

Dear Mother and Father,

I write this with my own hand, although there are servants here whose script is far more beautiful. I wanted to reassure you that I am comfortable here. How could I be otherwise? When I mentioned in passing that I had slept unwell, that night a matron came to my chamber and lay down first, so that the sheets might be warm and smell of a mother's comfort. There are servants to massage my arms and back should they become sore, servants to wash my feet when they are warm, to style my hair in any fashion, should I desire it. There are servants whose sole purpose is to be available for entertaining conversation. In the most discrete fashion possible, that bed-warming matron let it be known that she could sit by my side, stroke my head and speak pleasingly of trifles until I drifted off.

The palace is unimaginably beautiful, and carries its grace like a shaken fist. I find myself in the Hall of Statues when my time is my own. It is immense. I have wandered there for hours and seen only a fraction of what's there, the cream of The Empire's artistic plundering mixed with the flattering stone portraits of courtiers long forgotten. It is the same with the fountains, with the paintings, with the gardens. The palace is a city of opulence built around one woman. Any conceivable luxury is available, that she might have the option. When she chooses not to exercise those options, we are next in line.

You may question why your lovely daughter left Pahar for a life of total obedience, even unto the sharing of chewed food. There are some here who are fanatics - willing and even eager to martyr themselves for The Empress. Others serve out of pride, happy to know that servants quake when they pass and will spring to honor their lightest whim. But for me... I had to know. The Empress is as good a ruler as any other, and I have long prided myself on my skill with the sword. But at the bottom of it, I had gained inklings of what the Crimson Guard was doing with their enchantment and I just had to learn the truth of it myself.

I wish you would come and visit me, or even stay here - one of my fellow guards has nearly thirty members of his extended family living in the palace on his stipend. But I understand if you do not. Please write me, even if you cannot bear to look on what I have become.

Your loving daughter,

Eria