

The Gilded Lily

Long ago, in a land forgotten by map and chart, there was a nobleman known as the Viceroy of Westpine and his name, carried by the whispers of traders and travelers, was known far and wide. Even in the farthest, strangest corners of the world, he was respected and renowned; scholars envied his intellect, priests admired his wisdom, and women swooned over his rakish figure, for he had hair of rich mahogany, eyes like sparkling obsidian, and skin radiant as the sun. But most importantly, his people loved him, for he was fair and everyone was safe, healthy, and fed.

Year after year, Westpine flourished under this benevolent royal; the harvests were plentiful, the town grew, and the people were happy. However, the viceroy grew increasingly discontented and restless as time went on, for he was of a large, established dynasty and his fiercely competitive siblings, who ruled the neighboring states, perpetually overshadowed him because they were even more famous, more powerful, and more prosperous. They were cruel, too. “How is the little emperor today?” teased the Duke of Longmeadow. “Viceroy - ha, ‘tis a title bigger than your country.” scoffed the Earl of Muur. “Great things come in small packages. Except Westpine.” taunted the Queen of Southbridge. Every evening, after he made his rounds across Westpine, the viceroy sulked into to the castle study, plopped himself onto his favorite sofa, glanced at the mocking letters from his brothers and sisters, and tossed them onto the floor. The pile grew steadily; in a week the mound was as big as the couch, in a fortnight, the entire carpet was smothered by crumpled parchment, and in a month, the study was so full that the door could barely open. Finally, the viceroy exclaimed, “Enough!”, and in a frenetic burst of energy, he rolled up his sleeves, pushed everything into the hearth, stoked a fire, and burnt every last stamp, seal, and paper.

Exhausted, he collapsed on the couch in the now vacant study and called for his best officer, General D’Alvina. “General,” he lamented, “this country has been a laughingstock too long. A good fight should teach those snobs a lesson!” “Right away, m’lord” replied the general and he rode off into the night to raise an army. However, he was unsuccessful; though he scoured every possible nook and cranny, there were simply not enough strong men, fine horses, big cannons, and sharp swords to start a

war. Upon receiving this report, the viceroy promptly dismissed General D'Alvina and called in a new advisor, a loyal vassal by the name of Cartilla. "This country has been a laughingstock too long," the viceroy repeated, "but we haven't the means to raise an army. What are we to do?" "Have no fear," Cartilla announced, "I know just the remedy. I will introduce you to the fine art of duelling, you will challenge your detractors, and everyone shall fear your glorious swordsmanship." The viceroy considered this and assented, but things did not go exactly as planned; though Cartilla was patient and thorough, the viceroy was hopeless with a rapier, bungling every lunge and missing every parry.

Depressed and still the butt of endless jokes, the Viceroy of Westpine consulted aide after aide without success until suddenly, he had a flash of inspiration. He ran as quickly as he could to the top of his tower and gazed down upon the town square. "Yes, yes, yes! Perfect!" he cried, "I will build a city full of monuments so glorious, so spectacular, even the gods will weep."

The first thing the viceroy did the next morning was to call the entire population, one-hundred thousand strong, of Westpine before his castle, and from his balcony, he rousingly told his subjects how they had been humiliated by their neighbors and explained his grandiose construction plans to address this. He was greeted by resounding cheers of approval. "Viceroy, noble, viceroy, brave, it would be an honor to erect a statue in your name!" - the people would be more than happy to build the tallest, greatest, statue that they could imagine.

With the people's support guaranteed, the second thing he did was to ensure there were enough resources to undertake the endeavor and he instructed his agents to survey the land; they rode out to the warehouses, where bushels of grain sat stacked to the ceiling, they rode into the forests, where the wood grew thick, and at last, they rode through the quarries, where the earth glistened with metals. "There is a surplus of food, m'lord, there are many trees suitable for lumber, and the mountains simply glisten with riches. We can sustain this project, m'lord," declared the inspectors. "Excellent," the viceroy replied, let us begin."

All spring, Westpine was a nation buzzing with the sounds of industry and enterprise, and men, women, and children of all ages were eager to do their part;

caverns deep below the earth resonated with the sounds of pick and shovel and trees shuddered as they absorbed ax blow after ax blow.

In late April, the viceroy's statue was finally complete; crafted from the finest materials in all of Westpine and nearly as tall as the castle itself, indeed, it was a sight to behold. But the viceroy, was still not satisfied. "I am honored," he announced again from the balcony, "but we are not finished! Sleep well tonight, for tomorrow marks the start of a construction which will humble its beholders and bring titans to tears. I promise you this: The world will know that we are Westpine!" Once again, the people set off to the mountains, to the forests, and to the warehouses. One summer day, as the din of construction hummed in the background, one of the viceroy's aides approached the ruler as he sat in his study, reviewing his blueprints. "M'lord," he said worriedly, "I think that it would be best to stop this project - immediately." The Viceroy of Westpine took a step back, flabbergasted. "You said *what?*" "M'lord, please - the people are concerned about their own crops, which they are having difficulties tending due to the construction schedule. I fear that this may be the makings of a famine." "Nonsense," bellowed the viceroy, absorbed in his drafts, "I have ruled Westpine for more than two decades and not once has there been famine. I ask of you only one thing - to have faith!" And with these words, the viceroy slammed the door and continued working.

Late August came about and a giant evergreen was erected, equally iconic and magnificent as the viceroy's bust, but the ruler was still unsatisfied. For the third and final time, he called down from the balcony to make his final demand - the remodeling of the town square entirely in gold. The people, their faces gaunt and hollow with exhaustion, crescendoed into protest, but one earful of their maniacal leader, rambling about weeping gods and trouncing rivals, told them that there was no choice but to keep building; the people walked on into the mountains, the forests, and the warehouses, passing acres of crops which would soon ripen, wither, and rot. The viceroy was not to be bothered; he locked down the castle and waited for construction to finish, even as his advisors pleaded from outside the gates, warning him to reconsider for the sake of the harvest.

On the day the first winter clouds began to conspire and gather in the sky, the viceroy heard the sounds of construction cease and, picturing his neighbors' soon-to-

be-stunned expressions, salivated, eager to flaunt his statue, his massive pine, and the town square. He put on his best shoes and clothes, trimmed his beard, polished his crown, and grabbed an umbrella in the event of inclement weather and kicked open his balcony doors in excitement. “Today is our moment of triumph! Westpine, the aureate city, will have songs and tales and lore dedicated to it for millennia to come!” Silence. The viceroy looked down into the square and saw his people, a hundred-thousand men, women, and children gathered below as usual. All was normal but for their bloated, dead bellies and the viceroy looked up, down, near, and far in shock; the forests were bare but for a handful of stumps, the mountains were broken and wounded, and the air reeked of rotting wheat. The rain began to fall and the heavens wept.