear the intellect as heavily as the crown.

Now, the crown sits lightly on her brow, and the burden has been replaced by a platter. The Great Treaty, the one everyone is cheering for, had effectively stripped the monarchy of its daily drudgery, what with having ended the skirmishes to the north – overnight, the archenemy had become the greatest economic partner the kingdom had ever seen. Handing the reins to a parliament that seemed relieved to have a figurehead who was easily distracted by sugar had been the next logical choice.

Well, not one she had taken! They just let themselves in, and what was she supposed to do? Argue about it? *Spark a civil war?* On what basis?

She looks down at her hands, resting on the swell of her stomach, and watches her fingers absently trace the embroidery on the velvet. It is soft. It is easy. *It is terribly boring.* Then again, the idea of trading this cushioned existence for a stack of trade agreements makes her head hurt. And it is great luck to have not been born into servant-hood – Elina hadn't been as lucky.

Aurelia watches Elina's hands move deftly across the table, clearing away the sticky remnants of the fruit course. The contrast between her own soft, manicured hands, currently resting idly on the mound of her stomach, and Elina's rough, work-worn skin is stark and sudden. It pulls her out of the brief, melancholy reverie about trade agreements and parliaments. The thought of Elina scrubbing pots while Aurelia sits here, stuffed full of ham and honey, makes her shift uncomfortably in her chair.

"You know," she says, her voice losing its whining edge and dropping to a softer, more thoughtful register, though it remains slurred slightly by the wine. "It's terribly unfair that you have to work so hard. I mean, look at this." She gestures vaguely at the banquet hall, at the mountains of food and the drunken courtiers. "I'm just... here. Existing. And

you're running around." She frowns, trying to articulate a thought that feels slippery and distant. "I could order you to sit down, you know. I could make them bring you a plate. A big one. With the crispy skin from the pork."

She looks at Elina with wide, earnest eyes, the idea striking her as a stroke of benevolent genius. "Yes! Why not? You're my friend. Well, you were. Before the crown and the..."

Elina straightens up, the dirty linen napkins balled in her fist, and shakes her head once, a sharp, decisive motion that sends a stray lock of hair escaping her tight coif. She doesn't look at the food, keeping her eyes fixed on the Queen's face, her expression hardening into the professional mask she usually reserves for the most difficult nobles.

"No," she says, the word flat and final, leaving no room for argument. She glances around the hall, ensuring no one is close enough to overhear the breach in protocol, before leaning in slightly. "Your Highness, I am... look, Auri, I am working. I am not a guest, and I am not a charity case for you to play lady bountiful with. If I sit down, I lose my position. If I lose my position, my family loses the income that puts bread on their table."

She tosses the napkins onto a passing tray held by a younger kitchen boy, giving him a sharp nod to move along. She turns back to Aurelia, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "You want to be kind? Then eat your food and let me do my job. Don't make a spectacle of us both because you're feeling guilty about having a full belly while the rest of the kingdom turns." At that, she leaves to cut a slice off the boar they just carried over from the kitchen, carrying it back to the queen.

The dismissal stings.

Aurelia's mouth opens slightly, a ready protest dying on her lips as she watches Elina turn away, the efficient snap of the servant's heeled boots heading to the center of the banquet hall. She sinks back into her throne, the velvet embracing her like a cocoon, and crosses her arms over her chest, pouting at the empty air where Elina had stood.

"Fine, then," she mutters to the centerpiece of lilies, her voice petulant and low. "Work yourself into an early grave. See if I care. To think I offered you the crispy skin... It's the best part. Everyone knows that."

Her sulking is short-lived, however.

The scent of roasted boar hits her first – a thick, wall of savory smoke and fat that makes her stomach give a loud, appreciative gurgle, audible even to her over the music. She cranes her neck, ignoring the strain in her corset, and spots Elina returning with a silver

platter piled high with steaming, glistening slices of meat. The sight chases away most of the annoyance. Aurelia's hands flutter to the table, smoothing the linen in front of her. Though... she doesn't immediately go for it.

The aroma of the boar is intoxicating, a rich cloud of garlic and rosemary that seems to pull her forward by the nose, but as she leans in, the corset acts like a solid wall behind her ribs. She takes a shallow breath, the stays digging into her side, and realizes with a sinking feeling that there is physically no room left for the feast she intends to consume – she looks at the meat, then back at Elina, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Elina," she whispers, leaning conspiratorially over the armrest, her hand patting the hard, unyielding front of her bodice. "If you want me to keep eating like a hog – and I trust me, I really, *really* want to, I'm ready to do my duty to the kingdom – you're going to have to help me." She glances around to ensure the court is distracted by their own gossips before turning back to the servant. "The laces. They're... they're cutting me in half. I can't breathe, let alone fit another bite of this delicious pig in there." She bites her lower lip, her gaze darting nervously toward the shadowed alcove behind the dais. "Just... loosen them. Not too much!"

As Elina sets the heavy silver platter down with a soft clink – the roasted meat still radiating a heat that she can feel on her face – she looks at the Queen, then at the alcove, her jaw tightening so hard a muscle jumps beneath her ear. She glances at the courtiers; the Archduke is busy draining his cup, and the musicians are striking up a new, louder reel.

She grabs a pitcher of wine to mask her movement, stepping behind the throne and into the shadows of the alcove, the air here cooler and smelling of stone dust.

"Turn around," she mutters, her voice low and clipped. She sets the pitcher down on a side table and reaches for the silk laces at the small of Aurelia's back. Her fingers are rough and quick, finding the knot. "You realize this is madness. If you pop a lace out there, it won't just be the court laughing. The seamstress will have my head. I'm giving you an inch, maybe two. That's it."

Aurelia stiffens at the sharp command in Elina's voice, her chin lifting instinctively as she prepares to deliver a scathing reminder of exactly who wears the crown and who carries the wine pitcher. "I am the Queen," she starts, her voice rising to a shrill, indignant squeak that she quickly cuts off. "You can't just order me aro – "

The thought dies instantly as Elina's fingers tug at the knot. The sudden release of pressure is so profound it makes her head spin. The steel boning, which had been biting

relentlessly into her ribs and stomach, relaxes its grip, and her lungs expand to fill the space she hadn't realized she was missing. She lets out a long, ragged breath that sounds more like a moan of relief than anything regal, her shoulders sagging forward as the tension leaves her body.

"Oh," she gasps, her eyes fluttering shut. She brings a hand to her chest, feeling the way the bodice no longer crushes her against her will. "Oh, that is... that is significantly better." She wiggles her shoulders experimentally, feeling the soft flesh of her upper arms settle comfortably against the loosened fabric. The indignation of being ordered about evaporates, replaced by a flush of gratitude and the immediate, demanding return of her appetite.

Immediately and without so much as a word, she sets her sight on the boar.

She doesn't bother with the fork. Instead, she reaches out with greedy fingers, snagging a thick, dripping slice of boar directly from the platter. The skin is salty and crisp on her tongue, the meat tender and juicy, and she tears into it with a guttural sound of pleasure that is entirely unbecoming of the throne.

She chews rapidly, her eyes closing in bliss as grease slicks her lips. The extra inch of space Elina granted her is already getting occupied, the heavy mass of her stomach pushing outward contentedly now that the corset is no longer strangling it. A heavy swallow clears the way for a stray drop of sauce to be licked from a thumb, before the hand immediately reaches for a second, larger piece, her breathing audible and deep, no longer shallow and wheezing.

"You are a lifesaver, Elina," she mumbles around a mouthful of meat, not looking back at the servant but speaking toward the general vicinity of the alcove. "Truly. I should make you... I don't know. Something important." She pauses to shove a hunk of bread into her mouth to soak up the juices, her cheeks bulging like a squirrel's.

Elina steps out of the alcove, wiping her hands on her apron to remove the grease of the boar - either that, or it came from Aurelia's dampness. She doesn't care to know, nor does she look back at the throne; the sounds of wet, enthusiastic chewing are confirmation enough that her services are no longer required there. She moves down the high table, her posture snapping back into the rigid efficiency of a servant who knows she is invisible, grabbing a flagon of spiced wine from a sideboard.

She stops next to Baron Kaelen, then Archduke Valerius. The latter commands the most attention: the northern lord looks like a wolf brought to heel in a velvet collar, his scarred hands resting on the table near a plate he has barely touched. His eyes are fixed on the middle distance - calculating the cost of the feast in grain, she guesses with a frown - while his neighbors gorge themselves on the treaty's dividends. Elina pours the wine with a steady hand, the dark red liquid splashing softly against the rim of his goblet.

"The roast boar, Your Grace," she says, her voice low and respectful, but her eyes flick to the untouched plate. "It would be a shame for it to go cold. The cooks spent all day on the glaze."

She moves on before he can answer, her boots scuffing softly on the stone.

Further down the table, she catches sight of Seraphina again. The Lady has not touched the boar brought to her table; instead, she picks at a dish of candied figs, eating them with delicate, precise bites that leave no sticky residue on her fingers. Her fan lies discarded on the tablecloth, and she holds a goblet of wine with a loose, relaxed grip, eyes half-lidded as she surveys the room with an air of bored detachment. Elina doubts that she's actually feeling bored after all of that wine.

As she approaches with the flagon, Seraphina shifts her gaze, tracking the servant's movement with a slow focus. She leans back in her chair, the movement causing her bodice to strain slightly against her chest, though she maintains her perfect posture. A small, knowing smile plays on her lips as she glances toward the alcove where Aurelia is hidden, then back to Elina.

"Refill it," she murmurs, extending her goblet without looking at it, her eyes fixed intently on Elina's face. She lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, though there is a sharp edge to her tone. "Our Queen seems to have found her second wind. Or perhaps her third? Well, she'll soon need the energy, wouldn't you say? Ahah!"

Elina pauses, the silver neck of the flagon hovering over Seraphina's cup. She frowns, the crease between her eyebrows deepening, glances at the alcove, then back at Seraphina, trying to decipher if the comment is a dig at the Queen's appetite or something else entirely - something that feels like a warning she doesn't understand. Is the queen in trouble?

"I... yes, Your Ladyship," she mutters, pouring the wine with a distracted hand. A splash of red misses the cup and lands on the pristine white tablecloth. She scoffs and reaches to wipe it, but her attention is snatched away by a movement at the far end of the table.

She turns, her body following her gaze. Archduke Valerious is not sat at his seat anymore.

He now moves with a slow, deliberate heavy tread, eyes locked on the throne.

Aurelia is lost in a haze of savory bliss, the boar's rich fat coating her tongue and the bread soaking up the juices before they can drip onto her velvet. The loosened corset is a revelation; she feels as though she could eat forever, the tightness in her midsection replaced by a heavy, contented pressure that she welcomes rather than resists. She is just reaching for a third slice, her fingers sticky and eager, when the heavy tread of boots on the stone dais penetrates her gluttonous fog.

She looks up, her mouth still half-full, and blinks rapidly. Archduke Valerious is suddenly looming over her, a dark, imposing figure amidst the sparkle of the court. A mountain of rough wool and old scars, his expression grim and unreadable.

For a second, panic flares in her chest – has he come to complain about the trade routes? To demand more grain for the north?

She swallows the meat with a difficult gulp, her eyes widening as she frantically tries to remember if she was supposed to meet him earlier. The boar slice in her hand suddenly feels very heavy, and she instinctively moves to hide it behind the centerpiece of lilies, but her full stomach presses against the table edge, stopping her mid-motion. She gulps: how much did Elina loosen it? Didn't she say only an inch or two?

The man ascends the dais steps, the heavy soles of his boots now absorbing the impact of his weight, making his approach unnervingly silent. The smell of the banquet – roasted garlic, dripping fat, and the cloying sweetness of spilled wine – assaults him, a suffocating miasma of excess that seems to cling to the very tapestries. He stops at the foot of the Queen's throne, his bulk blocking the golden light of the candles from her view, casting her into a temporary, cooling shade.

He does not bow.

Instead, he stands with his feet planted shoulder-width apart, his hands clasped behind his back, the knuckles white and swollen. His gaze sweeps over the table, taking in the half-eaten trenchers, the overturned goblets, and the greasy smears on the linen before settling on the Queen's face. He notes the grease glistening on her chin, the way her breathing comes in short, shallow gasps.

"Your Majesty," he says, his voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through the floorboards.

The shadow does little to quell the flush rising rapidly up her neck and into her cheeks. She tries to sit up straighter, to summon the imposing height of the throne, but the corset simply betrays her; instead of lifting her, she merely slouches further, her spine curving into the plush velvet as her belly settles heavily against the table's edge.

To her horror, she can feel the laces move further away from each other.

She hurriedly shoves the slice of meat onto her plate and wipes her hands on the napkin, though she only succeeds in smearing the grease further into the linen. Her heart hammers against her ribs.

"Archduke... Valerius, is it?" she manages, her voice coming out higher and thinner than she intended. She clears her throat, trying to inject a note of royal command, but it sounds brittle. "I... I was just partaking of the boar you gifted us! A triumph of the northern breeds." She gestures weakly at the platter, her eyes darting nervously to the side, searching for Seraphina, Dafne, any of her ladies will do. Hell, even Eloanore could do some good here, never mind her low-born accent.

Anyone to bridge this widening, awkward silence. "To what do I owe the..."

Valerius shifts his weight, the floorboards groaning faintly under the heavy tread of his boots. His gaze remains fixed on the Queen's face with the unblinking intensity of a hawk watching a field mouse. He brings his right hand from behind his back, the movement slow and deliberate, exposing a palm mapped with calluses and faint, white scars from a lifetime of handling reins and steel.

He extends his hand toward her. He does not smile, nor does he frown; his expression is carved from granite, waiting.

"The treaty," he says. He holds his hand steady, the fingers slightly curled, expecting her to take it. "We should seal it properly, Your Majesty. As. Is. Custom."

The word "custom" hits Aurelia like a bucket of ice water.

Her tutors had drilled the protocols of the Five Holds into her head until she could recite them in her sleep. First: *the Archduke of the North never bows!* So really, the lack of manners is to be expected from these barbarians.

Second – *and far worse* – *a handshake offered while the recipient is seated is not a greeting. Instead, a deliberate and calculated insult.*

To take his hand from the throne would be to acknowledge him as her subordinate. *Like a child receiving instructions from an elder*, apparently, and she sure is no elder.

Panic flares in her chest, hot and sharp. She looks at his hand, rough and scarred, and then down at her own body, trapped in the velvet and the loosened corset. The mere thought of standing up is daunting. Her stomach is a heavy, weighty anchor in her lap, and her legs feel like jelly beneath the layers of her skirts, but the alternative – remaining seated and accepting the handshake – would be a diplomatic disaster of the highest order.

As she shifts her weight, a creak from the corset sounds like a cracking whip in her own ears. *It's not fair!* She'd barely touched the boar, for god's sake. Damn that servant and her lack of lacing technique!

Gripping the arms of the throne, her fingers sink into the cushion. She takes a shallow, careful breath, terrified that the expansion of her lungs will be the final straw for the laces at her back. There is a gap between the busk and her skin she can feel now, a dangerous, widening space that wasn't there five minutes ago. A sharp, metallic ping echoes from her midsection as well – the sound of a lace eyelet giving way under the strain, maybe? – but she ignores it, forcing herself upright with a grunt that she quickly swallows.

"Of... of course," she stammers, her voice barely a squeak. She braces her feet against the floor, the heavy silk of her skirts tangling around her ankles. "The... the old ways. Must be... observed."

The sudden vertical shift sends a wave of dizziness through her, compounded by the weight of the meal sitting heavy in her gut. She has to lock her knees to keep from swaying, her hands clutching the front of her bodice to hold the fabric - and herself - together. She lifts her chin, ignoring the heat that is surely burning her face a bright, humiliating red, and extends her hand. Her fingers are sticky, and she frantically rubs them against her skirt before taking his rough, calloused palm in her own soft, damp one.

"The treaty," she repeats, her voice breathless and high, trying to project authority. "It is... an honor to stand with you, Archduke. The North and the Crown... sisters at last."

Valerius grips the hand firmly: his palm is rough, calloused, a stark contrast to the soft, grease-slicked skin of the Queen. He does not shake her hand with the courtly flick of the wrist practiced in the capital, preferring instead to just... hold it with a solid pressure, his thumb pressing briefly against her knuckles before he releases her.

He gives a single, sharp nod, the motion stiff and military.

"You... um... you stand firm, Your Majesty," he says, the words sounding like they are being dragged over gravel. He clears his throat, a low, rumbling sound, and a faint color rises in his cheeks, visible even through his weather-beaten skin. "Like the... the stone of the... the mountain. Yes. It is good. Very."

He abruptly pulls his hand back, clasping it behind him once more as if he has been burned. He turns on his heel, the movement sudden and sharp, and marches back down the length of the high table.

Aurelia sags against the throne, her knees trembling from the exertion, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. But before she can fully recover her composure, a different, lighter presence replaces the Archduke's heavy shadow.

Seraphina appears at Aurelia's side with a swiftness that defies the amount of wine she has consumed, her silver gown rustling like dry leaves, startling her as she rests a hand on the Queen's shoulder. Her fingers digging in slightly to steady herself more than the queen.

Her face is flushed, a high, bright pink that contrasts with her pale hair, and her eyes are glassy, though they fixate on Valerius's retreating back with a sharp, predatory focus.

"Now, now, don't flatter yourself, darling," Seraphina murmurs, her voice a slurred, conspiratorial trill that rises and falls in pitch. She leans heavily against the throne, her weight pressing against Aurelia's arm. "He is a Northerner. They spend half their lives freezing in the dark and the other half hitting things with axes. Words are... hic... a secondary concern. Ahah! Particularly with women..."

She waves a hand dismissively in the direction of the Archduke, nearly knocking over a candlestick in the process. "Poor lord looked terrified. You handled it beautifully, of course. The 'stone of the mountain'..." She lets out a peal of laughter, high and uncontrolled, that draws glances from the nearby tables. "Oh, that is rich. Truly!"

Aurelia feels the corset shift again.

"Yes, quite... hilarious, ahah..." she mutters, gently peeling Seraphina's fingers from her shoulder. "But if you'll excuse me, Seraphina, I... I feel the need for some air! The... stone of the mountain, you know. It requires... altitude."

She doesn't wait for a response, though one comes in the form of a giggle anyways. She turns, moving with the slow, deliberate care of a woman walking across a frozen pond, her hands wrapped into each other in a regal manner, right over her dress. She keeps her eyes fixed on the heavy oak doors at the far end of the hall, ignoring the boar, the wine, and the courtiers.

As she passes the high table, she spots Elina clearing a plate. Without breaking stride, she reaches out, her fingers pinching the servant's earlobe with a sharp, insistent tug.

"You," she hisses through gritted teeth, not stopping but dragging Elina along with her toward the exit. "Come with me."

The pinch is sharp and immediate, sending a jolt of pain down the side of Elina's neck that forces her to drop the rag she'd been using to wipe the table. She stumbles, her boots scuffing loudly against the stone as she's pulled off balance, the heavy flagon of wine she'd been holding sloshing dangerously close to the rim. She doesn't cry out - years of keeping her head down in the bustling kitchens have taught her better than that - but she shoots a frantic, wide-eyed look at the nearby diners, hoping the movement is lost in the shifting shadows of the hall.

She falls into step behind the Queen, her posture hunched and submissive to hide the obvious height difference - Elina being much taller -, though her jaw is set in a hard line of irritation. She leans in close to Aurelia's back, her voice a low, urgent hiss that barely

carries over the music.

"Auri, Auri, stop for one... would you unhand me, you madwoman!... ow, ow, ok, I'm sorry..." she mutters, the words clipped and breathless.

"Do you want to start a war with the North and a scandal in the same breath? I am working! The Archduke is watching. Everyone... oh dear everyone is watching..."

It's not the truth, what with not one of the nobles taking note of anything but their wine and their respective fairer sex. She tries to pull her ear free, but the Queen's grip is surprisingly obstinate, her fingers digging in like a vice.

"Where are we going? If this is about the corset, I told you, I only gave you an inch, I'm not about to lose my job giving you another," She almost trips over a courier left for drunk on the ground. "I don't care if you become an empress next, your seamstress will have my head."

With every step, Aurelia feels the ominous shift of the corset against her skin, the gap between the laces widening as her body settles back into its natural shape.

"Just... shut up and walk," she grinds out, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. She doesn't dare look back at the high table, terrified of seeing Archduke Valerius's stony face or Seraphina's drunken amusement.

They reach the doors, and two guards scramble to pull them open, their eyes widening in confusion at the sight of the Queen dragging a servant by the ear. Aurelia sweeps past them, her skirts billowing out behind her, and practically pulls Elina into the cool, dimly lit corridor of the outer gallery. The heavy doors thud shut behind them, cutting off the roar of the banquet instantly and replacing it with a ringing silence.

Aurelia releases Elina's ear immediately.

The silence of the corridor is broken not by words, but by the sharp report of snapping thread – a sound like a whip crack against the stone walls. It starts at the lower back, where the tension of the laces had been fighting a losing battle against the Queen's indulgence. One by one, the silk cords give way, the knot unraveling with terrifying speed. But the relief is short-lived and catastrophic; as the pressure distributes, the

weakened structure of the garment itself surrenders.

The busk, the rigid steel strip that runs down the front, bows outward under the sudden, unchecked force of Aurelia's midsection.

With a metallic twang, the hooks and eyes rip through the brocade and the heavy linen lining, unable to contain the soft, heavy flesh that had been compressed against them. The corset collapses instead of just loosening, prompting even the sides of the dress on top of it to gape open, the fabric folding in on itself as the structural integrity fails completely, leaving the Queen's belly to surge forward, no longer compressed but heavy, round, and free, pushing against the velvet of her gown like dough rising in a warm oven.

The breath she had held during their escape rushes out of her in a single, involuntary explosion – a deep, resounding belch that seems to go on forever, fueled by three courses of rich food and two and a half goblets of wine. Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes wide, but the sound has already bounced down the gallery. Maybe even alerting the guards at the far end?

Slowly, she lowers her hand. For the first time in hours, she takes a deep, unrestricted breath. She looks down at the ruin of her dignity, then up at Elina, a flush of defiant pride rising in her cheeks that overrides the embarrassment.

"There," she says, her voice booming slightly in the quiet hall, patting the prominent curve of her belly with both hands. "Seems like I have been doing my duty afterall, uh? I did exactly as you asked. I ate the food. I let you do your job. And now..." she gestures vaguely at the wreckage of her attire. "Well, the spectacle is contained to the corridor, at the very least."

Elina stares at the ruin of the Queen's bodice, her mouth slightly open, the words dying in her throat. She takes a step forward, her hands hovering uselessly in the air between them like startled birds. The corridor is dim, lit only by the flickering sconces, but the damage is unmistakable – the velvet has split at the seams where the hooks gave way, and the white linen of the under-layers is bulging through the gap.

"No kidding... oh, by the... hold still," she mutters, panic finally overriding her irritation.

She drops to one knee, ignoring the hard stone floor, and grabs the edges of the torn velvet.

She tries to pull them together, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on the slick fabric, but the mound of Aurelia's stomach is an immovable object in her path. Every time she manages to get an inch of fabric to meet, the Queen's breathing pushes it back out again – the pulling and pushing comes to an end as one of Aurelia's breasts pokes out, even if she swiftly, *diplomatically*, pushes it back into the fabric.

"It's no use," she hisses, her voice rising an octave. She looks up at Aurelia from her kneeling position, her eyes wide and frantic. "It's not just the laces, Auri, the busk is gone. The fabric is torn. I can't pin it, I can't tie it... you're..." She gestures helplessly at the expansive curve of the Queen's midsection. "You're too... there. We need... a new dress, maybe?"

"Oh, stop fussing about," she says, batting Elina's hands away with a dismissive wave of her own.

She smooths the front of her gown as best she can, though the fabric still gapes open, revealing the soft expanse of her stomach and the white linen beneath. She doesn't try to hide it anymore; the battle is lost, and frankly, she's too comfortable to care.

"Can't you see it's hopeless? I'm not going to find a seamstress at this hour. I'm certainly not standing here while you try to sew me into my own skin."

She turns away from the servant, her movements slow and heavy, and begins to waddle down the corridor toward the private wing, her hands resting proprietarily on the curve of her belly. "I'm going back to my chambers. If anyone asks, I'm... reading the treaty over one more time." Really, it'd be the first time, but she has already revealed the extent of her gluttony to Elina tonight. She doesn't care to show her sloth as well. "Or sleeping. Or knighting someone. Or whatever the fuck. And you're coming with me to help me out of this..."

Elina scrambles up from the stone floor, dusting off her knees with quick, agitated strokes.

She hurries after the Queen, her boots echoing against the flagstones as she tries to close the distance without actually running – a breach of protocol that would surely be noticed by any lingering courtiers. Mercifully, there are none nearby.

She reaches out, hovering a hand near Aurelia's elbow but thinking better of touching her.

"But... Your Highness, wait," she stammers, glancing back at the heavy oak doors they just passed. The sounds of the banquet are muffled here, but the responsibility still weighs on her shoulders. "I can't just leave! The head chef will have my hide, and the servers are already swamped. I'm a banquet server, not a... a lady's maid! I don't know how to get you out of that... thing. If I pull the wrong string, the whole dress might just fall apart, and then where will we be?"

As if on cue, a low, rumbling sound emanates from the Queen's midsection, deep and resonant like a distant thunderstorm rolling through the valley. It vibrates through the quiet corridor, unmistakable and impossible to ignore. Elina stops in her tracks, her eyes widening as she stares at the Queen's back.

"Did you... did you hear that? A thunderstorm coming?"

Realization sets in almost instantly - the source having been Aurelia's spoiled gut - but that doesn't stop Elina from doubling down. She's already dug her own grave anyways with the smile she's now trying to stifle.

"This early in the season? How odd. Clearly we're being attacked from the North again. Maybe one of their war boars has rammed its snout into the castle's walls."

Aurelia stops dead in her tracks, the heavy velvet of her skirts settling around her ankles. She turns slowly, the movement fluid despite her bulk, and crosses her arms over her chest; a motion that pushes her breasts up, emphasizing the strain on the torn bodice, but she ignores that in favor of fixing Elina with a glare that could curdle milk.

"A war boar," she repeats, her voice flat and dripping with sarcasm as she takes a menacing step toward the servant. "Is that what we are calling it now? A wild beast inside the castle walls? Past the guards? And somehow, it sounds exactly like my stomach demanding the rest of that dessert course I missed because of you?"

She holds the glare for a long moment, letting the silence stretch until Elina's smirk begins to falter.

...

The corner of her mouth twitches, fighting a losing battle against the humor bubbling up inside her.

"...well, I *am* looking as wide as one right about now," she says, her expression softening into a grudging, lopsided smirk. She uncrosses her arms and rests a hand on the curve of her stomach, which gives another, smaller gurgle as if agreeing with her.

Her face falls again, turning into a bothered pout. "Ughhh... I really have let the castle fatten me up, haven't I? Ouhhh...! I'm such a glutton..."

The servant's eyes sweep over the Queen, really taking her in for the first time without the buffer of a table or a platter between them. She sees the way the velvet pulls across the hips, the deep crease in the fabric where Aurelia's arm rests, and the undeniable, heavy roundness of the belly that has forced the corset into retirement.

She lets out a low, breathless whistle, shaking her head slowly.

"I'll say," she mutters, stepping up beside Aurelia and gesturing for her to continue walking toward the royal chambers. "Your seamstress is a magician, Auri. Truly. I had no idea... I mean, I see you every once in a while, but I didn't realize the extent of the... expansion. You're hiding a whole winter's worth of grain under there."

She walks slightly behind the Queen, one hand hovering near her elbow as if to catch her, though... she wonders if she could actually stop Aurelia if she fell. "And stop with the guilt, will you? It's a terrible, terrible look on a Queen. I told you before: your job is to be the Queen. My job - and the job of everyone else in that kitchen - is to make sure you can do exactly that." She leans in closer as they turn a corner, her voice firm. "If that means you eat so much you burst your stays in the middle of a peace treaty, then so be it."

Aurelia lets out a dismissive huff, though it lacks any real heat, turning into a breathless laugh as she navigates the corridor. "Oh, stop it. Just... stop," She tries to wave Elina away again, but her hand is heavy and slow, dropping back to her side with a soft thud. "You're making it sound like I'm some sort of... prize-winning heifer at the fair. It's undignified. I am the Crown, I'm supposed to be smart, diplomatic, charismatic... dignified all round, really."

Despite her protest, she doesn't slow her pace, the promise of her bed and the removal of the ruined dress driving her forward. The corridor has stretched on, but finally, they reach the heavy oak doors.

Aurelia pushes them open with a groan of effort, stumbling slightly into the darkened room, the air cool and smelling of lavender and beeswax.

"In," she commands, shooing Elina inside and then turning to shove the doors shut with her shoulder, cutting off the distant sounds of the banquet. She leans back against the wood, exhaling a long, shuddering breath, her hands cradling the heavy weight of her stomach as it rests freely in the open air of the room. "Finally. Now..."

The silence of the chamber is broken almost instantly by another low, rolling growl from her midsection, louder this time in the acoustics of the room.

It vibrates against her hands, a demanding, physical reminder that while the corset may have surrendered, her appetite has not. Aurelia flushes, a deep, mortified pink that creeps up her neck, but she doesn't try to hide the sound this time, opting instead to look down at the soft mound of her belly, then up at Elina with a glare.

"You see?" she snaps, though her voice wavers. "This is your fault. You and your... your talk of boars and duties." She pushes herself away from the door, waddling toward the bed, but stops halfway, turning to point an imperious finger at the servant. "Well, if you want me to be fat so badly, you'd better get to work. I wasn't kidding before, you know? I want my dessert."

She gestures vaguely toward the door they just closed. "Go back. Sneak into the kitchens, steal from the banquet, I don't care. Bring me... oh, bring me that honey-glazed ham. And the custard tarts. And a flagon of wine. And don't you dare come back empty-handed, Elina, or I swear I will have you demoted to the royal stables!"

The command hangs in the air, heavy and sweet, like the scent of the honey-glazed ham she just demanded. Aurelia stands in the center of her room, the ruin of her corset exposing the soft, heavy reality of her body - a body that has, in two seasons alone, been reshaped by its owner's greed and the kingdom's excess.

Elina sighs; Aurelia is no longer the princess she remembers. The high-born friend who practiced gravity in the mirror or recited poetry to make herself seem smart to the court's ladies and servants alike; she's a Queen now. A proper one.

Looking at Aurelia - flushed, messy - she feels the last of her resistance crumble.

The treaty is signed, the grain is flowing, and if the Queen's primary duty is to enjoy the bounty, then... then surely Elina's is to facilitate it, is it not? She gives a sharp, crisp nod, the mask of the servant sliding back into place, though her eyes hold a glint of genuine amusement.

"As you command, Your Majesty," she says, dropping into a curtsy that is only slightly mocking.

"Ham, tarts, and wine. I shall raid the banquet in your name."