

WEDDING

Laece looked at her reflection and sighed.

"Are you all right Lady?" Ethyne asked from behind her.

Laece looked at her in the mirror as she combed her long, black hair. "I can't believe it's happening. It's like a nightmare."

"Yes, but we knew this day was coming Lady."

"I just thought I had resigned myself to it but now it's here I find that I haven't at all." Laece blinked hard to fight back threatening tears.

Ethyne paused combing and caught Laece's eye in the mirror. "Lady, he's a good man and, although not particularly handsome, at least he's not Prince Mochighe."

Laece managed a weak smile but couldn't contain her grief any longer. Ethyne watched as tears rolled from Laece's large, sky blue eyes, down her cheeks and onto her lap.

"Oh Lady," Ethyne said as she came round to face Laece, "if only there was something more I could do to help." She crouched down and took Laece in her arms. Laece cried into Ethyne's shoulder, her sobs coming freely. Ethyne held her for a while and then gently pushed her back and looked her in the eye. "Come now, Lady, you can't let this get the better of you. You're Princess Laece and one day you'll be Queen but not if you don't get married tomorrow."

"I just so wish I could marry for love like you can."

"But when you're Queen you can have all the lovers you want."

"I only want one," Laece said and she pictured her love in her mind, "but I'll always have to share my bed with Uweniche."

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Oh come now. We both know what men want and there's no way I can refuse my husband."

"There is a way that you won't have to share your bed with him and you won't have to refuse him either."

Laece perked up at the thought of this possibility. "You mean I won't ever have to make love to him?"

"That's right."

"But how?" Laece was intrigued.

"There's someone I know who can help you. He can make a powder that when mixed into drink will make a man unable to perform. If you give it to Uweniche then you won't have to consummate your marriage. Ever!"

"Really?"

"I promise."

"Can you get it for me?" Laece's grief had vanished and she felt hope swell in her heart.

"I can't. He must see you in order to make the powder correctly."

"Well let's go and see him then." Laece stood up, crossed the room and retrieved her cloak.

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Laece watched as the man placed several herbs and other indistinguishable items into a mortar and proceeded to crush them. He had quizzed her at length about herself and Uweniche and she had had to give him a strand of her hair. He had promised her the solution to her problems and she was so excited about it that she could hardly contain herself.

"Will this really work?" Laece whispered to Ethyne.

"Of course it will."

"Ethyne, I can't thank you enough for this. You've saved my life!"

"Hush now and finish your drink."

Laece swallowed the last of her drink and put the mug on the table. She was so ecstatic that she felt dizzy with joy. She watched the man as he ground his pestle into the mortar to crush the ingredients into a fine powder. She was so full of happiness that she felt a little drunk and her vision had begun to swim. Her face flushed and she felt a little too warm. The room before her began to spin and then blackness overtook her.

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Ethyne looked at herself in the mirror as she combed her long, black hair. She studied her new face intently and stared into large, sky blue eyes. She touched the fine fur on her face and admired its silky softness. She stood up and smiled at the figure before her. She was no

longer old and overweight, but young, full of energy with a powerful and sensuous body.

"You are beautiful," she said in a voice she didn't recognise as her own but had heard every day of her life for the past sixteen years, "and you're going to be a Queen."