*Chapter Three—*

“I see that the Madame Presidente has brought her appetite to the office this morning.”

“Don’t get smart with me today, Marta.” Valeria pointed a finger at the portly older woman, “I am not in the mood. I slept like shit last night.”

“Not getting smart, just… commenting.” The older woman said with a click of her tongue as she lifted the lid from Valeria’s platter, “Enjoy your food, Madame.”

“Thank you, Marta.” The younger woman took a deep sigh, “You are dismissed.”

At the behest of her men and her advisors, Valeria had decided to give up smoking. The one vice that she had allowed herself to enjoy.

They had all given her plenty of reasons ranging from the practical, “You want to be around for a long time, correct? Cigarettes kill millions of people each year!” to the vain but useful, “Cigarettes are out now—it is seen as unstylish for world leaders to smoke.” to the *insulting,* “It is unladylike for women to smoke cigarettes. We want the men of this country to see you for what you are, a beautiful woman!”

And while they had all been well-intentioned, the deciding factor had come about when Valeria had wandered down a hall one day to find a portrait of General Pequeño chomping his cigars. Looking down on her with that puckered asshole face and his big, bushy mustache. His jowls bunching hideously into a twisted smile.

The less like him she could be during her tenure as the leader of this country, the better. And that started with the small things.

No matter how rich and smooth the flavor was.

It had only been a week since Valeria had stopped smoking, and she had never been more miserable. She wasn’t sleeping, she couldn’t focus, and she had no idea what to do with her hands. She had found herself sucking on the back of pens, only to remove them in embarrassment when somebody walked into her office to discuss matters of politics.

At least, during breakfast lunch and dinner, she found some reprieve.

“Maybe I’ll get my sense of taste back.” She joked between bites, “I could eat for hours without tasting any of your delicious food, Marta.”

“Don’t kiss up to me now, Madame.” The older woman laughed, “You have been in such a nasty mood that I am the only one brave enough to bring you your meals—don’t get me mistaken for your chef.”

“I have a chef?” Valeria asked incredulously, “It has been a week and I’m just now learning that I have a chef.”

Truthfully, she hadn’t thought much about the food that she had been brought. Between her many meetings with the People’s Liberation Army (though now, she supposed that they were just called The Army) she hadn’t found herself with enough free time to really enjoy it. It was only recently, when her nicotine cravings became especially bad, that she even found herself cleaning the plate to her daily meals.

She supposed now, in hindsight, that it was a good thing that it hadn’t been poisoned…

“You have many such employees at your disposal—most of which were installed by General Pequeño himself.” Marta said with a wise, knowing nod, “I say that not to make you uncomfortable, of course. As long as we continue to get paid, most of us are quite content to serve whomever lives in the mansion.”

Valeria chewed, her caramel-colored cheeks bulging with egg and thick cuts of bacon. While the loose collection of disenfranchised soldiers that had constituted the military had taught her many things, table manners was not among them.

“The people who are bothered by it, though.” Valeria said as sternly as she could with little flecks of egg around her mouth, “Remove them. We will house no traitors in this staff. I can’t be looking over my shoulder constantly to see if a maid is going to knock me over the head with a lamp.”

“I would say that you are in the wrong business then.” Marta smiled before seeing that attempting to reply with humor was misplaced, “But of course, Madame Presidente. I will… keep my ear to the ground for you.”

“See that you do, Marta.” Valeria was cutting into her bacon, “Now please. Leave me to my breakfast.”

As the door shut behind the older woman, Valeria simply felt content at being alone for the brief moment of the day that she could manage it. Before long, her military representatives would be banging at her door. Politicians would be meeting with her, trying to schmooze their way into her good graces. There wouldn’t be a single moment’s peace until that night.

And it would most likely be that way for some time.

Valeria grumbled into her breakfast as she hit the bottom of the plate. Even this small frustration was enough to get her temper rising. At this moment, she would have waged the rebellion all over again for a pack of cigarettes. Maybe even just one.

“Madame Presidente?” the intercom buzzed, “General Santos wishes to speak with you.”

“Tell him that I am quitting smoking and should be allowed to enjoy my breakfast.” Valeria snipped into the intercom as she forced down the button, “I should be ready in… an hour.”

“…Madame.” Her secretary said incredulously, “The General, he—

“Fine, thirty minutes.” Anything to get a little more alone time, “I will meet him in thirty minutes, when I have had my coffee.”

Pushing her empty plate to the side, Valeria put her head in her hands and sighed longingly.

“Marta.” She said in a slightly elevated tone, “Have the chef bring me some more bacon. And a cup of coffee please—black.”

The portly maid stepped back into view, nodded understandingly, and took the Presidente’s empty plate.

“Of course, Madame.” Marta said quietly, “I will make sure that I take my time.”

Valeria offered her first genuine smile of the past few days to the older woman as she left the room, and then breathed deeply as she leaned back in her office chair.

*Chapter Four—*

“If you don’t mind me saying so, it is good that you are finally getting out of those ugly fatigues.”

Style had never been at the forefront of Valeria’s mind. Though most women, even the one in the People’s Liberation Army, at least gave some passing thought to the notion of looking good, Valeria had never been one to care much about physical appearances. The idea of getting dressed up for no reason than the mingle with the rich and famous people of their country seemed a little silly.

“While I wouldn’t dare venture to say that you need to look more womanly…” the Presidente’s disdain for such a notion had become well-known by now, even in town, “It is good to show that you are not all grim, guts, and gunpowder.”

The stylist brought out her measuring tape. Sofia was a younger woman, who had spent much time overseas. One of the “new rich” people that had sprung up during the latter years of Pequeño’s rule and perhaps the most important people to impress if Valeria wanted her rule to have any staying power.

“Now we get your measurements around the waist…”

The roll of fabric tape coiled around Valeria’s waist, cutting into her scarred and naked flesh ever so slightly as the stylist pulled tightly. Loosening up a little to get a more accurate reading, she seemed much less distraught with the final number than the purportedly non-vain Valeria did.

“We can make that number a little smaller.” She said sternly, “It will be incentive for me to drop some of this weight.”

“Nonsense—you are the Madame Presidente!” the stylish young woman said vapidly, “It is normal to enjoy life. Eat what you want, ma’am, you have more than earned it.”

Valeria, who had become so used to suffering, found herself at odds with the idea that she didn’t *have* to be in fighting shape anymore. That the chances of a shell busting through the walls of the Presidential Mansion were growing fewer and fewer by the day. Quitting smoking hadn’t helped her keep from being jumpy either. She hated herself for the little tummy that had grown in the time that it had taken for her to get accustomed to her new abode and responsibility—she wanted to *lose* it, not adorn it in stylish (probably gaudy) clothing.

“I would still like to lose some weight.” The Presidente grumbled as her guest measured her inseam

“And when you do, I will tailor your new clothes so that they fit you.” Sofia said with a smile, “Now, how would we like to dress? For you, I have in mind a very stylish, very *elegant—”*

“A simple pantsuit will do fine.” Valeria groused, “All of the women in American politics, they wear them. On the news as well. I don’t want to look ridiculous.”

“Well that’s… more or less where I was going.” Sofia groused back, “Simple is good, I agree. Fashion is a tool to bring out what the wearer is trying to present to the world. You are a very… utilitarian person. I can work with that.”

“Good—I will feel better about paying you for your work then.” Valeria cracked an awkward smile, “I… apologize, I’m not very good at this. The standing still and holding my arms up.”

“Nobody is, ma’am.” Sofia laughed, “Here, maybe these will help you stay still…”

Sofia ventured over to the ornate wooden chair that had been there in Valeria’s bedroom since she had moved into it. She had brought with her a box of small French bonbons, apparently ones that she had bought especially for her latest client. She came back, clutching the tin with an eager smile on her face.

“Oh no, I don’t think that I should—”

“Nonsense, they’re very good.” The stylist smiles, “We can share.”

“Sofia, I—”

The Presidente had left her mouth open long enough for Sofia to pop one of the small chocolate balls into her unsuspecting mouth. And while anger was her knee-jerk reaction to such an invasion, as soon as she bit down, her facial muscles relaxed as her eyebrows raised in shock.

“Mm… they *are* very good.” She hadn’t tasted chocolate in… how long now? Certainly not *years*, right? “I… suppose that would be alright.”

“It will be our little secret, ma’am. I promise.” Sofia tittered as she picked one up for herself and popped it into her mouth, “Do you want another one?”

“I… don’t see why not. Lunch will not be for a few more hours now…”

“Consider this the real spoils of war. Fine French chocolate and designer clothes.” Sofia smacked her lips as she went back to work making adjustments in her sketchbook, “You will have to be versed in them anyway, hosting foreigners right? Consider this practice!”

“Mhm. Yes. Practice.”

This woman was about as empty-headed as they came. To think that she had come from the same soil as Valeria, who had to work for everything that she had ever gotten in her life. Though she supposed that Sofia was among the people that she and the People’s Liberation Army had been fighting for. The spoiled, vapid city girls were just as important as the farmers’ daughters…

“What do we think?” Sofia asked as she turned her sketchbook around to reveal a rather understated, but undeniably stylish blouse and pantsuit sketched onto a featureless version of Valeria, “I think it’s very powerful. Very elegant.”

“Could we perhaps do it in the colors of the Liberation Army?” Valeria piqued an eyebrow, reaching for another bonbon despite herself, “What I am trying to present to the world is that I am sticking to my promises.”

“Yellow and Blue…” Sofia looked absolutely dejected at having to work with such a horrendous color scheme, “I’ll… see what I can do.”

Perhaps sensing the Presidente’s growing displeasure, Sofia offered her another bonbon.