

NEO

Prologue

The Marriage Rite

I shiver with anxiety in bare feet and a white slip dress while a statuesque woman the family calls Mayte arranges a variety of candles and crosses on a table covered in a white tablecloth and two shallow vases of simple white flowers. This isn't at all how I imagined my wedding day if that's what you can even call this. This is like no wedding I've ever seen.

There's no pomp and circumstance.

No music.

No joy.

I'm marrying a dangerous man I don't love but am inexplicably attracted to, in front of a room full of equally menacing people who assert that this is a union which has been in the making for twenty-five years—the marriage rite.

It feels more like a calculated business transaction, but I'm quickly realizing that this wedding, this union between us, is like most things I've encountered since I've entered the secretive world of the Valencias.

The rules here are different.

Or maybe that's the point.

With these kinds of people, there are no rules.

When my betrothed, Neo Valencia, silently saunters into the room in his custom fit three-piece black suit and slightly unbuttoned white silk collared shirt it takes everything in me to remind myself that he's someone to avoid and not ogle. Unfortunately, his heated stare almost unravels the last bit of reserve I have left.

"Azul."

I've always hated that my name is Blue and my guess is that some lazy social worker named me that because of the blanket I was wrapped in when someone left me on the steps of The Holy Trinity Church. But when Neo greets me by name in the simple but bass heavy Spanish that he sometimes uses, the weight of

his voice completely bottoms out the room and everyone responds to my name with rapt attention...especially me.

"Neo."

"Ready?" he asks with a wicked grin.

Unbeknownst to me, it has long been my destiny to be joined in matrimony with this ruthless Valencia prince. It seems pretty ironic seeing how I've always ended up with the wrong men, but I think this time it's different.

Neo is nothing like my ex.

He doesn't hurt me to control me.

"Sure," I glance up at him with the most unsure expression ever.

Mayte is a short and stocky woman who whispers in Spanish what I think is a prayer, then forcibly clasps our wrists together and binds them with a white satin ribbon as the spectators watch with bated breath. The people in this room could buy and sell me a hundred times over, but it's as if they think something about this union will solve all of their problems.

The pressure of the moment builds.

What the hell am I doing?

A week ago I was cleaning houses for seven bucks an hour.

Today I'm standing in a thousand-dollar designer dress.

Tomorrow I will be Mrs. Neo Valencia. The wife of a man who is heir to a house of power, lies and secrets but also someone who can help me find what I've been looking for my entire life.

My family.

It is the only reason why I'm still here.

I realize that Mayte is staring at me, waiting for me to respond to something she asked.

"I'm sorry what?"

"Do you accept the terms of this rite?"

"Terms?"

"That you'll do basically anything he tells you to do," his sister Luna blurts out from a distance.

"Luna," her mother admonishes her. "Shut your mouth."

"To hell with the patriarchy!" She chants raising her fist in the air.

Neo gives his little sister a quick and dirty look of warning, one I'm sure she's been given before because she quickly folds her lithe body back into her chair and quiets down. The room isn't fazed by the brief interruption though, as they all wait patiently for my answer so that the ceremony can continue.

For a brief moment I think of Ben.

"I accept," I croak, knowing that I've just possibly made an arrangement with satan himself.

But that's the thing about karma, it can show up in various forms and faces, but today I guess it looks like this.

Today, karma looks fucking fantastic.

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