

A Fist of Iron

By Arindown R.

I had to be an Emperor like my father.

I had to be strong.

I stood in front of the window, overlooking a city bathed in morning light. In every window scarlet banners flew. On the street a tide of people moved, coming to celebrate.

To celebrate me.

I inhaled a breath, gripping the edge of my robe with thin fingers. I had to be what they expected. I had to put on the mask of confidence. Maybe someday I might become what I pretended.

I *had* to be the legend my father was.

“Your Imperial Majesty...” I heard one of the courtiers behind me. He paused. “I’m... sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

I stayed facing the window, too afraid that if I turned, he would read the fear. “Speak,” I tried to sound commanding, the way my father had. It sounded weak.

“Your Imperial Majesty, we are ready sir.” I heard a rustle as he bowed. “We wait your command.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t move, waiting for him to leave.

“Sir?” He asked hesitantly.

I rested both hands on the windowsill, trying to breath evenly. *Why am I afraid?* “You are dismissed.”

He bowed again, leaving.

“Be the man you need to be,” I whispered to myself. “Be a king, Travion. Be strong.”

I tried to recall every piece of advice my father had given before his death. Every time he had paused, his forceful gaze looking into mine, and told me how to be a leader.

“*Strength*,” I could still hear his firm voice in my head, still feel the pressure of his hand, a hand that had gripped both sword and sceptre. “*Strength Travion*,” he said, “*is a fist of iron*.”

I sucked in a long breath, curling my own hands into fists. “Fist of iron.” I repeated. *Fist of iron*.

That was my mask. Strength and confidence.

I would be an Emperor with an iron fist, worthy of my father’s crown, of his legacy.

I would be strong.

I tried to stand tall. Turning, I crossed the room, entered the hall, where courtiers attended.

“This way, your Majesty.” One motioned me down another hall. Soldiers waited at the end, inside the great door. They saluted, reaching to pull the door open.

Strong.

The door swung open. Blinding daylight streamed down. Through it, I got my first glimpse of the carpet, stretching up to the throne dais. Thousands of people crowded the edges of the walkway. Townsfolk, knights, nobles, their eyes on me, watching.

All expecting.

I stepped back. I couldn’t do it. What if they saw past my mask? Saw the fear?

“Sir?” someone whispered cautiously.

I blinked, and straightened. *Be a King, Travion. Be strong*. I stepped forward, out into the light.

The crowd murmured, throwing leaves and flower petals in front of me. I couldn't look at them. Couldn't let them know.

I kept my eyes on the throne, the priest standing beside it. The people were a cloud of color, surging, shifting. Their voices a rush of wind, passing over me. I couldn't catch the words in it.

I stopped at the dais, forcing myself to breath. The priest stepped forward. The square hushed as I knelt.

"Your Imperial Majesty, Prince Travion," the priest said, loud enough that his voice echoed. "Are you willing to take this Oath?"

Under the robe, my shoulders were sweating. *Strong.* "I...I am willing," I said.

"Will you swear then," he laid his hand on my head, "to rule over this Empire and this people in justice and dignity, with a heart of mercy?"

Justice. Dignity. Mercy. I opened my mouth to answer, but my father's voice cut through my thoughts. "*Mercy,*" he said, "*is a crutch for the weak.*" I stared at the hem of the priest's mantel, my false confidence fading.

"Tyrant!" A voice broke out from the crowd. "Tyrant!"

Surprise rippled through the square. I heard the bark of a commander, and the clank of metal as soldiers moved.

I shifted, looking over my shoulder.

"Tyrant!" the man shouted, shoving his way nearer. Guards stepped up beside me, swords drawn. The crowd parted for soldiers.

“You’re a tyrant! Just like your father!” he shouted. His arms and shoulders were covered with scars from whippings. His face disfigured from beatings. Soldiers grabbed him, twisting his arms behind his back.

“Tyrant!” He screamed again, thrashing. They held him down, pressing a sword against his back. He became silent.

The priest cleared his throat, going on. “Prince Travion,” his voice rose, “will you swear then to rule over this Empire and this people in Justice and Dignity, with a heart of mercy?”

The crowd waited.

My hand clasped the cold metal of the broach at my throat. *Tyrant*. The cry rang through my head.

“*Strength is a fist of iron,*” my father’s words came again.

“No.” I whispered back. “No, it’s not.”

My father’s fist hadn’t been strength, it had been tyranny. A tyranny that had crushed the hearts of his people. *My people*.

“Sir?” The priest leaned closer. “Are you alright, sir?”

I pulled my fingers away from the broach. I could never be the Emperor my father was. I *chose* not to be the Emperor my father was.

“I swear.” I said, then louder, “I swear.”

“And will you, the people, take His Majesty, Prince Travion as your Emperor, and serve him with willing hearts?” the priest shouted, taking my father’s crown, raising it high.

There was a moment of silence. Then, “Long live the Emperor!”

He placed the crown on my head, it was heavier than I had expected. I stood.

I let go of the mask of fear. I held my hand out toward the soldiers. “Release him.” It wasn’t commanding, just merciful. But if mercy was a crutch, I would use it to stand.

“Long live the Emperor!” The crowd pushed closer. The sky rained flowers and leaves through sunlight.

Strong.

For the first time, I believed it.