

Atonement

By Sonia Vlatkovic

I am nobody.

Perhaps a whisper, a garden snake, the wretch who murdered her mother; I am the princess of a sun-ravaged empire and starving people. I am nothing.

My father's words are a poison, tainting my thoughts as his negotiations echo throughout the meeting chamber. I force myself to pay attention, crescents forming on my palms as I dig my nails into my skin.

Listening is a virtue, I remind myself. By listening, I have understood the extent of my powerlessness; by listening, I have realised the deepest reaches of my ambition.

At the sound of an angered cry, I lift my gaze. Father's hands are braced on the desk, his face a furious shade of red as he stares down the ambassador of Frankreich. "My people are starving!" His voice holds a note of despair. "It is only spring. This drought will only worsen with each day."

The ambassador's weathered face is weary, mirroring the tiredness I feel deep in my soul. "Yes, as you've mentioned before," he says, contempt souring his voice. "There is nothing more to discuss."

For the previous four weeks, I have oft heard Father's pleas; they are etched into my mind: *Our people are dying. There is no water. There is no food. Help us. Be charitable!* They circle my mind, useless and unwanted. Our people may be starving, yes, but that means they are desperate. With enough motivation, coercion, manipulation, they could fight a war for us. We would win.

My father intends for me to be a peacekeeper, yet he does not realise I possess the most dangerous mind in this room.

I toy with Mother's necklace, a smile touching my lips as Father's agitation grows. A note is stored within it, inked with her dying words: *Never let them break you*. Her words are an oath, a constant reminder of her unwavering presence guiding me from beyond the physical world.

"Ericka."

Father's voice cuts through me. I jerk to attention, cursing myself for losing focus once more.

"Father?" I dip my head respectfully, schooling my features into neutrality. Apprehension simmers within me. Each week, I am taken here and forgotten – after all, what value can I offer besides expressing peace and beauty?

"Tell me, ambassador, what if we were to bind our nations maritally? A bond of lasting unity and peace... is that not enough to warrant some aid?"

I freeze. His words are not spoken by one, but many; I hear them in the mouths of the nobility, the servants, the rabble, the serfs. The air becomes too dense to breathe, pressing its hands upon my shoulders with the weight of a kingdom.

I have enough sense to stand, tucking my trembling hands in the folds of my skirts as the ambassador's eyes sweep up and down. *Be brave*, I tell myself, *for Mother*. Her necklace, so biting cold against my burning skin, is no longer encouraging. It is a noose around my neck, choking my protests and stealing my breath. I am drifting away.

For so long, I have desired to show my worth. Even now, my heart aches with the hope of not seeing thinly veiled hatred within Father's gaze at the sight of the girl whose very existence killed his wife. I force a calming breath, brushing the necklace. I will suffer bound to an evil nation, secure knowing I am the salvation of Father and his empire; I will suffer knowing Mother's sacrifice was not in vain.

The ambassador barks a disbelieving laugh. "I truly pity you if you think this useless girl is enough to save your nation," he says, disdain dripping from his voice. "You are wasting my time, Kaiser. There is nothing more to discuss."

Shame curdles within me as he sweeps from the room. Silence hangs heavy in the air, festering with each laboured breath huffed from Father's nose.

"You."

I flinch, a doe at the mercy of a beast. Despair gleams behind the anger simmering in Father's gaze; he is a mirror, the patchwork of emotions cast over his face reflecting the storm roiling within my chest.

"This is your fault," he hisses, striding forwards. Wine fouls his breath, its sourness overwhelming my senses. "You are incapable of even being a worthy bride!"

I hear his slap before anything else, its harsh sound a familiar tune as my head jerks back in a blaze of pain. Something sparks within me, thawing the emotions that have been frozen for too long.

"I am more valuable than a bride," I spit. My anger has manifested into a terrible beast, clutching my heart and stifling Mother's guidance. My vision tunnels as I lunge, everything unfolding in a sequence: his dagger's hilt in my hand, then its blade in his heart.

Conviction flickers in my heart where there should be remorse. As his face pales, I rasp, "I will send my beloved brother to war, and then I will command your court. I will surpass what you taught me in strategy"—life trickles from his eyes—"and in victory. At any cost."

He is dead.

Blood stains my fingers, my nails, my dress. Turning away, I unclasp Mother's necklace, pressing my lips to its silver before laying it on Father's chest. "Rest, Mother. I know what to do." I no longer need her guidance. No; now that I have felt the lure of power, I do not intend to let it go.

Father's journal lies open on the table, its pages flecked with red. Sinking into his chair, I thumb to a page untarnished by ink or blood. *Never let them break you*, Mother once said. Only now do I know: the world cannot break me if I break it first.

Raising the quill, I begin to plan.

I was nobody, but now I am everything.

