

I. A Royal Challenge

Princess Eloise was heir to heaven's throne, upon which no king or queen had ruled for many years. Her suitors were great in number, but the princess' beauty was greater: her eyes were as radiant as the sun, and her silver hair, which had never been cut, flowed about her frame like a rushing river's current. Marriage would signify the beginning of her reign as queen. Whoever shared her hand would rule as king beside her.

In truth, the princess did not wish to wed. She took solace in her beauty and desired to share it with none, fearing both the responsibilities of the throne and her suitors' intentions. Thus, the princess swore that she would marry no suitor save the one who proved himself the most humble and creative among the gods. She had also resolved that no god would ever claim her heart. That was hers and hers alone to give.

For six years, the gods toiled in vain. For six years, the princess endured the gods' incessant wooing as they wove tapestries of gold, sang epic songs of poetry, and performed incredible feats of strength. But the princess judged each god too prideful in his creations or too dull in his humility. All who endeavored to win her hand found the challenge impossible.

Then, in the seventh year, a final suitor approached heaven's throne and announced his intentions. This suitor was Isolee, a respected sculptor whose craft knew no equal. He stood shorter than all the other gods, and Princess Eloise did not find his appearance comely. She would have turned him away if not for the sculptor's candor.

"Fair princess," Isolee began, kneeling. "Your beauty is known throughout heaven, as are the works of my hands. To deny as much in the name of humility would belie the truth. And in truth, you have been beset by suitors these past six years. As I undertake your challenge, I make this promise: if you do not waste my time, I shall not waste yours."

"Arise, respected sculptor, and explain yourself."

"Judge me as I labor, princess. Watch my hands carefully and dismiss them as soon as their work displeases you. Do not wait until I have spent my last breath in vain."

The sculptor's words pleased Princess Eloise, so she granted his

request.

“Your candor commends you, as does your wisdom,” she replied. “I will hold us both accountable to your promise.”