

Ana Gonzalez

Professor Howe

ENGL 4800W

21 April, 2019

### Relinquish

The weather was overcast and full of gray hues the day the city of Nadezdha was blown to pieces. She remembers that clearly, having remarked on the atmosphere's dreariness to her chambermaid. It was difficult not to notice what the sky looked like when there were exactly three fifteen-foot-tall glass windows just beside her bed. Elzaveta knew that she liked to wake up to sunlight and had pulled back the velvet and maroon curtains as part of the daily morning ritual. At first, she believed that the reason she preferred to awaken to daylight was because she liked the way it gradually pulled her from her dreams. Over time, however, she grew to understand the true reason: she wanted to know that there was indeed a world beyond the iron gates that enclosed her home.

As was protocol, Elzaveta handed her a satin robe for her to get dressed in and swiftly tied her hip-length platinum hair into a tight bun. Dasha had grown close with her assigned chambermaid, having practically grown up together beneath the behemoth roof of the Steel Palace. While it was made clear from the start that the two friends would occupy drastically different roles once they had reached the proper age, both girls formed a bond amidst their lessons. Elzaveta was one of the only servants who knew of Dasha's crass, witty nature.

"My scalp's going to come off if you keep this up," Dasha quipped as she stared at her pale face in the golden vanity. Elzaveta let out a chortle, wrinkles forming beneath her crystal

blue eyes. “Oh dear, that’d be quite the spectacle.” The two girls laughed aloud and continued to trade jabs until at last, Dasha’s hair had been sculpted to perfection.

“Your carriage is ready, by the way,” Elzaveta said with a smile. Immediately, Dasha shot to her feet. “Already? You’re joking, right?” The chambermaid shook her head. “It’s waiting in the garden plaza. The driver’s ready to go when you are.” Excitement burst through Dasha’s veins at the prospect of stepping beyond the palace’s perimeter. She was only granted one day of travel per month as decreed by her mother and she treasured every minute she had to explore. “You truly are the best!” Dasha declared as she ran to her wardrobe to prepare.

Ten minutes later, Dasha was running down the gargantuan halls of the palace. Above her, banners of maroon and gold flowed between the rafters in steep waves, the gray light of the day reflecting off of the many troughs. The tail of her turquoise gown seemed to float behind her as she sprinted towards the south door. Dasha knew well that running within the Steel Palace was a rule strictly enforced by the other servants, but on days like these, they knew that any attempt to slow her down was fruitless.

Dasha burst through the heavy doors, half relieved that her mother hadn’t caught her erratic running. The Queen was a strict woman of forty-two years who hardly smiled or showed any other emotion while in the presence of others. Dasha herself couldn’t remember a time in her life when the monarch had broken her blank façade. However, Dasha could somewhat understand why. If anyone were to lead the world’s largest faction, then it had to be her mother. The Queen knew military strategies, was an expert in international negotiations, and had a will as tough as the iron that surrounded her abode. Despite recognizing the gravity of her parent’s duties, Dasha still yearned for some sort of deeper connection with her mother.

The carriage was painted in a sleek coat of maroon and the crest of The Prime, made up of a six-pointed star and a circle of spikes, was outlined in gold on both sides. Dasha wore the same crest on the back of her petticoat and even the strong horses at the front of the carriage sported the insignia on their eye-covers.

“Good morning, Printessa,” a croaking voice said. Dasha halted before the carriage steps and saw one of her servants, Andrei, sitting cross-armed inside. She never liked Andrei personally. They did not grow up together like she did with Elzabeta, but she was certain the reason why she disliked him was due to his rule-bound disposition. His loyalty to the Queen’s laws made him especially unpleasant to travel with on city excursions. Across from him, to Dasha’s relief, sat a much more welcoming face. Valentin was a much kinder servant, one who understood her love for exploration and was supportive of her interests beyond the palace. Dasha gave a quick wave to Valentin and entered the carriage, the driver closing the door behind her. After settling into her seat, Dasha heard the crack of a whip and felt the carriage lurch forwards.

“You make it abundantly clear that you don’t enjoy traveling,” Dasha stated, looking at Andrei’s sour expression. “Why accompany me then? There are many others who would enjoy the trip instead of sulking around like you.”

Valentin let out a suppressed chuckle beside her. Andrei puffed out his chest in defiance. “As decreed by the Queen, I am to accompany you always when you travel beyond the castle grounds.” Dasha rolled her eyes. “Always with the rulebook.” Andrei snorted and narrowed his eyes. “Better it be me to keep you in check than your mother. We both know that.”

“Now, now, let’s to ruin the ride,” Valentin’s softer voice chimed in. “We have a long way to go. Let’s all try to be as civil as possible.” His lips widened into a smile. “At least until we’re not all in such an enclosed space.” Andrei scoffed but relented, slouching back into the

white cushions behind him. Dasha let out a loud sigh and looked outside to watch the massive firs slowly float by.

For about a half hour, Dasha and Andrei traded petty insults at each other with Valentin continuously attempting to keep the peace. The arguments were about the usual: The Queen's responsibilities, their position within the war, Dasha's duties as the one next in line for the throne.

"I don't understand how I'm supposed to rule over people if I don't even know how they live," Dasha snapped towards the end of the trip. "Journeying outside of the Steel Palace is incredibly dangerous, even within The Prime," Andrei responded matter-of-factly. "We cannot trust anyone, not when you are the heir to the faction."

"What he means to say, Printessa," Valentin began, "is that you are incredibly important and we do not want to see you hurt."

Dasha turned away towards the carriage window again as the answer she's heard all her life was reiterated to her once again. Her position as the future Queen was drilled into her mind ever since she began her decorum lessons within the palace. Suddenly, there was a logical reason for her extremely sheltered life; why servants had to follow her wherever she went, why she could barely venture beyond the grounds, why Elzabeta and Valentin could never truly be her friends. "A ruler does not need friends," her mother had once told her years ago. "She only needs allies."

Dasha was so lost in her sea of discontented thoughts that she did not realize that they had crossed into the city's grounds until she saw an old merchant carrying fish around in a woven basket. Her eyes lit up as she marveled at the mazes of cobblestone streets, the towering buildings (albeit not nearly as tall as the palace), and the horde of people dressed in all matter of

colors bustling around with their goods. It appeared that the carriage had entered a marketplace of sorts and the hours of trade were underway. Dasha had picked this city specifically to see this phenomenon with her own eyes, although she could not recall the name of the settlement in the middle of her intrigue.

“How filthy,” Andrei muttered as he too looked outside. “How can they stand to walk around in such tattered shoes? They surely do not know how to clothe themselves.”

Dasha suddenly became very conscious of her dress. She felt absolutely comfortable in the layers of satin and cloth, her feet shielded in pristine black shoes and white arm-length gloves molding her hands and elbows. She looked at the attire of her two servants and noticed how bright the brass buttons on both of their maroon tunics seemed to glow even in the somber daylight.

“They seem happy enough to me,” Dasha responded, her face hardening as guilt began to manifest itself in her chest.

“Because they do not know any better.” Andrei uttered back, now looking at her with his beady black eyes.

“They are citizens of The Prime, are they not?” Dasha’s voice grew louder. “They are my subjects and they deserve my respect regardless of how they wear their clothes.” She forced herself to keep staring at the window in a desperate attempt to keep her anger under control.

“Ah, so now you act like a Printessa.” Andrei declared. “Seems like you follow your mother’s rules whenever it suits you best.”

With that venomous remark, Dasha whirled her head around, her eyes alight with vexation. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Valentin leaned towards her, palms turned upward in a pleading manner. “Printessa, Andrei is being rude. Please, do not mind-.”

Dasha held up a single index finger and Valentin retreated to his regular position at her side. She could feel his uncertainty, but despite knowing that he meant well, Dasha had had enough. Lowering her hand, she looked Andrei square in the face.

“My mother may be the one in charge but her laws do not tie me down,” Dasha spat. “No matter what kind of role I am meant to fulfill, what I decide to do and not do is my decision alone.”

Andrei let out a loud laugh at this. “Printessa, your mother is the Queen. Whether or not you agree with her is not up to you. We are all loyal to her and should follow her accordingly. We cannot afford any tomfoolery within The Prime’s ranks, not even from you.”

Dasha leaned forwards, her hands beginning to tremble. The guilt growing within her from before forced all her misgivings to be pulled to the forefront of her mind. Her distant relationship with her parent. How she would never have friends. Her destiny to become yet another ruler in an endless chain of stonehearted monarchs without passion or happiness. It was as if something had clicked and Dasha felt a wave of emotion wash over her body.

One side of the carriage dipped into a small hole within the road before Dasha spoke up once again.

“If being an heir means that I cannot understand more about the world around me nor sympathize with those I command, then perhaps-.” She stopped short, hesitant to voice the concern that had slowly been festering within her the past few years. The restricted freedom. The relationships that were predetermined for her. At that moment, within the confines of the carriage, Dasha vocalized her deepest and most polarizing conviction.

“Then perhaps I am not meant to be a printessa.”

A shock swept the inside of the carriage. Andrei stared at her with his mouth agape and eyes open in surprise. Even Valentin’s usually calm demeanor was warped by his bewilderment. Dasha felt both pain and relief as the words spilled out of her mouth. Tears stung the corners of her eyes but she forced them back. After a moment of complete silence, Andrei quietly spoke.

“What do you mean by that?”

Dasha stared down at her gloved hands with gritted teeth. Too many things were swirling around in her head. The veins in her face and ears pounded as her heart rate increased. She could feel the inside of the carriage spinning but she forced her eyes closed in an attempt to regain control. Now that she had voiced her greatest worry, it was as if the statement itself had become truth. Suddenly, Dasha couldn’t help but think of all the times she’d felt isolated and unhappy. How she’d choked on her unhappiness in order to please those around her. How she looked at her mother with saccharine expressions and declared that she knew what was expected of her.

Her feelings rushed every nerve in her body. Dasha raised her head and, looking in no direction in particular, repeated her words louder.

“MAYBE I’M NOT MEANT TO BE A DAMNED-.”

This is the part of Dasha’s memory that she could not quite piece together, not even today.

There was a deafening noise and for a moment, Dasha thought Andrei had erupted in a fit of rage and had lunged forward from his seat to reprimand her. But this couldn’t be so. The sound she had heard then sounded like one of the military jets The Prime commanded when it was piercing the air. It was quick, sharp, and absolutely brutal.

A few seconds after every person within the carriage heard the noise, the carriage spilt apart. The cushions exploded into tufts of cotton and the wood that made up the carriage's skeleton tore and twisted in a horrendous cacophony. Dasha felt herself fly into the air and see the clouds above her as the roof was ripped open. She heard the horses cry out in a panic, the driver's frantic shouts, and the yells and screams of the city-folk before she felt cobblestone smack the side of her head.

\* \* \*

The taste of ash on her tongue brought Dasha back to consciousness. She found herself to be laying on her back, her clothing ripped at the seams and her arms cut and oozing droplets of blood. One of her eyes was stinging and from the heat emanating from the surrounding skin, she concluded that part of her face was badly scrapped. As she forced herself to sit up to fish out the ashes among her teeth, she took in her desolate surroundings. The crowd of people she had marveled at before was completely gone. She could see or hear no one else. There was debris everywhere, mostly from buildings that were now toppled over and destroyed. The smell of fresh earth and dust seeped into Dasha's lungs, causing her to double over and cough.

Valentin and Andrei were nowhere to be found. The driver was also missing. Dasha tried to stand up to look for them, for anyone, but a pain shot up her right leg and she was forced to sit down again. Fearfully pulling back the edge of her dress, she saw her right foot twisted in an unusual angle. The anklebone jutted outwards and was swollen into a large half sphere. She must have been injured while she was still unconscious.

Fighting back tears and sobs of anguish, Dasha willed herself to her feet. She hobbled painfully over to one of the damaged buildings, careful to not lean her full weight on the walls out of fear that they would topple too.



For what seemed like hours, Dasha slowly made her way through the city, taking in the ruins of the once mesmerizing settlement. She spotted the carcass of one of the carriage horses, its head smashed beneath a pile of stone and brick. Dasha whimpered at the sight, sorry that such a beautiful animal had passed in such a way.

As she continued on, she noticed that there were also human bodies buried beneath the rubble. Once she saw the first few pairs of hands and feet, Dasha turned away and tried to focus on returning back to the palace. She knew that she would not be able to keep moving if she let the severity of the destruction sink its horrific fangs into her psyche. Still, with every still cadaver that made its way into her peripheral vision, another boiling tear cascaded down her cheeks.

She reached an alleyway between two buildings she deemed to still be sturdy enough and collapsed, exhausted, mortified, and afraid. The pain in her damaged foot that she had suppressed up to that point had grown into a searing hot sensation that pulsed through her entire limb like an electric current. She knew that if she did not find help soon, then the stress she had put upon it up to that point would be too much for the foot to be saved. Just as she had feared, her morale nosedived and she heard herself wail into the silence.

It took her some time to notice the sound of shuffling as she had buried her face into her still-bleeding arms, effectively hindering her ability to perceive her surroundings. It was only when she heard the whisper of a human voice that she looked up in fright.

There, just some yards away from her curled up body was a woman, badly hurt around her stomach and quivering with every step forward she took. Bruises lined her bare legs and part of her brown hair was matted and damp. Dasha was shocked to be looking at someone alive and

could only stare in awe as the woman continued to approach her. Then, with a voice as soft as air, the woman spoke.

“Child,” she mumbled. “Please, my child.”

Dasha looked at the woman confused, unsure if she was referring to herself or if the woman was looking for her kin. The heir was about to speak when the woman reached around behind her and seemed to unwrap something from behind her back. A surge of fear erupted in Dasha’s chest, her mind wildly thinking that the woman had gone insane and was pulling out a weapon to harm her. She felt a terrified cry escape her throat and she held her hands out defensively.

It was only after the woman pulled a woven lump from behind her that Dasha understood what the woman had been saying. There, tucked within an orange and yellow blanket, was a child no older than a few months, deep in sleep. Dasha could not believe her eyes. The boy’s head was so impossibly small, his cheeks flush pink and bits of ashes were stuck within his black tufts of hair.

“My child,” the woman moaned, falling to her knees. She cradled the bundle in her forearms, jaggedly rocking her son back and forth. “Please, please...”

With trembling arms, the woman held him out to Dasha. She in turn carefully took the baby in her own arms, still entranced by the boy’s serene face. Tears began to fall in greater numbers from her eyes, some of them dripping onto the child’s blanket and skin. The boy let out a soft coo and slowly opened his eyes. Dasha let out a gasp when she saw two vibrant green orbs stare back into hers.

Dasha kept looking downwards at the child, feeling herself gradually relax as she rocked the blanket between her elbows slowly. The boy had fallen back asleep by the time she heard a familiar voice ring out.

“Printessa! Where are you?! Answer me, Printessa!”

Dasha’s head snapped up as she heard Andrei’s yells in the distance. Her eyes continued to widen as she heard drone of Prime aircraft somewhere beyond and the marching of foot soldiers thunder closeby.

“Printessa?!”

Dasha looked down at the tiny boy in her arms. He was still asleep. Suddenly, she remembered the woman, having been so caught up in the miracle she was holding to turn back to his mother.

“Ma’am, your boy-.” Dasha stopped speaking when she looked up and beheld an empty alleyway. The child’s parent was nowhere to be seen.

With another barrage of cries from Andrei in addition to the shouting from the approaching horde of soldiers, Dasha forced herself to her feet, fighting against the pain tormenting her leg. With the little boy still safely nestled in the woven blanket, she stepped out of the dark alleyway and back into the obliterated streets.