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opening extract from

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*To my father, His Alteza
the Coronador of Galnicia*

A few months ago you summoned me to the Council Chamber. You asked me to take my place at the table with your ministers. In the circumstances, I thought you were going to do me the honour of including me in your discussions on the great questions involved in governing the country. I thought you wanted to initiate me into the exercise of power. My father realises that I've grown up, I said to myself. Now that I'm fifteen he thinks I'm as able to give an opinion as any of those grave statesmen. I was anxious, but flattered. At last you were taking me seriously!

I was wrong.

Much to my surprise, my mother the Coronada entered the Chamber, bringing you a large file full of notebooks and papers. I turned pale when I realised what they were.

On your orders my mother had searched my room. She had put everything I'd been writing for years in that file: my personal diary, my secrets, my dreams, my poems, my stories.

My soul was there on the table. In front of you. In front of all the Council members.

You opened the file. Your lips wore an odd kind of smile. You rose to your feet and, without so much as glancing at me, you began reading my notebooks out loud.

At first your ministers remained silent. Attentive. They didn't understand the point of what you were doing, but I realised at once.

As you read, derisive laughter escaped you several times. You stumbled over certain words on purpose, you emphasised any awkwardness. You did it so well that after a while the ministers began laughing too.

There I was at your mercy, all alone, crushed. And you thought it was so funny that you began gesticulating and pulling faces to show how ridiculous my writings were. I clenched my teeth so hard to keep myself from howling out loud that my jaw hurt for several days afterwards.

Then you abruptly closed the file, and your face grew stern again. 'That's enough joking!' you said, and added, turning to the assembled company, 'Gentlemen, you may be wondering to whom we owe these imperishable masterpieces. Their author is among us. Pray congratulate . . . our Princess.'

The ministers turned to look at me in surprise, their eyes reddened by tears of laughter. Some of them coughed, others were still having difficulty containing their mirth. One of them – I think it was the Minister of Agriculture – had actually dribbled on his lace collar.

You told me to rise to my feet, and you said, 'Time to make an end of such childishness, Princess. You are the sole heir to the throne of Galnicia. Very soon you will be the country's official representative. Galnicia does not need such tall tales as these.'

You handed me the file and told me to throw it on the fire.

I took a few steps towards the hearth. As I did so, I looked at the Galnician flag hanging on the wall, with its bands of yellow and green

and the two arrows passing through them, and I cursed all that it represented.

I knelt down. As I let go of my notebooks the flames licked my hands. I felt them burn me to the core. I rose again, and you looked satisfied.

It was then I came to the decision that I had been putting off making for weeks.

I left the Council Chamber under the scornful gaze of your ministers and my mother, but I didn't mind that any more.

And so, 'dear Father', this is how things stand.

You are a good Coronador, all the Galnicians think so, and they are right. You rule fairly and justly. Tranquillity and Harmony guide your actions. But as a father you're the very opposite.

Do as you like with this letter: burn it like the rest of my writings if it gives you any pleasure. I only hope that remorse will keep you awake at night.

I'm claiming my freedom. What a beautiful word! You'll have plenty of time to think about it now.

Malva

PART ONE

Leaving

1

A Hedgehog Haircut

To the north, the walls of the Citadel dropped straight to a sheer precipice. Perched there on its rock, it looked like a watchful bird of prey, unfolding its towers and wings above the valley and casting its imposing shadow on the calm waters of the River Gdavir. Once upon a time, invading forces from Dunbraven and the kingdom of Norj had been smashed to pieces against those walls; warriors and their mounts alike had perished here, and for months afterwards the Gdavir had washed helmets, armour and the bodies of men and animals downstream.

To the south, however, the Citadel looked very different. Its broad facades with their innumerable windows embraced a series of gently sloping terraces. Almond, olive and lemon trees grew there in neat rows, standing deep in lush grass. Basins of water adorned with blue and green mosaics had been sunk among them, to cool people strolling along and to attract birds. Recently the Coronador had become passionately interested in exotic plants, so one terrace had been turned into a paddy field

and another into a palm grove. Here and there huge hedges of bamboo swayed in the light breeze of the coming summer.

It was here, in the Citadel, that the heart of Galnicia beat. For many years, far from the noise of conflict, the Coronador had governed according to the precepts of Tranquillity and Harmony, the two principal goddesses worshipped by his people. Galnicia was prosperous, the Galnicians lived happy lives, and yet . . . that evening, no one suspected that the country was enjoying its last hours of peace and freedom from care.

Malva had finally managed to escape her mother's eagle eye.

Even ordinarily that wasn't easy to do, but today she had thought she never would. Besides the hours wasted with her dressmaker and her dancing master, an interminable session prostrated before the Altar of the Divinities had been inflicted on her. The Coronada had made her lie on the cold tiles and recite the incantations over fifty times. Malva was used to the constraints of the protocol that ruled her life as a Princess, but now she had difficulty hiding her impatience. She clenched her fists, telling herself over and over again that soon all this would be just a bad memory.

At last, as evening fell, the Coronada was called away by other duties. She was too busy to give any orders, and didn't see Malva slip out of the Hall of Delicacies, where a whole army of domestic staff was completing the preparations for the next day's festivities.

Discreet as a shadow, the Princess hurried towards the South Wing. She passed the kitchens and then went upstairs to the ballroom, where a dozen silent maids, skirts spread around them, were kneeling to polish the floor. In the corridors, on the stairs, up in the galleries she passed be vies of menservants

handling pulleys to lower the chandeliers, replacing candles and beating carpets. None of them paid her any attention.

Outside, the gardeners were just finishing clipping the hedges, and were hanging lanterns in the branches of olive trees. As she passed an open window, Malva heard the fountains begin to play in a large basin of water, and further off, in a bandstand, musicians were rehearsing serenades. Their notes floated into the warm evening air, mingling with the scent of jasmine.

Malva felt the Citadel, and all Galnicia beyond the walls, thrilling with joyous excitement. She herself was the central figure of the coming festivities, yet she didn't feel in the least cheerful. To tell the truth, her head was full of very different plans.

When she finally reached her alcove bedroom in the South Wing, she breathed a sigh of relief. A tall, thin girl was standing in the middle of the room, hands clasped over her apron. It was her chambermaid Philomena, waiting for her as they had arranged.

Without a word Malva bolted the door and sat down at the long mirror in its mother-of-pearl frame. She took the pins out of her hair, then picked up a pair of scissors and held them out to Philomena.

'Quick!' she breathed. 'There's no time to lose. Night will soon fall, and the Archont is expecting us.'

Philomena stood behind her without moving. Her bony face looked even paler than usual.

'I . . . I don't understand,' she faltered.

Malva thrust the scissors into her hands impatiently. 'Yes, you do! You understand perfectly well! Hurry up!'

Philomena had been in the Princess's service for years. She

had known Malva as a baby when she herself was a very young girl. The Princess had always trusted her like a sister. Philomena had always been devoted to her mistress. But there were certain things that her beliefs forbade her to do, such as violating the principles of Harmony.

‘Oh no, I can’t!’ she moaned at last. ‘Ask me to do anything you like, but not that!’

The mirror reflected both their faces. The chambermaid looked sickly next to Malva, who at fifteen still had the rounded softness of childhood.

‘For pity’s sake, Philomena, do as I say. The Archont told us that —’

‘*This* isn’t what we arranged!’ the chambermaid interrupted, throwing the scissors down on the dressing table as if they were something evil.

She crossed her arms over her thin chest. From her stubborn expression, Malva could easily see that she wasn’t going to get her to change her mind.

‘Oh, you’re being ridiculous,’ sighed the Princess in vexation. ‘You take mad risks for weeks without batting an eyelid, and now that it comes to just cutting my hair . . .’

Philomena shook her head vigorously. There was no *just* about it. In these last few weeks, to be sure, she had indeed agreed to everything. Malva had asked her to lie, and she had lied. If she had asked her to cheat and steal she would have done it. Philomena was ready to die for Malva, but wielding those scissors was simply beyond her.

‘I’ve combed your hair so often since you were born,’ she recalled. ‘I’ve used so many ointments to untangle it, to make it smooth and supple . . . oh, you’ve always been so proud of your hair!’

'No, my mother has always been so proud of it,' the Princess corrected her.

'But what about later?' cried the agitated Philomena. 'You don't have to cut your hair! You could always . . .'

She took Malva's hair in both hands, wound it into a coil at the nape of her neck and held it up on top of her head. Malva looked at herself in the glass. In the golden candlelight she looked as if she were crowned by a roll of silk. She remembered how a painter had painted her portrait the year before, for her fourteenth birthday. To render the colour of her hair faithfully, he had sent for a certain black ink made by mages in the distant Orniant Empire. 'Essence of the night,' he had said reverently as he applied his brush to the canvas. The portrait became famous throughout Galnicia and had become a symbol: the Princess's hair perfectly represented the ideal of proud Galnician beauty.

'No one will notice under the hood of your disguise,' Philomena tried again, in what she hoped was a persuasive tone.

With a brusque movement, Malva shook herself free. Seizing the scissors, she took hold of a lock of her hair and cut it off without hesitation.

The lock was left there in her hand, and then unfolded like the petals of a flower that has just been picked. Philomena stifled a sob. In her eyes, little though she seemed to care, Malva had just committed sacrilege. One by one, handfuls of hair fell at Malva's feet. She went on cutting and cutting at random, while a macabre kind of jubilation lit up her amber eyes. Whole tufts of black hair got caught in the folds of her collar and slid down between her shoulder blades, making her back itch.

When Malva finally put down the scissors, the mirror showed her a pathetic girl with a hedgehog haircut. She looked so odd and ridiculous that she started laughing.

'Galnicia can just do without its pretty doll!' she exclaimed. At that moment she wanted to run to the far end of the Citadel and show herself to everyone, particularly her mother. She could already imagine the Coronada's horrified howl. 'Malva! By Holy Harmony, what have you done?' But of course she couldn't afford such an act of provocation. It would spoil everything.

'Now go and get the disguise,' she told Philomena.

Despite her feelings, the chambermaid obeyed. Malva watched her open the hidden door at the far end of the alcove and disappear into the secret passage. She felt confident. They had rehearsed their moves so often these last few weeks! And there was the Archont too; thanks to him, everything would be all right.

As soon as she was alone, Malva took the letter she had written to her father out of the folds of her dress. She spread the creased paper out in front of her on the dressing table. *To my father, His Alteza the Coronador of Galnicia.* She reread the opening, and suddenly felt alarmed. How could she make sure that this farewell letter didn't fall into her father's hands at once? Malva couldn't think of anyone to whom she could entrust it. Perhaps the Archont might have some idea. Meanwhile, she slipped it behind the mirror.

Her eyes fell on her reflection again. For the first time, Malva noticed the peculiar shape of her ears, usually hidden by her hair. Now they stuck out on each side of her face like two grotesque pennants.

Even if I fail, she thought, gurgling with laughter, who'd want to marry a jug-eared hedgehog? No one!

In her mind's eye she saw all the next day's many guests file past: the entire Galnician nobility entering the Sanctuary, the

Dons with their bull-necks squeezed into stiff collars, the Donias with their tulle hats, their curtsies, their simpering smiles . . . She imagined her mother and father, one on each side of her like guard dogs, facing the Divinities. *'The Coronador and Coronada of Galnicia are giving their only daughter in marriage! What a joyful day! Long life to this happy union!'*

Malva stifled a cry. She clenched her fists and pressed them firmly to her breast.

'Take a deep breath,' she told herself out loud. 'None of that is going to happen. You won't wear the Ritual dress and the crown of shells, you won't make the sacred offerings. You're not going to marry anyone.'

It had all begun some months earlier during the Rite of Tranquillity. The Archont had dropped a remark inadvertently, and the truth had burst in on her. Malva could still hear his voice ringing in her ears.

'You must prepare for your wedding night, Princess.'

Malva had given a start of surprise.

'What?' said the Archont, amazed. 'Hasn't your mother told you?'

No. The Coronada had not seen fit to tell her that plans had been made for her marriage. As for the Coronador, he never wasted time talking to his daughter. As far as he was concerned she was nothing but a bargaining counter, a commodity to be exchanged for political alliances.

In her state of shock, Malva had flown into a towering rage. And in the middle of the Rite of Tranquillity, too! What blasphemy! Fortunately the Archont was a clever man, respected by one and all, and devoted to the Princess ever since the Coronador had put him in charge of her education. He had

given some kind of explanation to the worshippers gathered together in the Sanctuary, and that had nipped any scandal in the bud. But Malva's own anger had not been extinguished.

Over the next few days the Archont had paid frequent visits to her room. He hoped to make her see reason.

'All Princesses of your dynasty have married young,' he said. 'Your mother herself was only thirteen, and she didn't die of it. I really cannot understand your objections.'

'But you know,' wept Malva, 'you know perfectly well what marriage will mean to me! I shall have to give up the only pleasures I've ever been allowed. I won't be able to study any more, or read, or say what I want, or go out without an escort!'

The Archont heaved an exasperated sigh. 'I do know, Princess. But you have no choice.'

Malva was choking with rage. How could the Archont give in so quickly?

'When you've taught me so much!' she told him. 'It's thanks to you that I discovered the joys of reading, writing, making up stories, thinking. You even gave me my longing to travel and a taste for freedom!'

The Archont smiled sadly. 'I am only a humble tutor. It was not I who taught you all those things, but the authors of the books you read. And books are not the same as life, Princess. You must give up your childish dreams. You must do your duty.'

Malva felt betrayed and abandoned.

'Trust your mother,' the Archont told her gently. 'I am sure she has chosen you a good husband. The Prince of Andemark is only thirty-three, and they say he's an excellent dancer.'

Malva couldn't have cared less about the Prince of Andemark and his dancing steps. Every time she closed her eyes she saw

herself shut up in a room waiting for the wedding night, and dreadful panic churned in her stomach.

Once, when she was very small, she had watched the Parade of Gifts: envoys from all over the Known World had passed through the Citadel courtyard in procession. One of them had a huge reptile on a leash. 'A female allicaitor that I caught in the Lands of Aremica,' he announced. Then he produced a cage with a terrified hare crouching inside. The envoy had given the hare to the Coronador, saying, 'Throw it in the air and watch!' The Coronador had thrown the poor creature. With a snap of its teeth, the monstrous reptile had swallowed its prey.

Alive.

To the plaudits of the nobility.

Malva felt she was in exactly the same situation: they wanted to throw her to a stranger who would crunch her up in an instant.

In the end the Archont finally realised that she was prepared to do anything to avoid such a fate. One evening he admitted that he sympathised with her.

'You're so young, so beautiful . . . and so gifted. You've always had such an independent nature. I can see why you don't want to spend your life as a puppet on the arm of a man who's too old for you.'

Malva had raised her amber eyes to him, brimming with tears. 'Talk to my mother! Talk to my father!' she begged. 'Ask them to call this marriage off!'

The Archont had shaken his head. His powers were great, but not great enough for that. Galnicia needed this alliance with Andemark, and the Coronador wasn't going to change his mind.

'Your father entrusted your education to me, but otherwise I'm powerless.'

'Then what can I do?' cried Malva in despair.

'I don't know,' the Archont replied. 'But be sure that whatever you decide, you can count on my help.'

For some time Malva had thought the question over from every angle. At last it seemed to her that the only solution would be flight. It was certainly the only way she could escape this marriage, but she couldn't bring herself to make the final decision. Paralysed by fear, she kept putting it off until tomorrow.

Then came the day when the Coronador summoned her to the Council Chamber and made her burn her notebooks. That ultimate humiliation had suddenly swept aside her fears and scruples. As soon as she was out of the Chamber she had gone to find Philomena to tell her what she was going to do.

'Very well,' Philomena had murmured at once. 'In that case I'm going with you.'

And so the two of them, thanks to Malva's friendship with the Archont, had planned their escape in meticulous detail.

Malva swung the mirror away, because her reflection was beginning to upset her. As she did so the letter slipped down behind the dressing table, but she didn't notice. She rose and went to the window to pull back the curtains.

The moon had not yet risen. There was still a fine ribbon of clear twilight sky on the horizon beyond the orchards. Towards the east stood rolling hills, dipping to valleys here and there as the River Gdavir meandered on its way. I may never come back, Malva thought. I may never taste the fruits of that orchard or see summer in Galnicia again. She felt a lump in her throat, but quickly swallowed; it was much too soon to start feeling homesick.

At that moment Philomena came back through the hidden

door. Without a word she put down the bundle containing the disguise: cotton underwear, a coarsely woven skirt, a beige top with simple sleeves, a plain bonnet. Over it Malva threw a woollen cape that Philomena had stolen from a peasant woman at the cattle fair. The worn, shabby outfit would help her to pass unnoticed. The cape had a hood which came down over her eyes when she lowered her head.

‘What do I look like?’ asked Malva.

‘A girl of no importance,’ said Philomena, after solemnly inspecting her.

The Princess smiled. From now on Malva, sole heir to the throne of Galnicia, was a girl of no importance.

Philomena collected her royal garments, wrapped them around Malva’s locks of hair, and put everything into the bundle that she was carrying under her arm. It contained all their worldly goods: a change of clothing, a loaf of bread, some olives, a fair sum of money in gold pieces given to them by the Archont, and new notebooks. Malva was planning to write all her adventures in them.

‘Come on,’ said Malva, making for the entrance to the secret passage.

Philomena followed, closing the door behind her. As darkness enveloped them, Malva suddenly realised that this time it wasn’t just a rehearsal.