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The Trials and
Tribulations of
My Next Life as a
Noblewoman

MARRIED AND OFF TO THE
FRONTIER!



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Reinald

Second son of Marquis Rodenwald. A gentleman of exquisite good looks and one proposed fiancé for Karen.

Achim

Karen's older brother's bodyguard and foster brother.


Gerda

(Lady Saburova)

Karen's eldest sister and firstborn daughter of the Kirsten family. Married to the king.

Karen

The main character. Reborn as the second daughter of the Kirstens, a middle-class noble family. Her mother is soon to forget her existence entirely...



The Trials and Tribulations of My
Next Life as a Noblewoman 1

Characters

Kamil, the Conrad Margrave

Elderly lord of the frontier,
living quietly out of the
public eye. A proposed
fiancé for Karen.

Nico

Karen's personal
attendant.

Sven

Son of Doctor Emma,
and the Conrad
Margrave's heir.

Wendel

Doctor Emma's
adopted son.

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1: So I'm Reborn, Now What?

Stories about being reincarnated in another world were all the rage. Tales in which the main characters get up to all sorts of wild adventures. And just like everyone else, I enjoyed them too.

But let's get to the point.

I, too, was reborn, though not in the way I would have hoped. I did not die of overwork, nor in an accident, nor in an effort to protect another...rather, I simply neglected my own health. If I'm being honest, when I thought of the people I'd left behind I wanted to tear my own hair out, but regardless, I was reincarnated. The memories of my new life began with my very first cries.

Which brings us to my birth.

So I'm reborn, now what?

Um, aren't I supposed to get some kind of revelation before the rebirth? Given a duty or something...?

My first thought was "Where am I?"

I couldn't move freely, and I couldn't see clearly. Nonetheless, somehow I knew that this place was not familiar. In contrast to my bewildered confusion were the happy couple overjoyed at the birth of me, their child. The man praised his wife. The woman, though still in somewhat of a daze, shivered with elation and wept at the sight of their adorable new daughter.

While my vision and hearing were still hazy, what with me being a newborn and all, I still understood all the same that this was a joyous occasion. The sight of the couple brought warmth to my heart. "Aw, how wonderful," I thought, as though the scene were not something I myself were a part of.

My mother then brought her face close and spoke to me. I was powerless and could do nothing but watch and listen.

"XXXX, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX."

It was then I thought to myself, “Oh? Why don’t I understand anything she just said?” I could hear both of my parents, and the importance of the moment was not lost on me, but I did not have the slightest clue as to what they were saying.

This was around the time that it *really* began to dawn on me that I had been reincarnated. I was originally born and raised in Japan. I was single, in my thirties, and I didn’t have any friends or acquaintances overseas. If I did, I’m sure I would have enjoyed my life more.

I thought for a while, then I slept. I drank my mother’s breast milk, and then I slept some more. Some days later, I arrived at a conclusion.

Oh, I’ve been reborn in an entirely different world.

From then on, I did my utmost. I did the very best I could manage, though in hindsight, I think it would have been better to simply have done nothing out of the ordinary. I was quick to stand to my feet with support, and I had no strong dislikes. Both my parents and grandparents were delighted with my growth, but their happiness only made me more fearful. What worried me most was their language and how unique it was. The pronunciation was strange and unlike Japanese or English.

Father, mother, big brother, big sister.

I could understand that much, but I knew that actually *speaking* would prove difficult. Now, you may be thinking that I was an adult in an infant’s body and that I was immersed in the language. “*With some study, surely you’d get a grasp of how the language works,*” you say.

If only it were that simple.

I was in my thirties. My *thirties*! Now, I realize that’s still considered the realm of the young—at least where the elderly are concerned—but it’s not like I was a teenager. My brain was somewhat stuck in its ways. I had only ever been able to speak Japanese. Tackling a whole new language was not so easy a task.

I had intended for my first word to be “mama,” but had instead called my mother by her actual name. I’d mimicked the sounds of what my father called her, thinking it would make her happy; I hadn’t expected that we’d kick things

off on a first-name basis. In Japan, parents call each other “papa” and “mama” respectively. It was a mistake to think it would work the same way in this world. In this way, I began my new life, making lots of these kinds of errors as I did my best to play the part of a child.

Now, let’s skip ahead to when I was fourteen, and my mother forgot me completely. This, I must say, was rather horrible. The worst part of it all was how quickly it happened. It was almost laughable. I was met by our servants when I returned home from visiting one of my few friends. Our family was middle-class, but nobles all the same, and we had servants boarding with us.

“My lady,” said one, “your uncle and aunt are here.”

“They are? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Their arrival was rather sudden. A hastily arranged meeting, it would seem. They’re with the rest of the family.”

“Mother and father will be mad if I don’t at least say hello. I’ll be with them in a moment.”

I was a well-behaved girl, so I made sure to wash my hands and ensure that my appearance was prim and proper before gently knocking on the door. This kind of thing was indeed the very height of bothersome for me, but to ensure a future in which I was free to do as I wished, leaving a good impression on my relatives was a must. And for all my complaints, it wasn’t like I ever had to do any chores, like cleaning or the laundry. In any case, I entered the room with a smile befitting my fourteen years.

My mother took one look at me and was utterly bewildered.

“And who might you be?” she asked.

Naturally, everyone at first thought she was joking. However, their amusement quickly turned to panic when they realized she was entirely serious. Everyone was worried as to whether or not she was okay. Her condition, such as it was, did not improve. My older brother, older sister, and younger brother all took me in their arms.

“What are you saying, mother? She’s our little sister, Karen,” said my older sister.

“Daughter?” replied my mother. “I only have one daughter, and that’s you, Gerda.”

“Father, something’s wrong with mother!”

“How could you say such a thing to your own mother?!” barked my father.

It was like something out of a stage play. My mother was taken to the doctor, and we, her children, were left as our relatives approached, one after the other, to offer hugs and kind words. Among all the consolations and promises that everything was going to be okay, I felt some relief at the fact that I was an adult in a child’s body.

I mean, if a *child* was completely forgotten by her own mother? That’s a guaranteed recipe for trauma. But being who I really was, I could take it all in the way one might a dramatic performance. It came as a shocking surprise, yes, but I still didn’t even really know where I was. That and the fact I had a mother in Japan brought me a little solace.

And yet life still had more surprises in store for me. *Far more.*

As it turned out, I was not my father’s child.

I skipped straight to the reveal there, but let me explain it from the beginning. It began with my mother’s selective amnesia. How, or why, it happened, we didn’t know. But what we *did* know was that all her memories related to me were gone. She no longer had a daughter by the name of Karen. In her mind, her children consisted only of my two older siblings and my younger brother. My family was thrown into a pitiful confusion. Desperate to spark my mother’s memories, everyone searched through the house for items of sentimental value.

One day, amid such a search, a letter was discovered hidden in the depths of a closet. Upon closer inspection, my father found that it was addressed to a man. It turned out that the letter was proof of my mother’s extramarital affair. When my father went to my uncle for advice, the man flew into a rage. He promptly made the incident his own business and tracked down the man in question. During the interrogation, the suspect admitted to having had a brief affair with my mother.

Naturally, my mother underwent a similar interrogation, and while she did somewhat vaguely admit to the tryst, she *still* did not know who I was. However, the more they investigated, the more a truth came to light that none wanted very much to even consider. In the end, I was not my father's child. The timing of my conception and birth didn't add up, and more to the point, I had inherited all of the physical traits unique to my mother's partner in crime. It was thus concluded that I was indeed not my father's child.

And perhaps, you'd think, this is where it ends.

Oh, you hapless fools; the confusion and chaos were so very far from over.

The matter should have ended with my parents, but it spread to the rest of the family, by way of gossipy servants. Gerda, my older sister, was aghast. My relationship with my brothers also grew strained, and our home was thrown into panic. As a result, my father expelled me from the family and pushed me onto my real father. He didn't really have any other choice. Though he had raised me since birth and he loved me regardless of the fact that we weren't related, the rest of the family wouldn't stand for my continued existence.

After all, we were members of the nobility, and relatives to the Dunsts, a most distinguished family. On both my father's and mother's sides, our relatives were fastidious and scrupulous about all matters and, unbeknownst to me at the time, my grandparents visited often. My mother's memories looked unlikely to return, and as such I disturbed the natural order of things by simply existing. My father was at his wits' end.

And so it happened! A plan to remove that which was stained! She who sullied the family name! The misfortune that befell me yet knew no end!

My *real* father was the son of a gardener. He was a man who, by that point in his life, was married with children of his own. I was thrust upon him along with a sum of money, but all the same I was unwanted. The man himself was humiliated, and his wife and children were enraged. Oh, how I lamented my circumstances. If only my mother had chosen a nobleman for her tryst; perhaps then I might have found myself in a more favorable situation.

"Well, whatever," I had thought. "Once you hit rock bottom, the only way left to go is up."

I knew that, at the very least, things were not so dire that I would have to resort to selling my own body. I was glad then for my thirty years of prior life experience and my passion for life.

My father (the real one) rented me a room in a shared residence. In Japan, you would call it an apartment. My neighbors were, by and large, women. You see, one of the positive aspects of being born in this new nation in this new fantasy world was that the women were afforded the independence to live and work on their own. A great number of the men also showed women a good deal of respect, to boot.

That said, it wasn't nearly as safe as my previous home of Japan, which I suppose simply goes without saying. As for exactly *how* unsafe the place was, if a woman went wandering on her own outside of the country, it was all too easy to imagine her being robbed, raped, and ultimately sold off. And if you were murdered for wandering off the beaten path, you wouldn't get any sympathy; if you weren't traveling with protection, then you essentially got what you asked for. The cities and towns were safe, of course, but the truth of the matter was that there were a lot of dangerous people about. It paid to protect yourself.

When I'd been reborn, I'd wanted to work out why, but considering the meaning of my life was the very least of my worries once I was living on my own. Matters of the mind and spirit are best addressed when one has a certain stability in their life, and with my constantly being moved here and there, I was constantly left playing catch-up.

That brings us here, to where our story begins. It was spring, and I was sixteen years old. I'd been living on my own for two years, and I now found myself sitting at a table in a classroom, pen gripped tightly in hand as I moaned over what to do. My friend Ernesta peered down at me.

"Karen," she said. "What's got you so worried? What's the point of a pretty face when you're scrunching it up like that?"

"Will you hear me out, Ern?" I asked. "I can't decide where to work."

"Oh, my. Well, with your student record, you could go for anything so long as you don't aim too high. You're not in research work like me, so just go where you like."

“Your honesty is appreciated, Little Miss Honor Roll.”

“Don’t mention it. You’re not too bad yourself, maintaining your position of around 100th in the overall school rankings so consistently.”

“Sarcasm noted, genius.”

Over the last few generations, our nation had been blessed by a number of good and upstanding kings. No despots and no tyranny meant that the standards of life and education were rather high. Schools were open to ordinary citizens and, as long as you could pay the fees, enrollment was allowed at the age of eleven. Any student who studied for two or three years could expect employment upon graduation. And so, a great many parents did their utmost to ensure their children went to school.

Ernesta’s parents were one such couple, and she was studying on behalf of their efforts. She was an adorable girl, big round eyes and braided hair. I called her Ern for short. I watched as she took a seat in front of me and began counting potential jobs on her fingers.

“Well, manners and etiquette aren’t a problem for you, so how about one of the Houses? If research work isn’t your thing, there’s always the front desk.”

“Hmm...” I murmured, thoughtfully. “But there are an awful lot of...important, distinguished people at the Houses.”

By “Houses,” we were referring to the House of Magic and the House of Knights. And while it’s embarrassing for me to write of “knights” and “magic” in a serious discussion, they were both dedicated to the ongoing peace of the nation in which I lived. Many who worked at the Houses came from noble lineage.

“Then, how about snagging a Mr. Moneybags and sticking it to everyone? With a face like yours, it’s very much an option.”

She’s off the rails, this one.

Ern wasn’t speaking from any kind of sarcasm, however. She knew all about me, right down to my past, and it made her mad, hence the implicit suggestion. “Stick it to the fam,” essentially.

“I’ll consider it, if I find a man worth snagging,” I said.



I'd enrolled at this school once I started living on my own. The moment my family had pushed me onto my real father, I was no longer allowed at schools attended by the nobility.

"And what about you, Ern?" I asked. "You'll join a House, I suppose?"

"Yeah. I mean, I have these magical abilities, after all. And the last time, before this one, I didn't get to do much of *anything*. In *this* life, I'm going to do what I want to do, and I'm going to be good to my parents."

"A bit early to be looking so far down the line, no?"

"Not in the slightest," said Ern. "As soon as you hit twenty or thirty, life passes you by in the blink of an eye."

"Yeah, I know that, but look at us. Right now, we're both *young*."

Let me explain: Ern, like me, had been reborn. That said, she wasn't Japanese, and her life before this one was a far, far cry from the one I'd experienced. In Ern's case, she'd had children at a young age, spent her days scraping by, then died. She didn't like talking about it so I wasn't privy to the details, but one thing was certain—hers were not blessed, fortunate circumstances. I suspected that her past was the very reason she was so diligent about her studies. We'd become friends simply because we got along well together.

"By the will of the Lord, yes, yes, we are. Our worries, too, are but a fleeting thing," said Ern. "We should enjoy our new lives."

Ern was committed to her religion. And while her thoughts had changed a little here and there with her current situation, she nonetheless was a devout and ardent believer in God. I'd come here with my Japanese sense of religion, and so I only really believed in gods so far as it was convenient or necessary. Cheating, you say? I won't hear of it. A mysterious life-form that is all-knowing, with magical powers and the ability to grant any wish? I had more important things to consider.

Namely, the paper right in front of me.

"But where do I want to go?" I murmured.

As long as they paid their student fees, schools did their best to help students

in their efforts to find employment. I, too, was hopeful that I'd receive that same support.

But there was a problem. Oh yes, there was a problem.

In short, my options for employment were limited. I had been expelled from a family of middle-class nobility. I was once a Kirsten, and the last thing I wanted was to end up at a workplace with close ties to them, what with all the constant rumors and power struggles. All a prospective employer had to do was dig a little into my past, and I simply wouldn't hear the end of it.

And while I *was* the daughter of middle-class nobility, my existence was a stain upon the Kirsten family name. But it's your mother's fault, Ern had argued. What did I have to do with the whole sordid affair? Frankly, that was my opinion too. However, that didn't pass muster as far as noble society was concerned. My relatives staked their lives on their reputations. My mother's grandparents, in particular, despised my real father. I'd heard that they had exploded with rage, but I hadn't seen them since I began living alone.

In any case, my current peaceful life was thanks to their good graces. And while money was admittedly tight, I nonetheless lived without much worry. Still, I did wonder how that might change once I graduated school and entered greater society.

"Well," I muttered, "I guess I'll just submit my preferred employers."

My first preference was the position of trade accountant. Second, House secretary. Both offered good salaries. As much as I would have preferred to avoid work at one of the Houses, I'd arrived at it by process of elimination. In any case, my life goal at this point was to work for a time and save money.

"I won't get anywhere without some capital behind me," I uttered.

My grand plan, you see, was to leave the country at the age of twenty. I wanted to see the outside world. Given that I didn't have a particular location in mind, I saw the need to lay a foundation and gain some experience in the workforce. Now, if some benevolent god had bestowed upon me some great task, or if I'd been able to see the status screen in some world with a simple leveling process, then perhaps my goals would have been decided for me. Unfortunately, mine was a more coldhearted and unsympathetic rebirth. But,

reincarnation or otherwise, I still had to eat, and that meant I had to work. Besides, it wasn't like this world boasted the number of evil and exploitative corporations that Japan did.

Three days after I submitted my work preferences, my teacher called me for a meeting. Their eyes were red and puffy, and with each word they spoke, they seemed about to burst into tears.

"My apologies, Karen. I wanted nothing more than to reward you with one of your preferences, but it is simply beyond my control."

That told me everything I needed to know.

Someone's been pulling some strings.

My teacher was passionate about their students, and I had no doubt they'd attempted to negotiate on my behalf. I told them that their tears were a more than adequate apology and took the rest of the day off from school.

The city I lived in was filled with a pleasant number of plants and flowers. The wind was quite strong that day, and you could hear it shaking the leaves in the trees. The red and yellow flower petals in the flowerbeds surrounding the school fluttered as I took a seat on a nearby bench.

"Well then, what now?" I muttered.

There was no energy in my utterance. I'd deliberately chosen safe options for potential places of employment, and even then I'd been shut down. As for future options, I either had to prepare myself for family-related bullying and aim higher, or aim considerably lower, or otherwise resort to begging for work. I wasn't particularly keen on the latter, being that the places that would readily hire a sixteen-year-old couldn't offer much in the way of a high salary.

A barmaid or a shop clerk, huh...

I don't want to speak poorly of such jobs, but my dream was to one day leave this place for foreign lands. It was already going to be hard for me to find a good husband, and so I had to consider the worst-case scenario: that I would die alone. But, what if someday I fell ill? That was why I'd gone to school, so I could develop a secure set of skills to fall back on. But now, all of my studying felt as though it had been for nothing. I had thrown away *years* that I could

have spent enjoying my youth, and now I was desperate for those years to mean something.

And don't you go calling me too much of a pessimistic realist. If money wasn't an issue, I can assure you my teens would have been a complete and utter joyride.

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes. The wind through the trees, the sound of nearby conversation; these were gentle, calming things, but to me they were little more than static. Then there was the sound of a carriage coming to a halt. The slam of its door. These sounds, by themselves, were fine, but when I heard footsteps approaching, I opened my eyes. This was unusual. A shadow fell across my feet. It belonged to a face I had not seen in some time: long, almond-shaped eyes, a sharp and handsome nose, and neatly combed hair. It was Arno, the eldest son of the Kirsten family.

"What a surprise, brother," I remarked. "To see you here in a place like this."

In contrast to my shock, my older half-brother wore something of an inscrutable expression.

"It has been too long, Karen," he replied, peering down at me.

There was a touch of cold formality in his tone, but things were complicated—we were members of different families now. I should note that I didn't hold anything against Arno. He had always looked after me, and when he found out that my father intended to expel me from the family, he had opposed the idea until the bitter end.

"It has indeed," I said. "I would say it's been at least two years since we last met. You look rather tense. Are you eating properly?"

"All the regular meals, every day," Arno replied. "I'm happy to see you looking well. Are *you* eating properly?"

"You don't have to worry about that. My daily living expenses are covered, so I cook for myself and I'm eating my fair share of meat and vegetables."

Arno did not appear convinced of my financial security, however.

"I see," he replied, furrowing his brow.

Behind my brother stood his foster brother. The sword at his waist was a clear indicator that he was Arno's bodyguard. Like my brother, he'd been good to me growing up, and I waved a hello, but I received only a smile in return.

"Brother, what are you doing here?" I asked. "Surely you didn't just happen to see me while you were passing by."

"No, I have a matter to discuss with you."

"I thought as much. Oh, please don't take that as a reproach. It's nothing of the sort."

The fact of the matter was that Arno wouldn't have come without a reason. He and my siblings were prohibited from making contact with me, after all. My brother had also been raised and educated to act as the right-hand man of the head family's young master. As such, he carried the weight of the Kirsten family on his shoulders, and he would not be so rash as to meet me on a whim, no matter how worried he might be. I knew that my siblings were banned from seeing me because my older sister's servant had told me, back when it was first decided that I was to be expelled. This was why I didn't hold anything against any of my siblings.

Arno offered me his hand. The message was clear.

Come with me.

But where? Well, I certainly wasn't going to be so stupid as to ask *that* question. If my older brother had come all this way specifically to see me, then there was only *one* place we could possibly be going. I knew that I could reject his offer outright, but...

"Hmm..." I murmured. "But if I *don't* go, it only makes the situation all the more pitiful for you."

The school day was still ongoing, but public schools were fairly generous in this area. Some students left partway through the day to help their families and such, and doing so was fine, so long as it didn't impact your grades or cause the school any trouble.

"I'll need you to inform the school about all of this," I said.

“We’ll make sure that the necessary people are informed,” replied Arno.

So we boarded the carriage, and I sat opposite my brother. Riding in a carriage after so long reminded me of just how convenient they were. As I stared out the window it struck me then, quite deeply, that until I had been driven out of the family, the act of riding carriages had been just another forgettable part of daily life.

“Karen, are you receiving an adequate amount to cover your daily living expenses?” Arno asked.

“When I left ho...er...the Kirsten family, I received quite the sum,” I replied. “It meets my needs. I’m certainly not starving, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But what about clothes? From what I can tell, I gather that you don’t have much in the way of a full wardrobe.”

“What? But you haven’t even seen... Oh, I see. You haven’t seen *yourself*, but you nonetheless have eyes.”

Those eyes belonged to Achim, Arno’s foster brother, who currently sat by my brother’s side.

“Ordinary families don’t have a different outfit for every day of the week,” I said, asserting that my wardrobe, or lack thereof, was a nonissue. “And besides, it’s not like I’m going wild and dirtying what I already own. I don’t need a full wardrobe for school.”

Anyone who boasted a wide range of flashy outfits at a public school would only make themselves a source of ire. A difference in terms of noble and general sensibilities, I suppose.

Here in the privacy of his carriage, Arno spoke without the strained tension from earlier. I felt myself relaxing, safe in the knowledge that he did not despise me.

“And how is our sister?” I asked.

“So lively and energetic that it’s quite a bother. She’s trying to manage the entire household, and we’ve our hands full trying to keep her under control.”

“That certainly sounds like Gerda.”

My older sister was a beautiful young woman. Lustrous black hair, smooth white skin; at first glance, she appeared the portrait of a gentle and placid nobleman's daughter. In reality, however, her gaze overflowed with an unquenchable vigor. While many said that her strong will was her lone fatal flaw, that same fortitude was the very reason girls looked up to her.

"Father has been worried about you," Arno said.

"Is that so?" I said, unable to stop the icy edge in each word.

I knew immediately that I'd put my foot in it. My brother fell silent, and Achim looked suddenly uncomfortable. I tried to play it down by turning my gaze outside, but it did no good; the rest of our trip to the Kirsten home was spent in silence.

Though there was an air of nostalgia to it now, the Kirsten household was your typical noble manor. The grounds were surrounded by a lattice fence, and when we passed through the main gates we were met by the sight of a scrupulously well-kept garden. The road from the main gate to the front door was paved with stone. All of this put the Kirstens clearly at the higher end of the middle-class nobility.

The sight of the house and its surrounding environment brought back memories, both fond and unpleasant alike. Sentimental was not the word I would have used for my feelings as I passed through the front door, where I was met by a white-haired butler who bowed respectfully. The head servant, who had scolded me terribly strictly in the past, had a face on the verge of tears. I felt suddenly awkward, as though I should've apologized. These two had given me a plethora of sweets when I had finally left the manor for a different life.

We headed directly to the living room, where our family had once often gathered. Now the room held my father, my uncle and auntie, and a host of other relatives. I was left confused by it all. Had I just walked straight into some kind of deliberate stress interview?

"Long time no see, everyone!" I cried.

I won't deny that I was a touch, shall we say, peeved.

I had considered a more formal, well-mannered greeting, but when my

relatives had looked at me like a stinking, dirty rag left on an otherwise clean table, it angered me. You might call it childish, but guess what?

I was, quite literally, a child.

My mother was also in attendance, but as usual, she sat quietly in her place, observing me as one might a stranger. She nodded politely as I was shown to my seat. My father quieted everyone down and turned to me.

"It has been a long time, Karen," he said.

His voice hadn't always been so cold and unfeeling. He was a man with a deeper, more generous heart, and if Arno's words were to be believed, then he was speaking this way on account of all the relatives present.

"Yes, it has indeed," I said.

There was no trivial conversation to be had; my father got straight to the point.

"Gerda is getting married," he said.

"Congratulations are in order."

"Her husband is the nation's king."

"Well, isn't that just won...nnngh?!"

This was astounding news, though given my sister's beauty, also plausible.

Hold on just a moment. Isn't the king almost fifty? And more importantly, he already has a wife.

My father nodded, reading the confusion on my features.

"More precisely, Gerda will become the king's second wife. His concubine."

"Oh. But...how in the world did it happen?"

"The king proposed, and Gerda accepted of her own volition."

The *king* proposed to *her*. That's my sister for you.

"There was, however, one condition: Gerda flatly refused to become the king's concubine unless your honor was restored. She said that if her conditions weren't met, she'd join a convent instead."

Wait. Seriously, wait. I'm happy my sister feels that way, but wait.

"The king thus promised to ensure that your honor was restored," said my father, once again reading my expression.

"Huh..." I uttered.

"The head family thus issued their order. As of today, Karen, you are once again a member of the Kirsten family."

Gerda! Gerdaaaa!

I could barely utter even a single word. It was then that two portraits were placed in front of me. I looked up, puzzled, and saw a troubled look etched into my father's face.

"That brings us here," he said, his face suddenly pale. "Being that you are of age, the head family declared it time you found a suitable marriage partner."

My uncle placed his hand softly on my father's shoulder.

"Allow me to take it from here," he whispered.

I felt a touch of relief flush through me when I realized that none of this was what my father himself wanted. I took the two portraits in hand and looked at them.

"So the head family's idea of restoring my honor is to hitch me to one of these two options, yes?"

"Karen!" snapped my uncle. "Watch your mouth!"

I matched his attitude with a silent glare of my own. Did he think I didn't know better? One of the portraits was of a young man in his mid-twenties. Though I couldn't speak for what he was like in person, in the portrait he was handsome, with long blond hair. The kind of good looks that left you moaning. The other portrait was of, no matter how much you squinted, an old man. He had a charming, friendly air about him.

The plan seemed obvious: ditch the old man and go with blondie.

My auntie pinched my uncle's thigh. She must have realized that my overbearing uncle was only going to succeed in making me angry.

“Do you mind if I explain things, Karen?” asked my aunt softly.

In a calm manner, my aunt told me about the men in the portraits. The young man was from a distinguished family. He was a knight with a very bright future. The older man had retired to the countryside. He was a widower and lord of a frontier region; a margrave. My aunt went on in far greater detail, but she spoke almost exclusively of the younger man. I was young myself, after all. She also added that if I chose the young man over the older gentleman, I could also remain in the Kirsten household.

Oh, what’s that? You’re wondering who I picked?

Well, after some careful thought, I looked directly at my father. I felt that this was the last place on earth he wanted to be, surrounded by all his relatives like this.

“I am to choose one of these two men, yes?” I asked.

“Yes,” said my father, choosing to cast the sorrow in his eyes away from my own.

And so I pointed down at one of the portraits.

One month later, I stood tall and proud inside a countryside manor.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

Before me was a man who was easily over sixty. My new husband.

As for exactly why he was my choice, we’ll get to that in due time.

2: Two Prospective Husbands: One Gorgeous, One a Geezer

I saw my older sister once before I left. By then, her position as the king's concubine was all but official. But much to my surprise, she was not going to live inside the castle. Even upon her official appointment, she would not call the castle home. This was strange. Usually, one would expect a concubine to live in the royal castle. It made the most sense with regard to security, after all.

My sister, however, refused the idea of living a life in the inner palace. Her reasoning was thus:

"How dreadfully exhausting to be under watch every hour of every day. At the very least, let me live where I please."

Gerda's beauty was all the more refined since I'd last seen her two years ago, and her hair had fluttered when she'd spoken those words. She was as strong-willed as ever, and her confidence was apparent in her every word and gesture. Even so, her personality was not overbearing or unpleasant. Gerda was brimming with confidence, but she knew better than to flaunt it. Rather, she utilized it when necessary.

I visited Gerda at a manor located some ten minutes from the castle by carriage. It was fenced, of course, and flush with greenery and all manner of colorful flowers. My sister had told the king, "When it is your wish to see me, let these sights stir your heart as you travel the path to my abode."

Gerda was not yet officially the royal concubine, but she had begun living in her new manor once the king had promised to restore my honor. She was so ecstatic about my visit that she was waiting for me at the manor's entrance. We drew a great deal of attention from those around us as we embraced. Gerda then led me to her room where she made us tea.

"One is supposed to leave things like tea to the servants," she told me. "But here it's not such a big deal."

The interior of the manor was a far simpler affair than I'd imagined. While it was sparse in terms of antiques, I could see that great care had been taken in picking out the furniture. It wasn't excessively opulent, but it didn't strike one as austere either. It was a good fit for my sister, a young woman who did not require much in the way of makeup or accessories. I had admittedly been worried that her placement as royal concubine would have made her more ostentatious, but it appeared that my worries were for naught.

I took a seat on a sofa that immediately invited sleep and promptly lay down. It was just the two of us after all, and Gerda was well aware that her younger sister had something of a careless, slovenly streak. She merely told me to sit up should anyone enter, even though she herself maintained a graceful posture while she sipped at her cup of tea. We talked for a time, mostly about what I'd been up to in the time since I'd been alone. Gerda found little of it surprising.

"I had Arno keep an eye on you," she said. "I asked him to help you in the case that anything untoward were to occur."

"Oh, so you kept your eye on me."

"Of course I did. You're our little sister. You were driven out of the family. Did you expect us to just sit there and accept it? 'Oh, very well father, if you must. Kick her out. Now, would you like a cup of tea?' We're not heartless, Karen."

Gerda rested her chin on her hands and looked at me, her gaze mirroring something of exasperation.

"If you ever looked to be struggling, Karen, I was going to take you with me and run away to our grandmother, posthaste," she continued. "But you took to your new, solitary life calmly and quietly. You even looked like you enjoyed it."

Gerda let out a deep sigh. She'd been considerably worried at the time, and while I was grateful that she'd considered a getaway plan for the two of us, something she'd said tugged at me. I was puzzled by it.

"When you say our *grandmother*, on whose side do you mean?" I asked.

"On mom... On our mother's side."

But wouldn't she despise me for being the child of a forbidden tryst?

I said as much to Gerda and she called me a fool. She said our grandmother had been putting on an act.

“She didn’t have any other choice when it came to the head family,” Gerda explained. “The only reason things settled so peacefully is because our grandparents were so mad about all of it. Look at it this way: if the head family had been allowed to intervene, why, you’d be headed off to the countryside as we speak!”

Oh, dear.

I felt a fierce headache coming on.

“But, all the while you haven’t been the least concerned about the rest of us,” said Gerda, “and instead you... No, enough of that. I’m not going to start complaining. It’s enough for me that you’re healthy and doing well.”

Gerda let me rest my head on her knees, just like old times. She cared for me as deeply as she always had, and I could have lost myself in the moment except that I couldn’t ignore what she’d just said about our grandparents. I asked Gerda if father had known about our grandparents protecting me. She grimaced and shook her head.

“Though he *may* have realized what they were up to, I just don’t know when it comes to father. Ever since mother lost her memory, he won’t talk to us about anything.”

Things had remained strained among the Kirstens since my departure. I could see the sorrow it brought out in Gerda, so I changed the subject. Naturally, I asked about the king’s proposal which had, for all intents and purposes, changed her life. And yet, when I asked her how she had won the king’s heart, she responded with a puzzled tilt of her head.

“I attended a lunch he organized, and he spoke to me. From that point on he had his eye on me. We met a few more times and then...he declared that he wanted me to become his concubine.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it, yes.”

“And so you got married to a fifty-year-old geez...*ahem*. And so you accepted the proposal of a man thirty years your senior?”

Gerda smirked when I caught myself about to say “geezer.” But she didn’t deny that he was one, given their age difference.

“Karen, be sure to train that mouth of yours before you start entering social circles, yes? And in any case, it was the *king*. Some offers cannot be refused.”

“Yes, but if you *really* didn’t want to...”

“You must stop taking noble society so lightly. One day, you’re going to fall flat on your face.”

“But you at least understand what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, and I appreciate your concern.”

I knew what she was telling me, but at my roots I was still Japanese. It was all too easy for me to assume that one could simply turn down an offer that they weren’t interested in. I was aware, however, that in this world such ways of thinking were considered highly disrespectful.

Gerda let the hint of a smile cross her face. She brought her lips to my ear and told me not to worry. I could hear the confidence in her voice. Though she was my older sister and we shared the same blood, I was nonetheless startled at such a beautiful woman getting so close and whispering in my ear.

“But if the king were to ask me to bear his child, don’t you think that would be wonderful?” said Gerda, her luscious lips forming the shape of a most alluring smile.

“Oh? Is that what you’re scheming?” I asked.

“You make it sound so uncouth when you use that word. The fact of the matter is, the king already has two children, which means that any child of ours would have little chance of inheriting the throne. I’m well aware of that.”

“Yes, I see...”

“But in this world, one never knows. The empire’s interference has only grown in recent years, and there are rumors that war may not be entirely an impossibility.”

The mysterious smile that brought a glow to Gerda’s eyes marked a part of the girl that I did not know. I was shocked. My sister was *far more* ambitious than I had ever considered. I swiftly changed the subject; I didn’t want the queen or any of the king’s heirs setting their sights on me, by way of my sister.

“Your manor is quite far from the castle,” I said. “Are you sure it’s better here than there? Don’t you think it will be troublesome if people start spreading rumors that you’re seeing other men?”

“Oh, my,” replied Gerda. “And here I was thinking you were still a child! I stand corrected. I’m a royal concubine, dear, and as such rumors will always be prevalent. But I’d never get a moment’s rest in a place like the castle. Some say that everyone there is watched over even in their sleep. No, thank you.”

“Oh, so you’ve already thought that far ahead.”

“Well, you know me. In any case, I’m glad to see you’ve got the smarts to consider these sorts of things.”

Well, that’s probably because I’m actually in my thirties.

“Well, I *am* sixteen,” I said.

“Yes, sixteen already. I apologize that I wasn’t able to celebrate your birthday.”

“Never mind that; I know you had your standing to consider.”

“You realize I can rebel a little more now, yes? I’m allowed a certain level of defiance in my position.”

“Probably not a good idea to draw too much negative attention, sister.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s not like I’ll be poking my nose into politics. All I have to do is spend time with the king here, so you can rest easy.”

Gerda understood that her role differed from that of the queen’s. And I didn’t doubt that she would avoid political matters. She seemed intent on putting her energy into winning the king’s favor and attention. Until now, the man had

never had a concubine. It was clear that he was positively smitten, and this would certainly shift the power balance among all the related families. Naturally, this extended also to me as Gerda's younger sister.

"By the way, is it true you accepted your marriage proposal?"

Gerda interrupted my traipsing through nostalgia with her blunt question. I'd expected this. After all, this was the very reason I was visiting the manor in the first place.

"Yes, about that," I started.

"I know it was forced on you, but the second son of the Rodenwalds isn't a bad sort, I'm sure. His father, the marquis, also gave his approval, which means you can rest easy. You'll be treated well."

You're kidding. That's the guy I turned down.

I'd realized then that Gerda was still unaware of that fact. I'd already chosen the other option, and in doing so I'd left the Kirstens pulling their hair out.

"Gerda..." I said. "Though I'm happy you feel that way, don't you think forcing me into marriage is a little too much?"

"I *did* think that initially, yes, but then I realized it would be good for your future. The king thought as much also."

How am I going to tell her...?

Gerda was very excited about it all, and it felt harder and harder to say something.

"Gerda," I said timidly as I sat up. "You realize that I was offered *two* prospective marriage partners, yes?"

"Oh, the other one? I suppose you mean the man that the head family recommended? The elderly man on the frontier? Arno was furious about that."

Now I knew that the frontier option had initially been the *only* option, meant to get me as far away from the center of the nation as possible. I knew I should've discussed things with Arno myself, but he'd been so busy since I last saw him that he hadn't even returned home. The head family had been intent on pushing their marriage proposal through. But, through Gerda's work—

possibly with the help of the king—the Rodenwalds had been approached and another option was presented. Everyone had assumed I would naturally choose the younger option. Under normal circumstances, that was the logical choice.

“My... There certainly are quite the number of people wrapped up in all of this,” I remarked.

“And it would seem, thankfully, that they listened to our requests... Karen? Are you quite all right?”

This is bad. It's so bad, isn't it? There's no doubt about it, my actions have disgraced the king and Marquis Rodenwald.

“Um, Gerda? I have a request.”

“Yes?”

There was a kindness in my sister's voice that brought back memories. Before my mother had forgotten me, before I had been kicked out, we'd shared the same bed. We were sisters who did our fair share of bickering, to be sure, but we got along well now.

“It would make me so happy if you would share some of your favorite earrings with me,” I said.

“I'd be happy to, but aren't our preferences rather different?”

“Being able to look upon something that belongs to you would so cheer me up.”

“Oh! Hold on just a moment, then!”

Gerda leaped from the sofa while I crossed my arms and racked my brain. Things did not look good. They looked very bad, in fact. If I left things as they were, I had a feeling that I would be at the mercy of the others.

I needed a plan. I'd been intending to have dinner with Gerda, but after some thought, I opted to cut my visit short. Gerda insisted on seeing me off at the gate.

“The carriage appears to be running rather late,” I said.

“Y-Yes. I wonder what could have happened?”

With her attempts at conversation, Gerda made it painfully obvious that she was trying to buy time, but at this point I did not think she held any ulterior motives. Ten minutes had passed and, in my impatience, I decided to go looking for the driver. It was then that we were informed that the carriage was broken.

“Well, there isn’t anything we can do about that,” said Gerda. “Let’s wait inside for a spell.”

“Er, no,” I replied. “I suppose I’ll just walk home.”

“You’ll walk home?!”

“I’ll walk until I can pick up a hansom cab. I’ll be fine.”

“N-No! No, you won’t! A young noble girl walking by herself?! You’re putting yourself in danger!”

“Look at me, Gerda. Who’s going to think I’m a noble, dressed like this?”

I was dressed simply, not unlike any other ordinary citizen. I didn’t wear any accessories either, and I knew that the immediate area was safe. A short walk would take me to busier streets, so I didn’t think there was any cause for concern at all. However...

“Are you hiding something from me, sister?” I asked.

I saw Gerda flinch.

So she is hiding something.

I knew it was best not to get involved in whatever scheme she had cooked up. If she was hiding something from me, I very much doubted that it would be good news for me. Gerda tried to take hold of my arm, but I weaved away and tried to make my getaway.

“Well, it’s too late now,” Gerda remarked.

She flashed a bold grin. I noticed her gaze was not on me, however, and I followed it to a black shape in the distance. I let out a squeal very unbecoming of a noblewoman. It was a carriage, and while I couldn’t make out the family crest, I could tell by the make of the carriage, the driver’s uniform, and the fine chestnut horses that pulled it along that it belonged to a distinguished family.

“Gerda! What is this?! What have you done?! Ah, I’m so scared!”

“Don’t worry, little sister. I just thought that the two of you might like to chat.”

Gerda’s fists were clenched with excitement.

Oh no. Oh no, I don’t like the look of this at all!

I was right to be terrified. The carriage came complete with a number of knights, all of whom had the fierce and dignified pressure of military types. Had any children been around, I’m certain they would have burst into tears at the mere sight of them. There were females among the knights, to be sure, but they too showed not a hint of weakness. In a word, they were terrifying. To put it simply, the knights had that aura of professional military men and women who have long forgotten how to smile.

Gerda! What have you done?!

When the carriage door swung open, I shut my eyes tightly as its passenger alighted.

Sister, you should reconsider the meaning of the word “surprise.”

If she had done this with ill intent, then she could have called it a tremendous success. But I knew for a fact that she thought I would be delighted. The man who stood before me was so handsome that I couldn’t even look at him directly. He had a head of shiny blond hair and wore a graceful smile.

“It appears we are late,” he said, taking my sister’s hand and planting a kiss upon her fingers. “I do hope you will accept my apologies, Lady Saburova.”

“You made it in good time, Reinald. How is Marquis Rodenwald?”

“In fine health, thank you. Regretfully, he is busy with other matters and could not be here to see you today.”

“There’s no need to worry about such things with me. Compared to business with the queen, I am but an unimportant stone along the wayside, no?”

“You judge yourself too harshly. I assure you that the marquis is honest about his regret.”

Saburova was the new family name given to my sister as concubine. In her own shrewd way, she was playing the part of the sulky girl who didn't matter, and she was enjoying it.

Ugh, this is going to be such a pain to deal with...

As I'm sure you've already gathered from the names, the man standing before me and my sister was the very man she expected me to marry. We weren't any more than ten years apart in terms of age, yet seeing him in person had me trembling with fear.

I'm so scared, ugh. I hate it! Why am I so scared?!

Reinald had a face that went above and beyond mere good looks. It was a face carved by the gods themselves. He was also very clearly in great shape, and he cut a dashing figure at his full height. For a man to be made so incredibly beautiful pointed to the idea that the deities were not, in fact, of the belief that all people were created equal.

Reinald turned toward me and took my hand, just as he had my sister's a moment ago. It was such a graceful movement that I couldn't help but blush. Fortunately, I *did* stop myself from squealing which, as far as I was concerned, was worth a passing grade. That said, I did *not* need Gerda uttering the words "Oh, my," and coquettishly covering her face with her fan.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Karen. I am Reinald, second son of the Rodenwald family. As I'm sure you're already aware, I am your proposed fiancé."

He placed a kiss on my fingers. I could have done without it, honestly. Nonetheless, Reinald must have been used to seeing girls blush. He flashed me a smile so sweet that I almost sighed, such was its enchantment. He spoke a few words in a kind, gentle voice, but I didn't hear them. My thoughts were elsewhere.

Fiancé? The heck?

I didn't know for sure, but my guess was that these two had already assumed I'd turned down the old man and informed the Dunsts that I was marrying Reinald! The Dunsts would be tearing their hair out! Gerda, you fool!

It was all so off the rails that I wanted to throw my head back and cackle with laughter, but I couldn't. This had the potential to be disastrous. I now realized that even though I'd chosen the man I wanted to marry, that choice might've been completely ignored.

I looked down so as to hide the twitching in my cheeks, but fortunately Gerda and my would-be fiancé didn't cotton on to why. Gerda had gotten me into this mess and made it so I'd have to head home with Reinald, but I wasn't going to complain. Throwing a tantrum here would be utterly shameless.

Instead, as we parted, I threw Gerda a smile that said, *"I won't forget this!"*

In return, her smile replied, *"Best of luck!"*

We were sisters, yes, but ultimately, and unfortunately, we didn't always understand one another.

Reinald helped me up into the carriage, which was surprisingly simple. The seats were upholstered leather, but otherwise the interior was sparse of decorations. This was a carriage intended for more practical use.

"I have heard that you recently returned to the Kirsten family," Reinald said. "I also heard you are attending school in the city. You will graduate fairly soon?"

"Oh, um, yes, that's right..." I uttered.

I had feared that our conversation would be stilted and awkward, but Reinald was quite the skilled conversationalist. He was open and kind, and never spoke of any topics that were too difficult; he was ever aware of my age. He was, without a doubt, stunning to look at; had we been back in Japan I might well have been screaming and clamoring to take photos of him. As it stood, I simply couldn't believe that a man destined for the hallowed halls of the most beautiful people of all time could have ever been one of *my* prospective husbands, and so it was easier to imagine it happening to someone else entirely.

That being said, I still could not bring myself to look him in the eyes, and my conversational replies amounted almost entirely to variations of "Yes," "Is that so," and "I see." It's true that I wanted nothing more than to throw myself at his feet, but I had much bigger, more pressing concerns: namely, my current

circumstances and the fact that my actions were going to bring shame upon both Reinald and Margrave Rodenwald. That said, I had no intentions of giving up on what I wanted either, which made looking at Reinald all the more difficult.

All I could do was apologize internally for the fact that he would soon be known as a man whose fiancée ran out on him.

“Miss Karen, are you feeling unwell?” Reinald asked. “Your mind appears to be elsewhere.”

“Oh, erm, yes, I apologize. So much has happened of late, and it has left me rather exhausted.”

Since my return to the Kirsten family, life had actually been easy and casual, but that was neither here nor there. In the end, we shared little in the way of meaningful conversation, making our private rendezvous anything but interesting.

Gerda must have sent word to my family in advance, because my father and brother were ready and waiting for us upon our arrival. They introduced themselves to Reinald. At a glance, I could tell that while Arno maintained his composure valiantly, there was a raging storm within his person.

“Sir Reinald,” I said, bowing respectfully when it was time to part. “I apologize for offering little in the way of conversation even though you were so gracious as to escort me home.”

“Think nothing of it,” he replied. “There will still be many chances yet for us to better get to know one another.”

Ordinarily, yes. Ordinarily.

“My apologies...” I uttered.

And so we bid farewell to my beautiful (if ultimately temporary) fiancé and his terrifying guards. Arno flashed me a hopeful look, as if asking “How’d it go?” but I had nothing to tell him. I went straight to my room and took my pen in hand immediately. I knew now that if I sat back and did nothing, then my temporary fiancé would soon become my actual husband.

And that is trouble for me. Big trouble.

I moved swiftly. Once my letter was written, I put it in an envelope along with one of the earrings Gerda had given me and addressed it to the concerned party. I prepared a few things, then went out into the garden to see the flowers at sunrise. I told the staff I was taking a brief stroll, but it was actually something more akin to a race against the clock. I took a ladder from the garden shed and used it to scale the fence around our property. I twisted my ankle climbing down the other side, but I didn't have time to complain; I jumped into the nearest hansom cab, and headed straight for the only person I could trust.

"What?!" cried Ernesta. "No! I don't want to be a part of this!"

"Then tell them I tricked you! You can tell them straightaway, but please! I beg of you!"

I begged Ernesta for a small sum of money, and with it I headed for the outskirts of the capital, to the abode of my maternal grandparents. Naturally, they were shocked to see me. But if Gerda had been telling the truth, I knew that they would want to help me. I clung to my grandmother with tears in my eyes and I begged her to help me. It was like a scene straight out of a famous manga.

In this way, the first hurdle was cleared.

"I simply cannot marry that person," I said. "I will wed the frontier margrave!"

My grandparents could not hide their surprise at the fact that their granddaughter had chosen a sixty-year-old man over a literal Adonis, but my grandmother sympathized with the idea that Reinald was simply far too beautiful a specimen. My grandfather was less convinced, but being that this request came from the grandchild he felt they had neglected, he too acquiesced. My grandparents sent word to my family.

That was the second hurdle cleared.

That left only the letter I had prepared at the very beginning of this plan of mine. The letter had gone to the sixty-year-old margrave, and its contents said that all the preparations for our marriage were complete. The addition of my sister's earring was to indicate that Lady Saburova herself had given her

consent. In essence, I had Gerda trapped in a *fait accompli*. Admittedly, it pains me to admit as such in writing.

I must say, when I look back on these times in my life, I think it a miracle that I wasn't promptly beheaded for my actions.

A reply then arrived from the margrave, which sent the Kirstens into a panic. They did their best to scold me once they understood what was going on, but I remained steadfast in my decision to leave for the frontier. The Kirsten family was indebted to the margrave and could not simply refuse or cancel the marriage, so it was thus made definitive.

Mission accomplished.

That said, the idea of returning to the Kirsten home was now terrifying for any number of reasons. I assumed that the house and its gardens at sunrise were the last I would ever see of the place.

My grandmother saw my grandfather and me off with something of an awkward smile, and I returned it with a beaming, satisfied smile of my own. I was off to the countryside to get married to the Margrave of Conrad. At sixteen years of age, I was to become the wife of Kamil of the Conrad region.

When I arrived, he welcomed me with a smile.

"Welcome, Miss Karen," he said. "I am grateful for you coming all this way."

"Margrave Conrad, it is a pleasure to meet you," I replied.

Everyone who was there, including the servants, could not hide their confusion. Which I suppose was only natural. It was unheard of for a daughter of the nobility to willingly, of their own volition, choose to move to the countryside.

So, why would a sixteen-year-old girl choose a man over sixty (sixty-three, to be exact) as her husband? I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't, in some small way, an act of rebellion against the Kirstens. But I wouldn't dare give away my whole life for such a trivial act of revenge. My reasoning was simple at heart—it was all about my ultimate life goal. And while I *did* feel a touch bad about it, as soon as my grandpa hubby died, I intended to leave the country. That was what had driven me to my choice.

At the age of fourteen, I had been forgotten by my mother and banished by the people I called my family. Could anyone have guessed that everything that happened after I was brought back was, in fact, just the tutorial section of it all?

For you see, it is here where the curtains were raised on a life filled to the brim with ups, downs, and all manner of trouble.

3: Hitched

When the portraits of my prospective husbands had been placed before me, I fell into thought. I called for a meeting of the mind, in which multiple versions of myself voiced their various opinions, all of us looking for the most advantageous outcome.

First, there was Reinald. It went without saying that he boasted near-matchless good looks. His handsome visage drew envy, bewitched sighs, and the blushing cheeks of young maidens. The idea of marrying such a man and living a life like the heroine of a romance novel wasn't such a bad one, really. Reinald had money, a home in the capital, and could offer me a life free of trouble and worry. The fact that he was the *second* son of the family also meant less pressure; it was unlikely we would be expected to produce a son for the sake of having a future heir.

Then there was the Margrave of Conrad, Kamil. He'd called the capital home in the distant past but, for some reason or other, he had retired to the countryside. He once had a wife and child, but they were gone now, lost to illness and to war.

The above was all the information that I had to go on at the time I was asked to make my decision. And given that the choice was bound to determine the future, one would naturally expect a young girl to gravitate to Reinald.

I, however, made my decision based on a different kind of selection criteria.

In short, the old man was more likely to die first.

Ordinarily, you might think that the margrave still had another ten or twenty years left in him. But you'd be thinking in terms of modern-day standards. In *this* world, he'd be lucky if he made it to seventy. And even *that* was because he was one of the nobility; if he were a commoner, he'd likely have already been on his deathbed.

Reinald, in comparison, was in his mid-twenties, healthy, and in good shape.

He still had a great many years ahead of him, and I wasn't so heartless a person that I'd pray for my husband to march off and die in battle.

You see, the heart of the matter was my desire to travel. I wanted to walk freely in another country somewhere, going where I wanted and eating whatever I liked. I wanted to see what different cultures had to offer. The reason for it was, of course, my life before I was reborn. I'd spent it entirely in Japan, where I was raised to be free. Naturally, it was going to have an impact when I found myself in a fantasy world, reborn as a noble. I didn't have to worry about money, and I was drawn to a life in which I didn't have to work.

Yes, there are the forced strategic marriages, but let's put that aside for the moment. I don't want to get off track.

"It's a cold, hard world..." I muttered.

The life of a noblewoman is a troublesome, bothersome thing. I didn't want to work. I wanted to be slovenly. I wanted to be selfish. But, when I tried to be those very things, something felt amiss. In my first life, in Japan, I was just another regular citizen. This made me timid. Fainthearted, I tell you.

Why? Well, as it turned out, I just wasn't suited to the life of the nobility. I realized it the moment I began living on my own. During that period, I'd done a little work writing letters for people, and it was so fulfilling just to earn my own way. And the food I ate with that money? Simply delicious.

In other words, I didn't want to have to get by on somebody else's money, I wanted a freedom that was entirely *my own*. To put things into starker relief, I wanted to drink a jug of ale and devour a whole roasted chicken without a care in the world for what anyone around me thought. Such behavior is a breach of etiquette as far as noblewomen are concerned, and it is strictly prohibited. So it became clear to me that to reach my dreams I would need to shed my noble skin, so to speak.

Perhaps I hadn't made the most of it, but nonetheless I knew what it was like to live free. I wasn't suited to the job of supporting my husband in his endeavors, attending to our servants, studying this and that, maintaining appearances, or attending social events. That was all far too much for me.

And so when asked to choose a marriage partner, I had settled on the

Margrave of Conrad. Yes, I would still be expected to meet and interact with people in the countryside, but etiquette wouldn't be nearly as strictly adhered to as it was in the capital. And while I was somewhat worried and anxious with regard to the margrave's character, it was a gamble I had to take. Besides, by my grandparents' account he was not a bad sort.

We'll get to the matter of the margrave's personality later. For now, let me write about my time on the way to the frontier.

I had asked for the journey to be a simple affair, and that it was. We had left with an entourage of guards and a number of carriages filled with luggage. On the way, we had met with the margrave's guards, and this put us at ease.

The frontier lands that the margrave governed were...about as simple as simple gets. I spent the journey looking at the scenery, but admittedly there wasn't much in the way of things to look at. The highlight was perhaps the wide-eyed stares of a group of farmers in their fields. This was the very definition of the countryside, the boonies, the middle of nowhere. It was pastoral, peaceful, and quiet.

We passed a forest and some plains, then climbed a gentle incline to the manor that was at the core of the Conrad region. It was located on higher ground than I'd expected, and there were no trees around, which encouraged strong winds. Fences surrounded the houses, and while it gave the place a feel of desolation, it offered a clear view of the surroundings. Bandits and thieves could be spotted very easily.

I suppose the shock I felt was because I had expected the place to be idyllic; a little countryside village surrounded by woods, that kind of thing. The actual area itself, I found, was far more equipped and prepared for battle. I put this to my grandfather, who had accompanied me.

"This region is very closely guarded, isn't it, grandfather?"

"That's because it's located close to the border. Should our neighbors look to invade, this place will bear the initial brunt of it. It is the responsibility of the margrave to report on any unusual activity and to make sure that his people are protected."

"My... He must be quite the man."

“You are now the Conrad region’s margravine, and to support your husband it is your duty to study up.”

“Oh, you’re such a worrywart.”

“Of course, I’m worried. You’re moving even farther from us now than you did the last time...”

“Oh, come now, I already *told* you none of that bothered me.”

“Be sure you don’t take that casual attitude in front of others, young lady.”

It was advice from a grandfather to his granddaughter, and yet there was a certain shame in the man’s face. Perhaps the very idea that his own grandchild was set to marry a man of his own generation was enough to make him faint. Perhaps the reason that he joined me, through it all, was due to the guilt he felt for my expulsion from the family.

As our carriage neared the manor’s unadorned gates, we came to a stop. The gates were opened, the carriage rumbled back into motion, and we traveled for quite some time before we came to another stop.

“Everything is ready, sir.”

My grandfather was first to alight from the carriage. While he did, I made sure that my hair and clothes were in order and rehearsed the bright smile I would wear upon my introduction. I had declined the accompaniment of personal maids for the wedding, which meant that I was, at least for this part of the journey, looking after myself. My grandfather had been stubbornly insistent about me bringing maids, but I had refused to budge. I told him I would find some upon my arrival.

When my grandfather finally called for me, I came out doing my utmost to play my role. He put out his hand, and I took it as I slowly made my way out of the carriage. At this stage, however, I did not speak and kept my head politely lowered.

“Margrave, this is my granddaughter Karen. Please take good care of her.”

The two men appeared to be acquainted. In any case, it was only after my grandfather spoke that I raised my head. Standing before me were my new

husband and his servants.

“Welcome, Miss Karen,” said the margrave, “I am grateful for you coming all this way.”

“Margrave, it is a pleasure to meet you,” I replied.

As I supposed was to be expected, there were quite a number of people. Twenty, at least. I could also hear something of a commotion farther back, and I noticed some villagers had climbed the fence to get a better look at things. This wasn't particularly surprising; it was only natural that rumors had spread about the girl who had willingly come to the countryside to marry an old man.

I brushed away these thoughts and smiled at the elderly gent who was to be my husband. At a glance, he did appear to be the gentle sort. He was quite thin in terms of build, with a full head of white hair, and a subtle but stately beard. He looked like a very kind man, and without the beard I was sure he would have looked a little younger.

The margrave reached out to me with his hand. I released my grandfather's hand and put my hand over my new husband's, bringing our official introductions to a close.

“I'm sure you've had a long and tiring journey,” he said. “Take some time to relax in your room for a spell.”

My grandfather and the count were going to discuss a few things over tea while I settled in. I was guided by an older woman who looked to be a true veteran among the staff and a younger maid about my age. The younger maid was to be my personal assistant. I wondered if perhaps she had been employed specifically because of her age.

And though I keep on calling it the countryside, I could tell by the brisk efficiency of the staff that this was no ordinary frontier region.

“Your room is separated from the master's by three rooms,” explained the older maid. “You've only just arrived and there's much still to get accustomed to. Please don't feel the need to rush anything.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” I replied. “Wow, this room is so pretty. And so spacious too.”

“We were unsure if it would match the tastes of...someone so young...”

“It’s perfect. So much better than something excessively ostentatious. I think I’ll get along just fine here.”

I noticed a specific tone in the way the maid said “someone so young,” but deliberately ignored it. We entered the room and the windows were opened. The lace curtains fluttered as a breeze drifted in.

The margrave’s manor was three stories built in the shape of a “U” with a garden at the center of it. The lord of the manor and his family resided on the third floor. The second floor housed the guest rooms, and the first floor was made up of the dining room, living room, and study. The servants, I was told, occupied rooms on both the first and second floors.

“You can ask for any further details if you’re curious. Now, as for today’s schedule...”

The younger maid looked nervous as the veteran continued to speak. As I listened, I looked around and observed my room. It was so sparse of decorations one might have thought it was lacking! But that was just fine! One might have thought it too simple for a young noblewoman, overly rustic, even. Perhaps other girls my age might have been disappointed, but when I looked more closely at the furniture, I could see that it was all skillfully crafted and ornately designed. None of it was cheap, that was certain. None of it was lavish or luxurious, which was perfect.

“It’s a wonderful room,” I remarked.

The words were my honest thoughts, and yet the young maid’s eyes went wide with surprise. The veteran looked a tad surprised too, but showed no signs of it impeding her explanations.

“As for the wedding ceremony... Family members are set to arrive later. Dinner arrangements have therefore been prepared for my lord and lady alone. Unless, that is, it makes you uncomfortable...”

“No, I don’t mind. That’s no surprise, considering how everyone feels.”

It wasn’t an easy thing for the maid to bring up, and so she was surprised at how casually I accepted things. But I’d been expecting as much. I was not going

to be welcomed with open arms.

Incidentally, the wedding ceremony was not going to be the type of celebration held for a *new* wife. Everything was being done for a *second* wife. While it would have been fine to throw a party with all the relatives, that was not the case. I imagined that some relatives flat-out rejected the idea of our marriage from the outset. Saying that they would arrive later was just an attempt to brush things under the rug.

Given that the wedding was forced in the first place, this much was to be assumed.

“More importantly,” I said, changing the subject, “might I have a cup of tea? Being in that carriage for so long has left me terribly thirsty.”

“Oh, I-I’ll prepare it immediately,” said the younger maid.

“Nico, there’s no need to be in such a panic...” said the veteran. “Oh, that girl...”

Nico seemed oblivious to the older maid, Mrs. Henrik’s, advice.

“Her education leaves a lot to be desired,” continued Mrs. Henrik. “My apologies.”

“It’s nice that she seems so energetic,” I said. “In any case, it’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is ours. While we likely can’t provide you the kind of refined hospitality you would find in the capital, we will do our utmost to ensure that you are comfortable here.”

“Thank you. There’s still so much I don’t know, and much I’m sure I’ll ask you for help with. I hope you don’t mind if I lean on you for such things.”

Mrs. Henrik was like the margrave’s steward, one of the manor’s head servants. She watched over everyone, including Nico, my personal assistant. My guess was that she was a bit shocked at how different I was from what she had expected. I could feel hints of it even though she maintained a prim and proper attitude. I was prepared to brush that off with a beautiful smile.

Which reminds me... I know it’s a bit late to be bringing it up now, but in

terms of looks I sat squarely in the realm of beautiful. While it was true I wasn't anywhere near the realm of *ungodly* beauty that Reinald occupied, I can say with great confidence that I was some ten thousand times more beautiful than I had ever been as a Japanese person. After all, the Kirstens were a good family that had persisted for many generations. They had the luxury that nobles do in terms of being picky about who would continue their bloodline, so naturally that resulted in good-looking children.

"Well, what now?" I whispered to myself.

The windows were bay windows, complete with terrace chairs to look out over the garden. The view was truly stunning, and one could see even over the fence to the lands of the greater domain.

"This room boasts the best view in the manor," said Mrs. Henrik.

"It's breathtaking," I remarked. "I had thought the place was sparse in terms of greenery, but I see there's a huge forest over there."

"Some do their hunting over that way. However, past the forest, on the other side of it, are sheer cliffs, and beyond that lies the domain of our neighbors."

"Going there is prohibited?" I asked.

"No, many of the domain's inhabitants go as far as the lake. It's fine to do so through the spring and summer."

There were guards on patrol in these parts. I had noticed a few here and there, with swords at their waists. It was an odd feeling, having their gazes look over me, the new resident, but I knew in time I would get used to it.

"But this room really is splendid," I said as I continued to gaze out at the forest. "It's so beautiful."

I had managed to flee all the way to the frontier, but this was not where things ended. There was still much I had to do, and I could not afford to let my mind grow lazy. And more to the point, I had a problem looming in the very near future that required immediate attention. My thoughts had raced in search of an answer, but being that it all came down to the actions of the other party, there was little I could actually do about it.

I am talking about our wedding night.

Oh no, I don't know anything about making children, ew. I'm scared now!

I wasn't so stupid as to try such a tantrum in person. I *could* have, of course, but it was the fool's option. When I thought about the future, and what I wanted to do with it, I knew that making my way through the world playing the role of the fool would only end up exhausting me. That and, considering my personality, it wouldn't be an easy act to keep up.

I was prepared for the worst, so to speak, though I wanted to avoid it if at all possible. It would be one thing if the margrave was the sort of man to listen to reason, but that came down to luck. I told myself I'd first focus on gathering what information I could, and that was when I heard the door open. My maid Nico had returned with tea.

"I-I a-apologize f-for the wait!" she stammered, nervousness hampering her language faculties. "I has brought you a pots of tea."

Mrs. Henrik looked as if someone had forced her to eat an especially sour lemon. All the same, she knew she could not scold the girl for her lapse in etiquette (and language ability) here. Nico's face was bright red, all the way to her ears, and it was all I could do to keep a straight face so as to allow the girl to maintain her sense of pride.

I took a seat, thinking that once I had relaxed and soothed my thirst I would move on to asking some questions, but then it happened.

"Uh..." came the voice, followed quickly by a cry that went "Ahh!"

Even if you were trying to be polite, you couldn't have called Nico's cry cute. In any case, the teapot she carried was sent flying through the air. Nobody could do a thing about it. Tea went everywhere, and a good portion of it all over my arm. I wanted to take my shirt off immediately, but it was tailor-made to fit perfectly. It was practically stuck.

"Ni..." uttered Mrs. Henrik, and then, "My lady!"

"Oww..." muttered Nico, who followed this with a scream of "M-M-My lady?!"

Mrs. Henrik's shock and Nico's terror echoed throughout the room. I felt sweat beading on my forehead as I applied pressure to the burn. Pain pulsed through my arm, and a small corner of my mind marveled to think of how interesting my first day as the margrave's wife had been going.

A doctor was sent for immediately and one arrived quickly. She was a plump woman in her forties named Emma. She wasn't especially beautiful, but she had a charming, friendly face. She was initially surprised to find me soaking my arm in a tub of water, but she quickly regained her wits and cut through my sleeve with a pair of scissors so she could more easily treat my burns.

"The pain may linger for a time," she said, "but there won't be any permanent scarring. I'll make some ointment for you when we're done and have my son deliver it."

Mrs. Henrik was even more relieved than I was to hear that the burn would heal without scarring.

"Oh, what a relief!" She cried. "Thank you ever so much, Emma!"

"Think nothing of it," replied the doctor. "It was very much due to your swift ability to react to the situation."

"Oh, that wasn't me, that was Lady Karen. She told us to prepare the tub of water."

Doctor Emma, who was more accurately a pharmacist, was a licensed doctor employed as Margrave Conrad's private physician. I could see that she and Mrs. Henrik were on friendly terms.

"It is indeed very important to cool any burns as soon as possible," said Emma with a smile. "You're very well informed, Lady Karen."

"It's just something I picked up in a book..." I muttered.

"Nonetheless, such knowledge is important. As is the wit to put it to practical use. Now, let's rub some ointment on it to help relieve the pain."

My arm was blistered and discolored. It stung when I took it out of the water, but the good doctor quickly wiped it with a cloth, readied it for bandaging, then applied some of the ointment she'd brought with her.

“Ow...” I muttered.

“It’ll hurt for the time being, but do your best to bear with the pain.”

My burns *did* hurt when they were touched, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. The slimy green ointment stunk of herbs, and it was rather coarse too; it prickled as it sunk in. All I could do was grit my teeth and wait, hoping that the painkiller would eventually work its magic.

“Thank you,” I said when Doctor Emma was done.

“Don’t thank me, I’m simply glad to see that it wasn’t too serious. The pain will fade soon, so just be patient.”

The doctor decided to stay and keep an eye on me, and to be honest I was glad for the company; it made for a nice distraction.

“Doctor Emma,” I started. “You don’t hail from a noble family, do you?”

The woman was well dressed, and while her clothes were neat and tidy, they looked rather old. It didn’t seem to me that she spent much money on her appearance. The fact that her skin also boasted a healthy tan was another giveaway.

“My apologies, but no, I don’t,” she replied, with an embarrassed chuckle. “I do hope it doesn’t upset you. This is the countryside, you see, and it’s difficult to entice doctors from the capital to relocate to such a location. That’s why Kamil asked me to work for him. He knew of my training as a pharmacist, and so I have been his acting doctor since.”

“My lady, Doctor Emma excels at her job,” added Mrs. Henrik, somewhat flustered. “The people of the region adore her, and she learned her skills from physicians in the *capital*. I can assure you that she is not simply an ‘acting’ doctor. She is, it must be said, exemplary.”

Mrs. Henrik made sure to put an emphasis on exactly *where* Emma had learned her skills. I felt awful for the misunderstanding; it hadn’t been my intention whatsoever.

“I apologize,” I said. “I was merely curious to know where you studied, Doctor Emma. I’m not concerned with your lineage, so please rest easy.”

Mrs. Henrik, who had been resolute in defending the doctor, was now visibly confused by what I'd said. I was certain now that the two women were good friends. Mrs. Henrik's reaction reminded me again of how she had treated me when we first met. She and Emma had probably expected me to be a young woman of high noble standing with a short temper and little knowledge of the world.

Sweat once again beaded on my forehead, and I began to feel a slight nausea coming on. Doctor Emma brought out a handkerchief and dabbed at it. As a physician, she worked quickly and efficiently, but now that she was done treating my wounds, she felt much more like a kind, warm-hearted mother.

"But what a pity for such a thing to happen in such a beautiful room," she remarked. "Your first day here, and already a stroke of misfortune."

"I'm sure it will be cleaned in no time," I said. "But more importantly..."

Where did Nico go?

Once she'd spilled the tea, Nico had essentially frozen. She stood in place as she wept, her face pale as a sheet. I'd had her fetch the water for the tub so she'd have something to do, but I hadn't seen her since.

"Mrs. Henrik, where is Nico?" I asked.

The maid immediately took on the aura of a schoolteacher.

"She's gone to see the margrave," was her reply.

The furrow of her brow told me that the girl was being scolded. After all, I was the margrave's bride, and on the day of my arrival Nico had spilled boiling tea all over me. With my grandfather also here in attendance, the Conrads had their reputation to consider.

"Be sure to give the girl some sweets when she's done," I said.

"Some sweets, my lady?"

"If she has reflected on her mistake, I mean... Which I'm sure she will have. I'm certain she will be more than adequately admonished about all of this."

Nico had been almost completely useless from the moment I'd been burned. She'd simply stood there and cried. The extent of her panic told me that her

mistake had been the result of nerves, and I wasn't interested in punishing someone who was already so distraught. I also didn't believe that she'd been putting on an act; anybody that talented deserved an award.

"Please tell her to be more careful in the future," I said.

It wasn't easy for me to remain composed, what with the burns and the sweating, but I was in *pain*. The fact I was able to maintain a modicum of composure at all was, I thought, commendable. In my thirties, I would have put an ice pack on my burns, then promptly collapsed at my desk. With that in mind, I gave myself a pat on the back for sitting in place and maintaining decent manners.

"Understood... I will pass along your message," said Mrs. Henrik.

"There's no rush," I said.

But Mrs. Henrik left the room in a flustered panic anyway. I was shocked by the woman's haste, but the good doctor helped put things into perspective.

"You're not going to have Nico fired, I see," she said.

Oh, now I get it.

I made the mistake of looking at it all like a Japanese person again.

To put it in perspective: a servant had just burned their master. And, however compassionate a person that master was, to cause them physical harm on a first meeting was *the* most disastrous way in which a servant could possibly err. It would be no surprise for such a servant to be removed from their position or dismissed completely. It was also quite common for noble families to whip their staff for their mistakes.

"Well, it wasn't anything serious," I said. "And I think it's rather cruel to take someone's livelihood for such a thing."

"It makes me happy to know that you are so kind," said Emma. "Nico's parents are friends of mine. The girl is a touch impetuous indeed, but she has a good heart."

Well, then. That's rather interesting.

I was suddenly all the more glad I hadn't scolded Nico myself. It had never

been my intent to do such a thing anyway, but Doctor Emma was very much loved by the people here. It would have done me no good to have left a bad impression so quickly.

“I was wondering, Doctor Emma,” I said, changing the subject. “Do you live nearby? I couldn’t help but notice just how quickly you were able to get here.”

She might’ve been the margrave’s personal physician, but I very much doubted that the woman lived here in the manor. And while it was an innocent question, Doctor Emma’s smile struck me as suddenly tense.

“O-Oh, I just happened to be nearby!” she said, nodding profusely and speaking at a noticeably higher pitch. “I was informed by Ben, the gardener here, that you were injured!”

“It must be so hard for you, traveling here and there all the time. I suppose we were lucky you were here to see to my treatment so swiftly.”

“Yes, thank the heavens for such a fortuitous twist of fate. Oh, yes, about your ointment. I’ll make it up as soon as I return home. It will be delivered to you by evening.”

“Thank you ever so much.”

Doctor Emma brewed me a new pot of tea and just as I was beginning to grow accustomed to the throbbing pain of my arm, there came a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

The boy who entered looked to be around my age, and I knew immediately whose child he was. He wore a slightly old pair of pants and an equally well-worn shirt. He wasn’t a member of nobility, but nonetheless his eyes shone with intelligence. He looked just like his mother, Emma. He appeared to be somewhat nervous, but his expression was grim and didn’t so much as glance at me while he spoke.

“Mother,” he said.

“Oh, Sven,” replied Doctor Emma. “Is something the matter?”

She stood to her feet and ran to the boy. The color had drained from her face for some reason, and the reason for that quickly became clear.

“Why are you still here?” the boy cried. “You’re done treating the woman, aren’t you? So come back already!”

“Sven!”

Sven—the boy I assumed was the doctor’s son—appeared to hate me. Rather than introducing himself, he shot me the kind of glare one usually reserved for their enemies; when their hatred is such that murder is the only recourse. But we were meeting for the first time, I couldn’t understand what reason he could have for such harsh feelings. So I remained silent, simply observing how events unfolded.

“You will put a stop to such rude behavior immediately!” said the doctor. “Apologize to Lady Karen and introduce yourself right this instant!”

With her son here, Doctor Emma was in full-on mother mode. She took her stubborn son’s head with her hand and forced him to bow.

“But, b-but...” Sven stammered.

“No buts!” snapped Doctor Emma, who then turned to me. “My apologies, Lady Karen. This is my eldest son. He isn’t usually so rude to people!”

I felt sorry just watching the situation, but I tried to show them I wasn’t angry with a wry chuckle.

“While I must admit I don’t really know what is going on, I’m not in the least angry,” I replied. “And if you do have other matters to attend to, by all means, please feel free to see to them, Doctor Emma.”

“I’m so very sorry! I’ll make sure Sven gets a proper talking-to!”

Doctor Emma couldn’t stay any longer, given her son’s behavior, so she summarily dragged him from the room. The young Sven looked at me as they left, so I waved them goodbye.

I do wish he wouldn’t glare at me like that...

Once Doctor Emma and Sven were gone, I sat down on the bed in the adjoining room. Had I been at the Kirsten household, a servant would have been at the ready the moment I entered a new room, but the margrave didn’t boast the same luxury. I liked this, however. It meant I could relax.

All the same, it doesn't seem that my arrival is being universally accepted.

I sighed at the thought and lifted up my bandaged arm. I had no choice but to play the long game and take my time.

"All the same, I should be thankful for this painful inconvenience, I suppose. It gave me quite the opportunity to better understand the people here..."

There was bound to be a fuss, of that there was no doubt, but if the margrave was as kind as everyone said, then tonight was bound to be quiet. That evening, dinner was held for the margrave, my grandfather, and myself. Just as Mrs. Henrik had already informed me, nobody else was in attendance. It was just two elderly gentlemen and a young maiden in a room of the manor that wasn't often used. Mostly it was my job to sit and listen, but my grandfather and the margrave were both talented conversationalists, so I wasn't bored as the two of them regaled me with stories of their youth. The biggest takeaway from the evening was the understanding that the margrave was—as had already been said—a good person. He did not visit my room that night, and I slept most soundly.

Nico had been gone the whole day prior, but the following morning she appeared at my room and gave a tearful apology, which I accepted. We introduced ourselves, and henceforth we were master and servant. While I changed out of my pajamas, Nico brewed tea. I'd refused help when it came to getting dressed. I could do it on my own, so long as it wasn't anything too extravagant.

"Er, my lady," said Nico, a touch hesitant. "I have a message from the margrave. Once your grandfather has been seen off today, he has business to attend to and will not return until tomorrow."

"Oh, is that so? Very well, then," I replied.

Er, wasn't grandfather planning to stay for three days?

At the breakfast table that morning, there was a most uncomfortable air between my grandfather and the margrave. My grandfather looked utterly furious, whereas the margrave looked to have shrunk down to about half his size. One could have easily mistaken who was the lord of the manor and who was its visiting guest.

“Karen, I am returning to the Kirstens due to urgent business,” said my grandfather. “You are to enjoy the margrave’s hospitality for a few more days.”

“Very well. Do be careful on your trip,” I replied.

A few more days? He makes it sound like I won’t be staying here after that.

I assumed then that his ire was due to a matter he did not want to speak about. When breakfast was finished, my grandfather left for the capital, and I was left on my own. Fortunately, the medicine I’d received had worked a treat and I was in fine health.

“M-My lady?” said Nico. “I’d be happy to talk with you if you deem me a fitting conversational partner.”

By this time, the margrave had left the manor. Mrs. Henrik, too, couldn’t spend every waking hour with me, and so Nico was the next best person to chat with.

“Why, thank you,” I replied. “I’d love to learn more about the manor. I live here now, after all.”

There was much I wanted to learn about the place, but it was still only my second day. No matter how inquisitive I was, nobody was going to give me everything I craved just yet.

“What say we take a walk through the manor to the gardens?” I suggested.

Anything outside of the manor grounds was probably asking too much; that much was made clear by the relieved look on Nico’s face when I made my suggestion.

“Then, allow me to give you a full tour of the manor’s rooms!” she said brightly.

“Wonderful. Yesterday was a tad on the rushed side.”

As we left my room and proceeded downstairs, passing servants bowed to me politely. That said, their flustered looks made it clear they were still getting used to things. My guess was that the margrave was close to his people, and so they weren’t very used to more stiff and formal greetings. The awkwardness on display told me that, outside of the manor steward and Mrs. Henrik, these

servants had been taught formal manners but were anything but comfortable with them.

“Um, my lady,” said Nico by way of explanation. “Everyone looks a little tense, but that’s just because they’re not quite accustomed to the manners of the capital.”

Nico appeared to have something of an airhead quality to her, but one couldn’t question how well she read expressions. Though I hadn’t commented on the servants and their stilted behavior, Nico’s timing in terms of bringing the topic up was impeccable.

“That’s quite all right,” I replied. “I’m not bothered in the slightest. I daresay we’d be better off without all of that bothersome etiquette anyway. By the way, Nico, do you happen to know why my grandfather was so angry earlier?”

“Huh? N-No... No! I don’t know a thing!”

I was so very glad in that instant that Nico, the dear child, was so easy to read. I pondered what to do with this information as we headed out into the garden, having finished exploring the second and first floors.

I noticed that the garden was decorated with more than just visually pleasing flowers. There were also a number of wild grasses and herbs, some of which I’d never seen, even at school. As I knelt down for a better look, Nico was all too happy to enlighten me as to what I was looking at.

“Those particular flowers were planted so Doctor Emma can make medicines,” she explained. “She simply can’t cultivate enough at her own home, and so the margrave offered to lend a hand.”

“So that’s why everyone is always visiting, then. Doctor Emma and the margrave clearly have the people in mind, don’t they?”

“Yes! They’re both wonderful, amazing people! Everybody adores them!”

The bright, bubbly voice with which Nico spoke told me just how beloved the two of them were.

When I looked up, I noticed an old man in a straw hat, a gardener, looking down at me with a worried expression. The moment our eyes met, however, he

hurriedly turned away.

Whaaat? But he couldn't possibly have enough information to judge my person yet. It's been little more than a day!

I stood up so we could continue our tour through the garden, when who should arrive but Sven, the young boy who hated me. But unlike the previous day, on this occasion he was not alone. He was holding hands with a young boy of about ten, who looked just like Doctor Emma.

The moment he caught sight of me, Sven's eyes narrowed into a glare and he walked over. I was rather glad—he was exactly the person I was looking for.

“Good morning,” I said. “Are you out for a walk with your brother?”

There was no telling what the young Sven would do, but I decided to speak to him all the same. Sven, however, summarily ignored me. He kept his anger to himself—probably because Doctor Emma had had a stern word with him—and refused to look me in the eye. His loathing was quite impressive, given it was only the second time we'd met.

“Who's she, brother?” asked the young boy.

“Don't look at her,” replied Sven. “You're not to speak to her.”

“How cruel,” I said. “We only met yesterday. All I did was say hello and ask you a question. Isn't your reaction a bit much?”

“I don't have any reason to talk to the likes of you, you disg...”

He was going to say disgusting, or perhaps disgraceful, I just know it.

Nonetheless, at the sight of my face he shrunk back slightly and turned away.

That's my face one, Sven zero on the scoreboard, I suppose...

“Look, I don't mind if you've decided to hate me,” I said, “but I don't know *why* you feel that way. Would you at least tell me why you don't like me?”

“No.”

Sven was at that awkward age where stubbornness won out over conversation. Having given his answer, Sven took off and disappeared, dragging his brother along as he went.

“Nico,” I said.

“Y-Yes...?”

“Do *you* know why that boy hates me?”

Nico shook her head with great fervor. I glanced at the gardener again, but he made sure he was looking elsewhere. I knew our guard wasn’t going to be much help either; he was simply too far away.

“Well, it’s only my second day,” I said. “No use in trying to rush anything.”

There were stages to acclimating to a new environment. Take the workplace, for example. There were the first three days. Then the first week. Then it was about a month before you really saw everyone’s true colors. Then three months before you were all settled in. I wasn’t expecting much from my first month in Conrad, but my grandfather’s sudden change of character left me anxious. I had no intention of returning to the Kirstens after just a few days here.

By greeting and indulging in light conversation with the people of the manor, I came to understand Margrave Kamil’s personality. It was clear that he was loved by his people, just as I’d been told. He did not charge any taxes above what the nation demanded, he listened carefully to the problems of his people, and he made sure to handle any wild animals that caused havoc among the farmlands.

Outside of Doctor Emma, the margrave also paid for another physician and traveling performers. The performers played shows regularly throughout the region, so the people always had entertainment to look forward to. As the margrave had invested widely over the course of his career, he maintained ties with a great many nobles; it was in this way that he became connected with the Kirstens too.

Perhaps everything I’ve just described sounds like exactly what’s expected of a regional lord. However, it must be said that *much* of the nobility had tremendous difficulty when it came to “expected” governance. This was particularly true at the frontiers, which were away from the watchful eyes of bigger cities. It wasn’t all that uncommon for people to be crushed entirely when they gathered up their courage and looked to bring charges against their lord. Many such lords were greedy, yes, but not so greedy that their behavior

was considered a truly serious crime. When a person failed in their claims to bring their lord to justice, they were publicly ostracized. I'd heard of this from friends at school who'd fled from rural areas.

It seemed these worries and concerns were shared universally among countries, and even worlds. In this world, however, one did not have phones or the internet to turn to. In terms of magic, there did exist convenient ways to converse with someone at long distances, but such tools were not readily available.

I spent the next two days in Conrad simply learning about the place. The margrave was so busy that he did not visit my room, and so I had a healthy life in which I slept and woke early. That said, I was far more bored than I'd imagined, so much so that I could finally understand those old women whose eyes lit up at the mere *hint* of a new rumor on which to feast. This was most unbecoming of my mental age, so I knew I needed to acquire a way to kill time posthaste.

By my fourth day, I'd completely forgotten about my burns. The bandages were removed, and not a scar could be found. Every day at the manor was peaceful and, as always, Nico arrived at my room in the morning. She was always trying to go somewhere with me or follow me around, so I told her I wasn't feeling well and I intended to stay in bed.

Obviously, I was lying, and I quickly slipped out of the room to go to my desired location, a room in which the servants gathered to read books and gossip. Still, the act of hiding and eavesdropping was surprisingly hard on my heart; I decided I wasn't keen on doing it a second time. There was also the fact that I had to come up with an excuse for Nico, who had been running around in tears searching for me; that was a trial in and of itself.

On my fifth day, I received a letter from my grandfather. Its contents, along with what I had overheard from the manor servants, made me even more sure of things.

Come the sixth day, I heard that Doctor Emma was visiting, and so I thought it was time for a discussion. The steward and the manor guards tried to stop me, but I powered through and found the margrave and the good doctor looking

rather serious. They were also shocked, but they let me in.

“I know you’re both terribly busy,” I said with a smile, “but, might I have a word with the two of you? I’m here because you’re together, so I assume you know what it is I’d like to discuss.”

It was here that the steward, Whateley, and Mrs. Henrik’s truest skill of “reading the room” came into play. They excused all the staff swiftly and moved the three of us to a small room used especially for business discussions.

The margrave and Doctor Emma sat opposite me, next to one another. They looked very much like a couple. Meanwhile, I, the margrave’s wife, sat opposite the two of them. Still, I was happy with the seating arrangement.

As Mrs. Henrik poured tea, the margrave spoke.

“And what is it you would like to discuss?” he asked.

“I apologize if my broaching the topic was somewhat abrupt, but I’m not here to start a quarrel, so please relax. I’m not mad at Doctor Emma or Sven either, for that matter.”

I was fairly certain they’d known what this was about the moment I turned up. The margrave and Doctor Emma both heaved great sighs, but Emma in particular looked as though she were praying to the heavens.

“My apologies,” said the margrave. “I know it was wrong to hide things from you, but I simply wasn’t sure how best to talk about it...”

“Given that it’s public knowledge, I would’ve appreciated you telling me,” I replied.

“I’m just a commoner,” said Doctor Emma. “Our positions are vastly different, and the last thing I wanted to do was make light of your rank.”

“Under different circumstances, if you’d gotten on my bad side, Sven could have been in danger...” I said, pausing for a moment before adding, “No, I’m sorry. That wasn’t a nice way of putting it.”

“Miss Karen,” said the margrave. “Emma and Sven are my responsibility. She is not my wife in any formal sense but, as you now know, our relationship is known openly here. It has been this way for many years, and so it was my

assumption that the Kirsten family understood this fact when talks of marriage were brought to the table.”

“I understand neither of you had any ulterior motives. If anything, this problem stems from a lack of proper inquiry, and is the fault of those who did not inform me.”

I was *very* doubtful that the people who organized this marriage proposal were unaware of the margrave and the doctor’s relationship. That aside, I smiled so as to show that I was truthfully not angry.

I’m sure that by this stage you’ve worked things out yourself, but allow me a moment to explain. Doctor Emma was Margrave Kamil’s common-law wife. They raised two sons between them, and though I wasn’t sure of the exact lineage of the younger boy, Sven was most definitely their son.

“The reason my grandfather left in such a rage was because of your relationship, yes?” I ventured.

“Exactly that,” replied the margrave. “I brought it up, thinking that he already knew about it. I still can’t believe he didn’t know...”

“I heard nothing about it from him,” I said. “So I can only assume by his reaction that he really didn’t know a thing.”

“Then my behavior was most regrettable. On the day you arrived, I asked if it was truly okay that I had both a common-law wife and a son, just to be sure. He was on his feet in an instant.”

“Oh, my... In any case, it’s clear you’re surprised that we didn’t know of the relationship,” I said. “So, who *did* you talk to about it?”

“The Kirstens’ head family, the Dunsts. They know of the relationship. They approached me with the talk of marriage and I attempted to refuse, explaining my de facto relationship with Emma. You were nonetheless recommended as a better alternative.”

Wow, the head family really went for it.

The Dunsts were very insistent, and it was while the margrave was scrambling for a way to turn them down that I came along and jumped on the proposal.

“Given that you are the younger sister of the king’s concubine...” he said. “I had to be especially careful regarding the refusal of such a marriage.”

My grandfather had been informed of things by the head family, which meant that perhaps some information was lost or left out as it passed from person to person. When he *did* find out about the margrave’s wife, he was furious. That said, the marriage was a hurried affair. It was practically *asking* for this very kind of confusion.

In any case, the circumstances were now clear to me, which meant getting into a deeper, more personal subject.

“Am I right in thinking that I cannot ask for these two to leave?” I asked.

“Mrs. Henrik and Whateley are the epitome of trustworthy. As long as I have lived here, I have not hidden a single thing from either of them.”

“Very well. I have no intention of opposing your judgment in the matter.”

My question was more intended to confirm that the steward and Mrs. Henrik would remain for the rest of our discussion. The two of them were standing quietly against the wall where, at least for a time, I would not have to think about them.

I took a sip from my tea to wet my lips and got to the heart of the matter.

Which is to say, I apologized.

“Firstly, let me apologize to the both of you,” I said.

“An apology...?” uttered the margrave.

“Regardless of Doctor Emma’s existence, I nonetheless forced you into this marriage. I should’ve known when I first learned of how long you had stayed single. I should have known then how unlikely such a thing was. I was very rash, there’s no other way to put it.”

I was speaking from the heart. The margrave and Doctor Emma had not registered their marriage on account of their difference in rank, but they had a son between them. Given the margrave’s age, it seemed obvious that it was their intent to remain together as a couple. A sudden marriage to a young girl would have thrown all of that into disarray. And regardless of how Doctor

Emma really felt about the arrangement, she had greeted me with a smile and showed not a hint of displeasure. It was a credit to her strength of character. I very much doubted that I would have been able to stay similarly composed.

“Which is to say, had you known of Emma’s existence, you would not have gone into the marriage?” asked the margrave.

“No. I would have been conflicted, but... I still would have made the same decision.”

This particular point remained unchanged. Choosing Reinald would have locked me into a nigh-inescapable path. The margrave stroked his beard, clearly realizing that I had my reasons for making my decision. Doctor Emma, meanwhile, looked at me with her eyes wide with shock.

“In addition to my apology, I must ask a favor of the two of you,” I said. “Please, for the next three years...or even just for one year...will you let me continue to remain here as the margrave’s wife?”

I wouldn’t ask for children of my own, and I didn’t want any of the margrave’s riches either. If the margrave wanted Sven to be his heir, then I was happy to sign any document to promise that I would not get in the way.

“All I ask is for a little money on which to survive on my own when I leave...” I said.

“What do you mean, when you leave?” asked Doctor Emma, shocked.

I understood her concerns.

“With regard to that, I’m in the process of thinking up a good explanation for the others so as to ensure you and the margrave are left untroubled.”

“Hold on, Karen. I still don’t understand what you’re talking about,” said Doctor Emma.

She was so shocked that she’d lost her veneer of etiquette. The margrave, for his part, looked down at his hands as he thought on the matter. When he raised his eyes again, he was looking straight at me. His gaze was no longer that of a mere individual—it held the weight of his rank as the Margrave of Conrad.

“Actually, when the marriage proposal was first brought to me,” said the

margrave, "I had people look into you."

"Kamil?" uttered Doctor Emma.

It must have been the height of perplexing for the margrave to be told that a sixteen-year-old girl was willingly jumping into an arranged marriage. In this sense, it would have been far stranger for the man to have *not* looked into the circumstances. Judging by Doctor Emma's reaction, however, the margrave had not told his wife about things.

"I see," I said. "Then, you are aware of the scandal."

"Well, the family is well-known, and naturally news of them spreads quickly," he responded. "I wasn't sure if it was something I should speak of to others..."

"I don't mind. Besides, things will be far easier if we bring Doctor Emma up to speed."

The margrave thus informed his wife of the rumors that surrounded me: my mother's selective amnesia and my subsequent disappearance from her mind. He told her of my expulsion from the Kirstens, my time as a commoner, and my return to the family after my sister became the king's concubine.

I glanced around as the margrave spoke and saw that Whateley was already aware of my history. By the brief surprise that flashed across Mrs. Henrik's face, however, it was safe to assume that she wasn't.

"And then, for some reason, the offer of a marriage proposal," the margrave concluded.

"Yes, I believe the idea was to get me as far away as possible," I said.

It was hard to see it as anything other than an act of harassment, but only the Dunst family could speak for certain on their motivations. They had probably thought everything was going to plan until my sister offered up another choice. Then the wires between everyone had gotten all crossed, and suddenly my fate hung in the balance.

"I have Emma, so it was my intention to refuse..."

"The fact that you did not do so in time was a blessing for me," I replied.

"So it would seem. I gather there is a reason that you could not accept

Marquis Rodenwald's second son as your husband?"

"In short, yes."

"Hmm..." he hummed.

"Let me say that I hold nothing against the Rodenwald family. And it isn't quite a grudge against the Kirstens either. They *did* put me through some hard times, but I bear no particularly strong ill will."

I had to let the margrave know that this was not a mere case of reckless rebellion, and so I couldn't skirt the issue. I explained that while I had fallen to the status of commoner, I had begun living on my own and attended school. The margrave frowned when he learned of how little I received in the way of support, but he continued to listen. In any case, the point of the story was that I had grown accustomed to my new life.

"I should add that, for as long as I can remember, I've never really felt like a member of the nobility anyway," I said. "Ordinary life was not at all such an awful experience for me. It was never my intent to return to the Kirstens after what had transpired, and had it not been for my sister, my plan was to graduate, work for a time, then leave the country."

"Leave the country? And immigrate elsewhere?"

"As long as I stay here, I will always be seen as the girl who was expelled from her family. I am certain that, in some way or another, these rumors have already reached your ears too, have they not?"

The margrave's silence answered for him. But I wasn't looking for sympathy; I was looking for *freedom*. A freedom in which I could gorge myself on beer and a fully roasted chicken without anybody looking down on me.

"That is why, and I do apologize for how it will sound, I compared you and Reinald Rodenwald. I put the two of you on a set of scales, so to speak."

"Hmm," murmured the margrave. "And what was it that these scales measured, exactly?"

"I hope you won't think poorly of me, but my criteria was how quickly I might attain freedom upon either marriage."

Admittedly, my answer was the height of disrespect. Such a statement could have easily gotten me kicked out of the manor for angering the margrave, but he was a generous man who allowed me to speak so candidly. And while the three others in the room all grew suddenly tense, the margrave himself stayed perfectly calm.

“Ah, so a matter of age, then,” he said thoughtfully. “It is true that the elderly pass away far sooner than the young.”

Doctor Emma looked worriedly at her husband, who silently stroked his beard. I, too, felt somewhat nervous and kept my mouth shut. After a time, the margrave began again.

“That was quite the gamble,” he said. “If that was your plan, you needed to choose your partner wisely, and it was in your best interest to move cautiously.”

My shoulders slumped at his words. I knew it as well as he did; even though I hadn’t had the luxury of time, my scheme had been extremely reckless.

“You’re right,” I replied.

“Kamil,” said Doctor Emma, “given the girl’s circumstances...”

“Yes, I know,” the margrave replied. “I’m not scolding her. That said, I’m not praising her either. We’re all adults here, after all. But the letter you sent us had your *sister’s* name on it, yes?”

“Yes, I believed that to be the more definitive move.”

“Really, all of that should have been handled by your guardians. Your parents. Had your plan backfired, the people around you could’ve been harmed. Do you understand?”

I had...meant to consider all of this. But with an experienced elderly gentleman suddenly putting me on the spot, I was made all the more aware of the illicit card I had played so as to have my way. When the margrave saw that I understood what I had done, he nodded thoughtfully.

“Very good,” he said simply, taking a sip from his cup of tea before leaning back in his chair.

So...that's it?

"There's no point scolding anyone who already understands the error of their ways," he chuckled.

Gone was the penetrating gaze he wore earlier, now replaced by a friendly expression and a light, easy smile.

"I apologize if I frightened you," he continued. "But I cannot simply sit back and watch if a young woman looks as though she may put herself in danger. Perhaps it is simply lucky that you came here. I want you to remember that things might not have gone nearly as well for you had it been the lord of a different region."

I nodded. It was often said that, depending on the region, the lord of a domain owned the right to a girl's virginity and could be rather tyrannical about it. I assumed that was what he was alluding to.

"Now, let's get back to the reason you called for this meeting. You had something you wanted to discuss with us. Oh, actually, before that..." he uttered, then pointed at the table. "Mrs. Henrik, would you prepare some light snacks? Conversations of a deep and intricate nature require a break of the sweet variety."

Mrs. Henrik bowed respectfully, then noticed my gaze and bashfully looked away.

"My apologies, Ms. Karen," the margrave started again. "In my old age and time away from the public eye, it would appear I've become rather conservative. These past six days, I've avoided discussing things with you."

"I, too, was very guarded in a number of ways. You have my apologies also."

Oh, now I see.

The margrave had no issue apologizing to someone not only much younger than him, but also of lower station. This was perhaps the very reason he was so beloved by his people. I was also fortunate that both he and Doctor Emma were sympathetic toward my plight.

"Miss Karen, would you tell me what it is you want?" he asked.

"I long to leave the Kirsten family and this country," I replied.

"That is your true desire?"

"Completely and utterly. When I was expelled from the Kirsten family two years ago, I felt it swirling within me. But as I lived on my own, the desire only grew."

"In which case, why was it you so obediently went through with this marriage proposal in the first place?"

In other words... *Why didn't you just leave the family outright?*

This was not something a young nobleman's daughter talked about, but the old man just came straight out with it. This was not a joke either, and from the margrave's expression it seemed clear he was searching for how exactly our relationship would work. Everything he'd said until now showed that he had grasped the situation, so I decided to meet his honesty with my own.

"It is a matter of gratitude," I said.

"Gratitude, you say?"

"Though their care was...temporary, the Kirstens raised me for fourteen years. And when the whole commotion came about, my grandparents and my siblings all worried about me. They prepared money for me on which to survive, and it was through their support that I was able to attend school."

However I did it, I was intent on making it up to the family for that support. However crazy the whole ordeal was, if I ignored them all and simply left, it would cast shame upon the Kirstens and my sister. For this reason, I chose not to throw it all away and flee.

"It is the duty of parents to raise their child," the margrave rubbed his temples. "You shouldn't feel like this... But then again, I suppose it is not my place to speak on the matter."

"But even if I were to have left the country immediately, I don't have any work experience," I said. "Any place willing to hire me would likely be the bottom of the barrel."

"Ah, I see. So if you left and went across the mountains to Latoria, you

wouldn't be able to find decent work because our nations are on poor terms. That would leave the Empire as a prospective destination..."

I know it's rather late, but the nation in which I lived was called Falkrum. Quite the tongue twister. It boasted a wealth of both land and natural resources. For this reason, it was in the difficult position of being sandwiched between the nation of Latoria and the Arrendle Empire with its powerful military. Both nations were chomping at the bit to claim a piece of Falkrum's territory as their own. Over the last thirty years, however, trade with the Empire had proved fruitful, and the economy ran thanks to the money made from natural resources, merchants, traveling performers, and mercenaries.

"I am not very well-versed when it comes to the empire," I admitted. "I heard that there is often conflict between potential heirs to leadership, making the state of affairs rather unstable."

"Quite dangerous for a girl on her own," commented the margrave.

And yet, he also knew that if I worked in Falkrum, I would never escape my past. The margrave stroked his beard again. He was pondering my position, and it appeared to be causing him quite the headache.

"My plan was to work for a time upon my graduation," I explained. "I wanted to think that if I left Falkrum with some experience under my belt, finding work wouldn't be so challenging."

"But then your sister got married. Actually, we still have yet to hear any word at all from Lady Saburova regarding the way in which you used her name. She must care for you rather deeply."

This was true. She had not sent a letter or any kind of message whatsoever, but my sister was never one to simply sit and simmer when she was mad. Rather, she was the type to jump on a horse so she could scold me in person.

"It's safe to say, then, that Lady Saburova's desire to see your honor restored comes from a place of honesty, though it seems you both misunderstood one another's intent."

I let out something of a dry chuckle in response. For two years we'd been on different wavelengths...

Mrs. Henrik arrived with our snacks. Doctor Emma then went about making sure we all had an equal portion of the buttery treats, which were spread with very heavy helpings of red jam. It was practically a sweet unto itself, there was so much of it.

“It looks wonderful,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Everybody loves Mrs. Henrik’s baked treats,” said Doctor Emma. “She’s usually not so generous with the jam as she doesn’t like to waste it, but she’s gone all out today.”

The doctor flashed Mrs. Henrik a knowing look, but the maid pretended not to notice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said as she prepared fresh cups of tea. “The jam was going to go bad if I left it, so I simply used what was left.”

The treats were very sweet thanks to all the sugar in them, but they went very well with the bitterness of the tea. Such a combination was nice every once in a while.

“Delicious,” I uttered.

Doctor Emma smiled at my words, and I noticed a swell of pride in Mrs. Henrik’s person. Such sweets were rather expensive, and so I couldn’t buy them often. And while they were a touch overly sweet for my tastes, it had been so long that I found them delicious all the same.

For a time, we simply sat enjoying our tea and snacks. To my surprise, the margrave had a sweet tooth and happily ate everything on his plate. We took this time to introduce ourselves more thoroughly to one another on a number of topics and, contrary to what I had expected, the margrave and Doctor Emma were both very kind. Even with regard to the future, both talked as though they had already accepted me, and it left me rather stunned.

“I know how this will sound, coming from me,” I said, “but I am aware of my being something of a burden...”

“But you can’t simply return to the Kirsten home, can you?” replied Doctor Emma.

The doctor was especially understanding. She was thinking about how to best talk to the people of the Conrad region about me.

“But the two of you are a married couple,” I said. “I essentially cut right into the middle of that.”

“But I know a girl in trouble when I see one, and so I’ll do what I can to help,” said Doctor Emma.

“She *is* my wife now,” added the margrave. “Emma...”

“Yes, I know. I’m not particularly hung up on the position of legal wife anyway, so I’ve no problem with the current situation.”

Huh? Aren’t these two accepting all of this a little too quickly?

This felt especially true of Doctor Emma. I had been certain she’d show some disapproval. After all, no matter what the reason was, I had come in and taken the position of the margrave’s lawful wife. But as the two of them continued to push the discussion onwards, we suddenly seemed to reach a conclusion.

“Given what you want,” he said, “then for the time being it would be best to keep a low profile. You’ve just arrived, and many will be watching intently to see what you do next.”

“Let me handle talking to everyone and settling things in these parts,” added Doctor Emma. “But be aware that some are still likely going to see you in a less than positive light. You’ll have to be strong and bear it for a time, but let me know if anything happens.”

“Oh, er, yes, that sounds fine, but...” I started.

“In which case, I’ll have to send a letter to her family,” said the margrave. “Whateley, come with me, I need to consider what to write.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The margrave promptly stood up and left, with his steward following right behind him. Doctor Emma also left, as she had work elsewhere to attend to.

“Just relax and take your time,” she said before leaving.

And so, I ate the rest of the treat on my plate, finished my tea, and after some

time wallowing in silence I stared up at the ceiling.

“Huh?” I uttered.

Wasn't this whole thing supposed to play out differently? Wasn't I supposed to bow before them on my hands and knees, a grave look on my face as I begged the margrave to keep me as his wife?

This thought puzzled me for some time, until I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mrs. Henrik. She seemed to see right through my befuddlement, and she met my confusion with a look of resolve.

“Those two aren't like that on their own, but put them together and they'll make up their minds and get things rolling right quick.”

“Mrs. Henrik, uh... Have I gone slightly crazy?” I asked. “They're a couple, and they have been for years. Then I come in and...”

“Emma loves Lord Kamil, and she hasn't once been concerned with the idea of becoming his legal wife.”

I'd been taken completely by surprise. The margrave and the doctor had made up their minds so quickly, and with such resolve in their voices, that I was helpless to do anything but watch on in silent stupor. Mrs. Henrik cleared her throat and went on.

“I'm very relieved to see that Lord Kamil's heart is still with the doctor. Those two have always been the type to help people in need. With that in mind, it's safe for you to assume, my lady, that you'll be protected here like one of the family.”

I noticed then that Mrs. Henrik's attitude at some point had relaxed considerably, even though my circumstances had nothing to do with her personally.

“And I'm ever so grateful, but...as for you calling me 'my lady'...”

“People will be watching, so I'll maintain the proper etiquette for a time.”

“Oh. Anyway, this sweet of yours was utterly delectable. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Mrs. Henrik went on to say something else, but by then I felt like all the energy had drained from my body now that my discussion with the margrave and Doctor Emma was over. I was so dazed that before I knew it a whole day had passed, and Nico had arrived at my room, her beaming smile wiping away the cluttered mess of my heart.

“Have you talked to Nico about things, Mrs. Henrik?” I asked later.

“No. She’s a good-hearted girl, but her one weakness is that she can’t always control the pathway between her thoughts and her lips. I merely informed her that things between you and Doctor Emma were now sorted.”

I see. So Nico feared that the two of us would become rivals.

“However,” she continued, “upon receiving your permission to do so, we did inform Sven of the circumstances.”

“Well, there likely wasn’t any way around that,” I said. “He *did* think his father was being stolen from his mother.”

I didn’t actually remember having given that permission. I had a *feeling* that we’d touched upon the topic, but fearing that I would be scolded for admitting the truth, I opted instead to go along with things. After all, Mrs. Henrik had the air about her of a strict schoolteacher ready to admonish a wayward student.

“I heard that Sven was very rude to you, my lady, but he’s always been a kind young man with a strong sense of justice. He may well come to apologize as soon as he is able.”

Mrs. Henrik’s words proved true. Sven arrived early, his head bowed low the moment our eyes met. His eyes were red as he uttered a heartfelt apology.

“I spoke to you horrendously before I properly understood the circumstances,” he said. “That was awful of me, and I’m very sorry.”

“It’s fine, really,” I said. “I could have handled things better myself too.”

“But that was only because I struck first. My mother told me about...what happened.”

“Ah, yes. Well, now you know. Let’s put the past behind us.”

He was a gentle sort with a good heart, and he kept his head low. His hair was

about shoulder-length, and he gave the impression of being a bright young man. He seemed to repent his actions so sincerely that I began to feel a little like I should have been the one apologizing. Nobody had been hurt, after all, and I wasn't angry at him because I knew exactly how he felt.

The margrave had gotten to work quickly, and he had already sent word by horse to the capital, a distance that amounted to about six days of travel.

"Karen," he said to me afterward, "once things have calmed, I'd like for you to go and see your sister."

"My sister?" I asked.

"Yes. I think it best that you apologize for the way in which you used her name. After thinking things through, I think that Lady Saburova is the most suitable person to act as your guardian."

"As opposed to my brother or my father?"

"Both are not out of the question, but based on what we spoke of, I foresee difficulties. In terms of their hearts, they are your allies, but they might still fold under the pressure of the head family. By comparison, your sister now bears the Saburova family name."

Which meant she wielded a certain amount of personal authority and her word held more weight than that of the Dunst family. The margrave saw that she was afforded more freedom.

"I will do what I can to protect you, of course," he added. "But nonetheless, it would be in your best interests to make your own connections."

"Understood. Then I will head to the capital once things settle."

"When you do, and as long as you are amenable to the idea, would you please take Sven with you?"

"Certainly. We can do some sightseeing while we're there."

Our conversation was less like that of a couple and more one of a teacher and student. My relationship with Doctor Emma had also shifted; now that she knew I had lived as a commoner, she adopted a more familiar tone as soon as she realized it was okay to talk to me as she would any other. She also took to

lending me books on medicine. I realized it was a silent message for me to study, and so I did, and I was rewarded with pats on the head for my efforts, as though I were a small child. The doctor once again struck me as the kindly, motherly type.

While I was still referred to as “my lady,” by those in the manor, my conversations with the margrave were not those of a married couple. My friendly relations with Doctor Emma also resulted in the servants slowly becoming more accepting of me.

“I suppose it won’t be long before my grandfather is back... Oh, then I’ll head to the capital.”

Knowing full well that my grandfather would return with vengeance on his mind, the margrave made preparations for me to visit my sister. Knowing that there was a chance my grandfather might drag me off elsewhere, I wrote a letter to him and left it in the margrave’s care.

“Adults should be left with the tedious matters,” he said. “Children should be free to play and enjoy themselves.”

The margrave then gave me a sum of money that any child would have called a veritable fortune, and our group took off for the city. With me were Sven and Nico, with Mrs. Henrik as our caretaker and a few soldiers as protection. We had sent a messenger by horse before we left to inform my sister of my visit, but I never imagined it would spiral into the debacle that it inevitably did.

4: Hate Is Such a Strong Word

I had not expected to return to the capital so quickly, and I felt somewhat conflicted about it. I racked my brain for a while as our carriage swayed rhythmically, then opted to make conversation to take my mind off the apology I had to make.

“Do you want to go to school, Sven?” I asked.

The journey to the capital took six days. We rested at inns and villages by the roadside, and sometimes we camped, but whenever we were on the move we all shared the same carriage. There was little in the way of things to do while in transit, and this meant I had ample time to talk to Sven. Sven scratched the back of his head as he considered my question.

“We’ll see,” he said, staring out the window. “I mean, there’s lots to learn, and I’m sure it’ll come in handy.”

“Yes, that’s true. But, perhaps in your case an ordinary school isn’t—”

“Yeah, I *know*,” said Sven, cutting me off. “Father recommended a boarding school for nobles, but I refused.”

Now that everything was clear between the margrave and myself, there was no confusion as to the heir of the Conrad region: it was Sven.

“But why?” I asked. “Wouldn’t that be in your best interests?”

“No matter how hard I work, boarding school still means two years away from home. I can’t stand the idea of studying while I pretend to be friendly with all those nobles with their high-and-mighty attitudes. You hate all that prim and proper formality just as much as I do, don’t you?”

“Look, I get it,” I said. “I so very much get it, but...”

Unlike schools for commoners, schools for the upper-class nobility were attended by a more limited age range. It was most common for upper-class children to attend school for three years over the ages of fourteen to sixteen. It

was also common for those from more distant locales to live in the school dormitories. The vast majority of the nobility did this, and the fact that one of Sven's parents was a commoner wasn't enough of a reason to not enroll him. Yes, prejudice might show its face as a part of school life; but even so, there were still good reasons to have Sven attend such a school.

Education wasn't compulsory in this world, so attendance wasn't enforced as a matter of law. It was also perfectly acceptable for one to study with a personal tutor and not attend school at all. However, nobles sent their children to school because it was a place to make friends and strengthen relationships that could be advantageous further down the line.

"And you're fine without any of the benefits school could bring you?" I asked.

"Father and mother said exactly the same thing, but what I would prefer is to follow after *mother*. A showy, pretentious noble who does all their work in an office somewhere? That's not for me."

"But the work of a regional lord is most admirable. You won't inherit that from the margrave?"

"I'll do it. If I don't, then my twisted, narrow-minded relatives will and then the lands will get all out of sorts. So I'll handle the margrave duties on the side."

"You'll do the work of the regional lord...on the *side*? Is that even possible?"

"It's not a matter of whether or not it's possible. I'll simply make it happen. I've already made up my mind—I'm becoming a doctor."

The boy was steadfast. A playful grin spread across Nico's face, and she leaned toward me.

"My lady, my lady," she whispered, "Sven can't stand that doctors refuse to settle in regional areas. He wants to take some of the load off Doctor Emma and support the people with the knowledge he acquires at school."

"I see," I said. "Well, if that was the case, Sven, you should've just said so!"

"Nico!" said Sven, going bright red in an instant.

Nico had the boy's motives dead to rights. While becoming regional lord wasn't what Sven wanted, he had made his peace with the idea by a process of

elimination, knowing that in the end it meant protecting the best interests of the people. And judging by his expression when he called nobles showy and pretentious, Sven's real issue with school wasn't that he couldn't come home, but that he didn't have a good impression of nobility.

"How old are you again, Sven?" I asked.

"Fifteen. Still old enough to go to school."

So he's a year younger than me.

While I thought it best for him to attend the noble school system, Sven himself understood the benefits but had all the same turned it down. The margrave, too, was respectfully obliging of his wishes. I wasn't going to harp on him about it.

"I know that I have to go to school at some point," Sven continued, "and it's not like I hate studying. Mother also said that if I want to be a doctor, then I have to understand the greater world and the people who live in it."

"The school has a reputation you'll also have to uphold, so you won't be able to return home often."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I thought a lot about when I would go. I knew that I would have to go to school, so it was all about the best timing."

So the margrave and Emma wanted Sven to broaden his horizons. And in that sense, an ordinary school was perfect; it brought together children of a variety of different standings. None of the nobility, of course, but he'd meet the children of merchants and small businesses.

"Hmm, so it's something of a wait-and-see approach. In which case, shall I write you a letter of introduction?"

"A letter? Why?"

"I think you'll probably be fine, but things could be a little challenging given your background and upbringing. A letter of introduction will ensure your teachers keep their eyes on you."

Sven didn't know what I was getting at.

"You'll know soon enough," I said.

“Thanks, but I’ll work it out on my own,” said Sven.

I’ve already mentioned one of the good points of the education system here: that enrollment was accepted as long as one could pay their school fees. What this meant, however, was that student numbers were often high. It was difficult for teachers to adequately keep their eyes on everyone. As someone of a noble background myself, I’d had to deal with rumors and name-calling, and I would have had physical abuse on that list too if Ern hadn’t stepped in to sort things out.

Sven refused my offer to write him a letter of introduction, but Mrs. Henrik would later ask me to write one anyway. She understood the deeper meaning of his attending a public school.

“His mother is a commoner, yes, but traditionally speaking, the children of the nobility go to schools that match their standing,” she said.

“Yes, I understand,” I replied. “I’ll write a letter while we’re in the capital.”

Sven was opting to enter public school of his own volition, but there was a good chance he’d be a target for bullies. Alerting his teachers to such potential outcomes could see him with helpful allies if he ever needed them. My word would carry some weight; I was nominally the Margravine of Conrad, and also a direct relative of the King’s concubine.

We arrived in the capital on the morning of our sixth day. We left our luggage at the margrave’s villa, which was startlingly spacious. Sven was also seeing it for the first time and was equally surprised. Mrs. Henrik, however, looked upon it with some nostalgia.

“Lord Kamil spends his days in the countryside now, but a long time ago he worked right here in the capital,” she explained.

“And this villa has been here since? He’s kept it clean and in good order the entire time?” I asked.

“The royal family awarded him the villa for use when he came to the capital. It would be disrespectful to let it fall into disrepair.”

“The royal family?” uttered Sven. “So father was...”

Before he could finish his question, Mrs. Henrik announced that she was off to inspect the kitchen and servants' quarters, and she promptly left. It seemed clear to us all that she'd rather avoid speaking any further on the topic. Sven and I turned our gazes on Nico, but she shook her head in a frightful panic.

"I don't know anything about the distant past! Really! Not a thing!"

"You wouldn't hide anything, would you?" I prodded.

"This time I really don't know anything!" she cried out. "If you're looking for people who do, then it's got to be our steward, Whateley, or Ben the gardener! All the other people working at the margrave's manor are locals! They don't know anything about the capital!"

The girl's desperation made it clear—she wasn't lying. I filed away her comments in a corner of my mind while we all went to our separate rooms. After a short break, I announced that I was going out. On my own. Without Nico.

"You're going to leave Nico here?" asked Mrs. Henrik. "You know I don't recommend such a thing."

"But, my lady..." wailed Nico petulantly.

Having hailed from the countryside, the young woman was nothing if not bursting with curiosity about the capital. She wanted nothing more than to wander and explore, and so tears now filled her eyes. I did have my reasons, however.

"Let's not forget that I once lived right here," I said, "so you don't have to worry about me going anywhere dangerous. Mrs. Henrik still hasn't finished here in the villa, so Nico, you can accompany Sven."

"But my lady, I want to tour the capital with *yooouuu!*"

Nico enjoyed having me as her master because we were the same age, which made it easy for us to talk casually with one another. Around Mrs. Henrik, she always needed to ensure that she wasn't slouching or slacking, and it seemed formality was never the girl's strong suit. Naturally, she wasn't going to give up without a fight. To be honest, I would've liked her company, but I had to stand firm in my decision.

“Nico, you realize that I am going to visit Lady Saburova, yes?”

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Henrik, immediately catching on.

“Not you too, Mrs. Henrik!” cried Nico.

Mrs. Henrik offered to join me in Nico’s stead, but I politely refused. I had absolutely no idea exactly how my sister felt about me at the present moment, and I was visiting her to apologize. Bringing one of the Conrad servants would perhaps serve to only rub salt into her wounds. For all I knew, my sister’s servants might also have a few nasty words in store for anyone I brought with me, so going on my own felt like the safest option.

“I’ll go on my own, but I’ll take a hansom cab,” I said. “Really, there’s no need to worry.”

“Aren’t you leaving quite early, given your agreed meeting time?”

Hmm? If Mrs. Henrik knows the location of the Saburova residence and can calculate a rough time of arrival, then she clearly understands the lay of the land here in the capital.

“I thought I’d find a gift to take with me, so I don’t arrive empty-handed.”

“I see. In which case, will you visit the sweets shop on Maidenhair Street?”

“Yes. They’re my sister’s favorite.”

“I believe the owner of the establishment remains unchanged, so if you mention my name or the margrave’s, you won’t have to pay for anything.”

Mrs. Henrik explained, as she saw me off, that they were still customers, even now. I was a touch dubious of Mrs. Henrik’s claims, but they turned out to be true. The mere *mention* of the woman saw me given a wonderfully wrapped box of treats before I could even reach for my purse. The owner of the store even came out to handle my transaction personally. I don’t think that even the Kirsten family would have received such treatment.

Once I finished there, I jumped in a hansom cab and headed for my sister’s manor. Realizing that I was going to arrive early, I had it drop me off before reaching the manor so I could continue the rest of the way on foot. Around me was such lush greenery that I could easily have forgotten I was still in the

bustling capital. It was such a bright, clear day outside that it was actually rather hot, but the cool breeze was delightful, and it made for a wonderful temperature for walking.

“Hmm?” I uttered.

I looked around curiously at my surroundings. I had the feeling I was being watched, but I found nothing and nobody of note in my immediate area. The guards in the area were initially taken aback when they saw me walking alone, but they recognized me as the sister of their master and sent word ahead of my arrival. As such, my sister was waiting for me at the entrance to her manor, but before she could open her mouth to speak, I lowered my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

My sister responded with a “Hrk” at my beating her to the punch, but she swallowed back her frustration. Something like a soft groan escaped her lips, and finally she let out a deep sigh.

“I would appreciate it if you did not use my name like that in future,” she said.

“I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

“Well, I hope you’ve learned your lesson. Now lift your head, sister.”

I lifted my eyes hesitantly, gingerly, to find my sister cringing.

“It’s so rare for you to lower your head like that,” she said. “I feel like my anger has completely evaporated.”

In place of a scolding, however, my sister promptly flicked me between the eyes.

“Ow...” I muttered.

But, if a flick to the head meant avoiding a long lecture, then it was a pittance to have to pay. I could tell that Gerda had a lot on her mind, so it was in my best interests not to go shooting off my mouth.

“You’ve no servants with you. Did you come alone?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. I didn’t need the assistance.”

“You must stop going off for walks on your own, Karen. Even if they’re... No,

scratch that. I don't even want to see one of the Conrad servants."

Not bringing Mrs. Henrik or Nico was the right call. Nico in particular. One stern word and she would have been on her knees, weeping. I ran an internal victory lap while my mind celebrated my decision-making abilities.

"Um, so," I said. "Yes, that's right. I'm sorry."

"You aren't repentant in the slightest."

"That's not true. I'm very repentant."

"Only about using *my name*. You don't regret the rest of it at all. You can't fool me."

Gerda knew me too well. We really were sisters after all. She seemed to be nursing a headache as she led me to the manor parlor, a different room from the one we had occupied the last time I visited. The parlor was on the first floor, with glass doors that were opened so as to give a view of the colorful flowers outside. The room allowed direct access to the gardens. There was even the kind of terrace area one expected of the houses of the rich and famous. In the corner of the room was a screen partition.

"It hasn't been very long since my last visit, but the gardens are entirely different," I remarked.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I put a word in with the king and had the castle's gardener do some work."

"And you get to look upon these gardens every day. It's like starting the day with a good omen."

"Indeed. Feel free to take a look around later. For now, tea."

"What a wonderful opportunity to open the box of sweets I brought," I said.

"I knew you'd say that. Knowing you, I'd bet you brought some of your own favorites too."

A plate was brought in with all the sweets I'd bought laid out neatly. Gerda's gaze softened as her eyes fell upon the baked sweets filled with walnuts simmered in sugar syrup, her favorite. Since it was just the two of us, manners were now a secondary concern.

“You always did prefer the less sugary sweets,” Gerda said. “They’re not very popular among the ladies, though, are they?”

“But I find them just perfect,” I replied.

In this nation, sweets were made with preservation in mind, so they were so sugary it was enough to make your teeth scream. Mrs. Henrik’s jam was also sweet, yes, but it was nothing compared to the sweets sold in the capital’s most popular shops. Being that sugar was a fairly scarce commodity, the indulgence in such sickeningly saccharine treats was a privilege afforded only to the nobility. What the people here thought of as an afternoon snack was enough to give an ordinary Japanese citizen diabetes.

And as a former Japanese citizen myself, I wasn’t a huge fan of that particular sweetness. Here they soaked their roasted nuts in syrup, but I desired the subtle flavors of more refined desserts. The sugary crunch of biting into a cookie? The syrup that bubbled out from a cake when you pushed a fork into it? It sent shivers through me.

“It’s been so long since I had this,” Gerda said. “Our chef here is talented, but sometimes the heart pines for just these flavors.”

I watched as my sister ate her sweet, drowned as it was in sugar, and couldn’t help feeling suddenly puzzled. It was the way Gerda spoke, the way she ate, and the way she held herself. She wasn’t relaxed like usual. Rather, it was as if she were on her best behavior.

“Sister, did you perhaps have some other matters to attend to today?” I asked. “I hope I’m not burdening you by visiting like this.”

“Oh? Where did that come from all of a sudden? Of course, you’re not a burden.”

“But your clothes... Aren’t you the one who said that home is where one should relax?”

I took this opportunity to point out her formal dress.

“Oh, well, you know...” she said with a chuckle, sipping at her tea.

Perhaps the king is visiting later this evening...

“More to the point,” said Gerda, “you must get yourself a more respectable selection of outfits, Karen.”

“I’m dressed this way intentionally,” I replied. “I don’t like clothing that impedes my freedom of movement.”

We spent a little while just enjoying each other’s company, but when we were about halfway through our snacks Gerda took a breath, and I sat up a little straighter. The time had come to get to the heart of the matter.

“Karen, regardless of how it happened, congratulations on your wedding, in which you completely skipped your engagement.”

I noted a certain sarcasm in her tone of voice at the end of that particular sentence.

“Thank you...”

“As your sister, I’ve many thoughts on the matter, but I only have one thing to ask you. Do you love the margrave? Be honest with me now.”

I answered swiftly.

“No...?”

Still, I was shocked that she had led with this particular question. Gerda frowned, and I tried to maintain my composure as I put a sweet on my plate.

“You told me to be honest, didn’t you?” I continued. “If I’d said ‘Why, yes, I do love this man whom I’d never met until we married,’ I would have been lying. So I wanted to answer you honestly.”

“But who answers with such haste? You’re supposed to think a little, perhaps even hesitate before you give such an answer.”

“I don’t need that from you, of all people. The margrave is a nice, kind man, and that’s enough.”

I could tell by the creased brow that Gerda wasn’t totally satisfied, but she had her reasons.

“Well, if that’s what you say, then let’s assume that he is. But was he really a better choice than Reinald?”

“Um...”

“Don’t just say ‘um.’ That’s so rude!”

Naturally, Gerda was talking about my other prospective marriage partner. There was a harshness to her attitude, one that I assumed came from my having chosen an elderly man over a veritable Adonis.

“I know he’s the second son of the family,” said Gerda, “but he’s accomplished a great deal in his own right. His own father approved his freedom, and not only that, you were the only woman he approved of for talks of marriage. The king was shocked, and as for me, well, I had been so looking forward to seeing the two of you together.”

“Gerda, I... Wait, why were *you* so excited?”

“Reinald is so popular with the ladies, and he’s the very definition of distinguished. He promised to provide you with a good life, free of struggle.”

I sighed.

“Don’t tell me you wanted someone more powerful,” said Gerda.

“No, no. We shared a carriage together, and I saw exactly how organized his people were. I’m sure he’s an extremely capable soldier and warrior in his own right too. Those are not heights that ordinary nobles can easily reach.”

To be honest, he was in such control, and his people were so perfect at their jobs, it terrified me all the way home. But, even if Reinald had been given some measure of freedom, our marriage was nonetheless for the purposes of raising his family’s standing. That would have made divorce nigh-impossible. I was glad to have gone to the Conrad region.

“You do realize I had to go and apologize to the Rodenwalds after what you did,” said Gerda.

This was about sixty percent of what Gerda really wanted to get at.

“I am so very sorry,” I said sincerely.

“Karen, I’m begging you, you must tell me: why in the world weren’t you satisfied?”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t about that. I’m well aware that Reinald was a far better offer than I ever could’ve ever hoped for.”

“Then, why? You never would have found a better marriage proposal anywhere else.”

There were tears in Gerda’s eyes now. And yes, they seemed partially put-on, but her intent at least came from a place of honesty. I could tell she wasn’t going to back down from her question, which meant I had to speak.

“Yes, I could have lived free from hassle, but Reinald doesn’t seem interested in having a wife, and...”

“And...?” prodded Gerda.

“I don’t know how to say it, but I feel that a life at that man’s side would be a rather difficult one.”

And not because it meant marrying a man so blindingly handsome. Rather, it was a sense I can only really call instinctual. But it was just a hunch, which meant I couldn’t say as much to anyone other than Gerda. Any ordinary teenager would have jumped at the chance to marry Reinald, as it would have meant blushing cheeks and days of excitement. I truly felt it a pity that I had become so cynical. I suppose that is why even before I was reincarnated, my marriageable years had slipped by me without a hint of success.

Oh, how miserable it makes me to write such a thing.

“So it’s not like I have anything against Sir Reinald,” I said. “It’s rather rude to hate someone after only a first impression anyway. And if it’s a matter of forming a bond of family, then why not our cousin Marie? Surely she’s acceptable?”

“Did you not hear me? *You* were the only one who was approved,” said Gerda, her head slumping between her shoulders. “What are we going to do?”

There’s no need to be that disappointed...

Gerda took an ornate box from atop a chair. It looked like it had been placed there before we’d entered, and Gerda passed it to me. I assumed it was a wedding present. When I opened it, I found a gold bracelet sitting on red felt.

“My goodness, it’s gorgeous,” I uttered.

The popular bracelets in Falkrum at the time were big, gaudy things that, for all intents and purposes, swallowed a girl’s wrist entirely. This, by contrast, was a thin, delicate golden chain, at the head of which was a pale blue jewel. It was beautiful in a very subtle way, one that didn’t draw immediate attention. It was the sort of thing that could go entirely unnoticed if you weren’t properly looking. I couldn’t help but take it in hand and gaze at it longingly.

“What a surprise,” said Gerda, watching me with her head resting on her hands. “I didn’t think you were particularly fond of jewelry.”

“I don’t like anything too lavish because I don’t feel comfortable wearing it, but this is so fine and delicate.”

In present-day Japan, thin chains were rather common, but that wasn’t the case here. They lacked the machinery to make such jewelry, so everything was handcrafted. The crafting of such delicate accessories could only be handled by artisan engravers. In other words, the more delicate and thin a piece of jewelry, the more expensive it was.

“You couldn’t get something like this made just anywhere,” I said. “This must have cost a fortune, sister.”

“And perhaps it did. More importantly, do you like it?”

“I do, I adore it. Finally our taste for accessories has found a common ground. I’m ecstatic.”

“Hmm.”

Wait. She’s the one who prepared the bracelet. Why the odd reaction?

“If you’d only said that you hated it outright. I would have given up entirely,” said Gerda, sighing. “Now what?”

Huh?

Even in the midst of a troubled sigh, Gerda was stunning, but my concern was elsewhere. I was certain we were alone in this room, and yet I heard the rumblings of deep male laughter. I looked around, and eventually my gaze, along with Gerda’s, settled on the screen partition in the corner of the room.

The laughter came from behind it. It was followed by the sound of someone standing from a chair.

Wait. Wait just a darn second now...

I glanced at Gerda. Her eyes spoke for her in her silence.

"It's no use."

Behind the partition stood a man in his early thirties. Presumably the man who had been laughing. With him was my Arno, my elder brother, wearing quite the grimace. The two of them pushed the partition aside, upon which it was revealed there was one more person with them.

Gerda. You... But... Huh?

There was simply no mistaking the man in the chair. He who was a feast for the eyes. Reinald. For a brief instant, my head filled with the "／(^ o ^)＼" emoji. Soon after, my cheek began to involuntarily twitch as the man who laughed now cleared his throat.

"I see, I see, I see," he said. "A most adorable yet canny young maiden. I see now why Lady Gerda is so kind to you. You agree, Arno?"

"I apologize for my younger sister's inability to hold her tongue. It is beyond embarrassing."

"That just means she's honest."

"She is ignorant of the ways of the world. I beg your forgiveness, Your Highness."

Even while Arno struggled through an apology, the man did not seem to be speaking from a place of malice. He had shoulder-length hair and droopy eyes that sparkled under his bright eyelashes. He wore brilliantly embroidered and obviously expensive clothing, and it was clear that underneath it all was a muscular body. With a certain despair, I bowed my head deferentially.

"My apologies," I said. "I had no idea that Your Highness was present, and I spoke out of line..."

"There's no need to be so formal. Yes, Lady Gerda asked us to be here, but nonetheless *we* were the ones eavesdropping, so we've no right to be haughty

about it.”

So he admits to it. And it was my own sister behind it all!

That was why she’d brought me to the room with the partition. Leaving the windows open, too, was just another way to help mask the sounds and presence of the men already hidden in the room. I would have easily discovered them had I thought to look, but who would’ve thought there’d be people hidden behind the partition in the first place?

At a glance, I saw that Gerda was going to take advantage of her inability to complain in front of royalty, so as to play innocent. As for Arno, well... I could tell just by looking at him that he did not have the authority to stop someone of such a high standing. His panicked gaze, even now, shot me a clear message: *“Don’t go shooting your mouth off.”*

His Highness, Prince David, was the rightful heir to the throne and the future king of Falkrum. You might hear the word “prince” and think of a boy in his teens or a young man in his early twenties, but Prince David was very much in his thirties.

The fact that I hadn’t seen any of the carriages that had brought these men told me that they’d been hidden somewhere. But what was the prince even doing here in the first place?

“That look on your face,” said Prince David. “You’re wondering why we were eavesdropping, aren’t you? Well, come on over here, would you? I’m going to lose my voice if I have to keep shouting across the room like this.”

The moment he gestured to Gerda and me with his hand, I knew there was no fleeing the situation. My head was on the chopping block, as it were, and so I sat before the prince with my sister by my side. Arno stood behind the prince, looking the very picture of tense. Reinald, meanwhile, remained completely silent, and he somewhat stubbornly refused to meet my gaze.

Well, this has all become very interesting all of a sudden.

The prince crossed his legs as he took his time observing me.

“Hmm. I see that all of you three siblings have been blessed with the same good looks,” he remarked.

“With all due respect, Your Highness, we also have a younger brother.”

“Oh. So there’s four of you. And you all get along, from what I hear. How very fortunate for the family.”

If I remembered correctly, Prince David and his younger brother, Prince Demyan, weren’t on good terms. Regardless, it was more important for me to focus on the matter at hand. Given what I knew of tales of reincarnation, one theory was that this was where I could say something utterly outlandish so as to draw the interest of the prince. It was always a blast to get to this scene as a reader, but here now, faced with that very situation, it was anything but a laughing matter.

“I called the prince here today,” said Gerda.

It was in these very situations that I envied those in positions of power. I wasn’t sure if I was even allowed to talk at the moment.

“You may speak,” said the prince, reading my expression.

“But...why, sister?” I asked.

“Well, because the king, too, agreed with recommending Reinald as a marriage partner, of course. This matter was never simply going to vanish into thin air. It was necessary to confirm your intentions.”

The “matter” in question was that of restoring my honor. The king was one thing, but what did the prince have to do with any of it? I suddenly regretted coming home at all.

“That said,” continued Gerda, “I never asked that Prince David bring Reinald along with him, did I?”

“I picked him up on the way to see you,” replied the prince. “My good friend’s younger brother unexpectedly agrees to a marriage proposal? I simply *had* to take a peek at things myself.”

So it was the prince who brought Reinald, then.

It struck me that the man probably had far too much time on his hands.

“Karen, yes?” said the prince, a grin curling to the edge of his lips. “When it comes to rumors, we’re like moths to a flame, you see. And here we have a

request from the concubine herself, whom the king is so very fond of. That was going to draw attention no matter what.”

In other words, people were eager to find fault in the girl. The prince remained silent, which told me it was now once again my turn to speak.

“As it were, His Highness serves to aid my sister as her knight, yes?” I asked.

It was my intent to be thoughtful, but I wondered if perhaps I’d said too much. The prince laughed.

“Indeed. Ordinarily, the king would attend to this matter himself, but given that he is busy elsewhere, I came in his stead.”

He nodded a few times, and for whatever reason, continued to stare at me. It was a frustrating thing and I didn’t like it, but the reasons for it were soon made clear.

“Arno,” said the prince, “it would appear your sister is not as ignorant as you so claimed.”

He may as well have simply shouted, *“I thought you said she was an idiot.”*

Arno, however, did not refute the prince’s words. When the prince turned back to look at him, Arno merely lowered his head subserviently. It was like seeing noble society play out before my eyes.

“I won’t entertain a fool of a woman, but one with smarts? I quite like that. I daresay I’m intrigued. So how about it, Reinald? Perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea to whisk her away right this instant and make her your common-law wife.”

Knock it off, you idiot. You can’t just say that. It’s off-limits! I don’t even get a say in it?!

I felt myself going pale as the meaning of the prince’s words took root. My sister, for her part, merely uttered “Oh my,” and while my brother at least reacted to the words, he said nothing. It quickly became clear to me that I was devoid of allies.

The prince’s previous statement about rumors and attention had been a test, a way to ascertain if I knew my sister’s circumstances. If only I’d kept my mouth shut! Was there no way for me to flee and take a hansom cab to freedom? A

quick but very casual glance around the room revealed that the prince's men guarded all the doors.

Gerda could no longer be relied on, which left Reinald, and while he could finally meet my gaze, he showed no discernible expression, even when the prince spoke directly to him. It was a breathtaking sight, but I was in no position to admire it. Reinald looked pensive for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"I am honored that you would show me such concern," he said, "but taking the Margrave of Conrad's wife would only result in enmity."

"Oh, that? Just force a divorce. Simple."

Look at you, David. You play the part so well it's like you were born to be the literal definition of the scum of the earth.

"I am not so certain," replied Reinald. "Lady Karen is here in the royal capital with the margrave's son and a number of guards. My family has yet to gain the trust of the margrave, and especially now that he has accepted the young woman as his wife, we must not do anything that creates a divide between us."

"You would shun a young maiden who has fallen prey to an old man? If you ask me, you and young Karen here are a fine match."

"Though I wish that such were the case, I still cannot afford to take any hasty action. Please reconsider, Your Highness. I do not wish to do anything that would draw Lady Karen's ire or disapproval."

"Oh, don't be daft. Zakhar would be delighted to see you finally settle down. For my friend, for Gerda, and most importantly, for you. It is high time you were married."

"I appreciate and am most grateful for your concern, Your Highness, but to act in haste would only draw suspicion."

"Come now. I am the future king. Should anyone disagree with what I decide, I will have them silenced."

The two continued to go back and forth, but it was Reinald's words that I found most curious. Namely, he knew that I had arrived in the capital this morning, and he also knew about Sven and the guards who accompanied us.

And one more thing! Fallen prey to an old man?! How rude! Reinald is more of a gentleman than you could ever possibly hope to be!

Fortunately, Reinald wasn't interested in the prince's suggestions. Unlike David, he was surprisingly rational.

"Karen, you heard Reinald yourself," said Gerda. "He's fond of you, so...?"

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say," I replied, deflecting the question because I knew that I had to avoid drawing the prince's ire. "Sister, I am a married woman. Please don't encourage me to take part in an extramarital affair."

"Don't be silly. If my sister is walking a path to unhappiness, it is my duty to do something."

Prince David had also made it clear enough that Reinald and I getting married was most convenient for all parties gathered here today (minus myself). The prince and my sister continued in their efforts to sway both Reinald and me, but we both held strong. Arno grew sick of it all and left, stating he had urgent business to attend to, and it was then that the prince finally appeared to give up.

"Undutiful. That's the only word for it," he muttered. "Lady Gerda and I are going to lose our voices trying to talk sense into you. Let's take a break for tea. You two go for a walk in the garden."

"There's a path through the forest in the back garden," said Gerda. "It circles around and returns back to the manor, so take that."

Ordering people around came so naturally to the two of them. I didn't want to be anything like them in that regard, but despite myself, I was impressed.

The prince looked tired, and so Reinald and I left, though it was very much more like we were being kicked out. We stood in silence outside of the room.

Well, I suppose this was inevitable.

"My apologies," said Reinald, "but would you mind accompanying me? We'll take the path through the forest and come right back."

"Very well," I replied. "It's not like we can refuse an order from the prince,

anyway.”

At some point, a few of Reinald’s subjects had arrived, looking aloof and distant, though standing formally at the ready. Reinald told them that we wouldn’t need their accompaniment, and we left the manor. It was not long before we spotted the narrow path at the back of the garden.

“I am aware that you may well feel uneasy, alone in my company, but please be patient. I promise not to do anything untoward.”

“I feel nothing of the sort. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I trust you.”

Gerda and the prince perhaps hoped that by putting us alone it might spark something, but neither Reinald nor I saw it that way. I felt nothing like that in Reinald, and so we walked along the path side by side. He was considerate in that he matched his pace to my own.

“There’s one thing I’ve been meaning to ask you, Lady Karen. Do you mind?” asked Reinald. “You apologized to me when we last met. Was that because you had already made up your mind?”

“Oh. So you knew, even then?”

When I looked up, I was surprised to see a slight smile on Reinald’s face. It was not like the kind smile I had seen upon him before; rather, this one offered a glimpse of who he really was.

How surprising. He’s capable of smiling normally.

Perhaps it was because of his good looks. Reinald had struck me as something otherworldly, and I felt ashamed now to think that, without even realizing, I had thought of him as something other than human. But here, now, he had nothing of the suffocating presence I had felt from Prince David, and I finally felt something like a moment of relief.

“Yes,” I said, “I had made up my mind to go to Conrad. It was never my intent to sully your name by fleeing from you to marry someone else...”

“Think nothing of it. If that were the case, then what I did must have been quite bothersome for you. I knew the circumstances surrounding the marriage

discussion, but nonetheless, I came to see you. I had not expected that I would be turned down.”

“My sister asked you to come, did she not? In which case you did not have the option to refuse. You did not have the authority.”

That said, Reinald’s assumption was not mistaken, per se. Under ordinary circumstances, he would not have been turned down. The marriage would have been favorable to both families, and while I was not especially well-versed in the world of politics, even I could see that much.

“I am truly sorry,” I said.

I was a nobody, even as a noble, but my actions would have had a deleterious impact on Reinald’s reputation. It may well have left him the butt of jokes. But even then, he did not seem particularly bothered, and he responded to my apology with a chuckle.

“Not to worry. I am going to be the source of some trouble for you yet, so I suppose the apologies go both ways.”

I froze in place. Reinald walked on. And while I couldn’t simply brush off his words as if they were nothing, I did not get the sense that he would elaborate on the matter either.

Source of some trouble? What could that mean?

The forest path we strolled along wasn’t particularly wide. There was just barely enough space for three people to walk side by side. Fortunately, it was paved, and there were no stray tree roots to worry about tripping over. A pleasant amount of flowers were planted on either side of us, and the trees were also neatly trimmed and well arranged. All of this served to make the walk a brighter and more colorful affair than I had expected; it wasn’t gloomy in the slightest, but rather something more of a healing for the eyes.

As concerned as I am about what Reinald just said, if he’s not going to tell me anything further, then what point is there in worrying about it?

“If it isn’t any trouble, would you mind if I asked you something, Sir Reinald?”

“Ask away. I will answer so long as I am able.”

It seemed to me that Reinald had no intention of doing as the prince wanted, which meant there was no reason for me to actively push him away in the name of safety.

“As I’m sure you already know, I spent quite some time away from noble society, which means I am somewhat lacking in terms of information that, under normal circumstances, should be implicitly understood. So while I realize that there were many people to consider with regard to your marriage, I can’t help but wonder: why did your family elect to marry with the Kirstens as opposed to the Dunsts?”

“Naturally, it was our wish to form closer bonds with your elder sister.”

I was stunned into shock. I had expected him to be more guarded.

“Miss Karen?” asked Reinald, when I did not speak.

“I apologize,” I replied, “I’m just a little surprised that you answered so openly.”

“I have no reason to lie to you,” he said. “You’ve spent years among the common people, and I’d imagine that means you prefer direct answers to more flowery, roundabout modes of speech. I also feel that were I to lie, you’d see through it.”

“I appreciate you making things so straightforward, though I must admit I did not expect you to know me quite so well. You looked into my circumstances, I presume?”

“I do apologize if I have offended you, but I hope you understand that from the beginning it was a condition of entering into marriage discussions. That said, all I’ve said of your character here is what I’ve determined from talking to you in person.”

What kind of intelligence network did Reinald have to fall back on? If he could determine such things about me so quickly, was it because I was truly so easy to read?

“Then I suppose we can skip the finer details, seeing as you already know them.”

The corner of Reinald's lips curled, but revealed nothing. I could not read this man's personality.

"Was the Dunst family... Was my cousin Marie unacceptable?"

"I had heard that your sister asked what she did of the king in order to restore *your* honor. What she did, she did for you."

"Be that as it may, that doesn't necessarily make the marriage a good match for you, Sir Reinald, or more importantly, the Rodenwald family."

I've mentioned the Dunsts more than a few times, but it's important to note that as the head family, they had a very high standing among the societal hierarchy. The Kirsten family was smack bang right in the middle of that hierarchy, and by that logic I was of the correct noble standing when it came to marriage with the Margrave of Conrad.

"Even accepting the fact that my sister was involved, it's still a huge leap up in noble standing for one of my caliber... I was shocked at how good a marriage offer it was, and somewhat skeptical of the fact that your older brother approved it."

"Hmm, so you did think it was a good marriage proposal, then."

"If anything, it was *too* good. Had I simply accepted it from the get-go, I would have drawn envy from everyone, far and wide."

"A strange thing to say for one who avoided that very proposal."

"I said it before, but just to be clear, I don't carry any ill will toward you, Sir Reinald."

He'd heard as much when he and the prince and my brother were eavesdropping.

We came upon a pond as we walked. The water was likely pumped up from below, and it was so clear as to be almost transparent. Water strider-like insects floated upon its surface.

"Do you mind if we stop at the pond a moment?" I asked.

Reinald didn't come too close, and he didn't try to force conversation. I knelt down by the pond and looked down onto its surface, at the face of the girl who

stared back at me. She was quite pretty, it must be said. Straight black hair with a touch of deep brown, jade green eyes with a hint of blue, and taken as a whole, my face gave the impression of a somewhat gloomy...literary type. If I'd had more relaxed, frizzier hair, like Gerda, then perhaps I would have emitted something more in the way of sex appeal. I dipped my hand into the pond. The water was cooler than I expected, and it seemed to drain my body heat through my fingers.

"So, why you, and why not someone from the Dunst family?" said Reinald. "While I cannot speak on the matter in any detail, I *can* say that our family believed it in our best interests to create a bond with the Kirstens."

I listened, but I did not turn to face Reinald.

"You saw us as more important than the head family," I said. "And yet, we are at the beck and call of the Dunsts, you know."

"If you are curious, perhaps you should ask the margrave to look further into the matters of your head family."

"The margrave? But he lives at the frontier, what could he do from there...?"

"He has been away from the capital for a long time, yes, but his connections to it are still very much alive. He would have no trouble looking into matters."

That Reinald would not tell me himself indicated perhaps something shady hidden behind the curtains. Regardless, I was grateful for his intel.

"Is it perhaps related to the reason His Highness brought my brother with him, and not a representative from the Dunst family?" I asked.

Reinald's eyes went wide for a brief moment, but his response was to smile in a way that neither confirmed nor denied anything.

"By the way, I would like to ask you something else," he said.

"Be my guest. After all, I feel as though I've been raining questions on you all this time."

"It's only tangentially related to what we're talking about, and a matter I am personally interested in, so do not feel obliged to answer."

I stood to my feet and was summarily presented with a handkerchief. I had

one of my own, but I felt that refusing Reinald's would interrupt our conversation, so I accepted it. He went on talking as I dried my hand. It struck me that it was subtle gestures like this one that likely made him all the more attractive.

"What I'm wondering is, why did you accept a marriage proposal at all?"

So that was why he led with that particular foreword. I had expected something of a more pointed, private nature, and it was exactly what I got. I had already told the margrave, so I explained my reasoning to Reinald too, but he did not seem entirely convinced.

"But given all you did, I can't help feeling that there's more to it...and yet, that is perhaps rude of me to say, given all you've just told me. How strange that you bear no ill will toward your mother."

"Is it really so strange? Really, I don't. I am saddened by it all, however," I admitted. I paused for a moment, wondering whether to go on, but did so anyway. "Though perhaps, in the beginning, I did begrudge her."

I think the reason I could talk about it to someone I didn't really know was because I'd never before been asked about it. At least, not directly. Everyone who knew my circumstances avoided asking me about them for fear of hurting my feelings. The only person who bucked the trend was Ernesta. But even she had never asked me about my circumstances in any real depth, so I had never brought them up.

It was unclear to me exactly why this was of interest to Reinald, but there was no pity on his face. His question came from a place of curiosity, which made me more comfortable opening up about it.

"How do I put this?" I said. "Perhaps things would have been different had my mother hated me, or reacted to me in a way that was more concrete."

Even now, my mother still could not recall a thing about my person. If she was aware of the existence of her third child, then she would have been more bothered by the constant barrage of comments thrown her way, or she would have felt something like hatred for the child who was the very symbol of her actions.

I would have preferred for my mother to hate me. But it was the opposite. When we passed by one another, she would greet me politely. “Good morning, wonderful weather, wouldn’t you say?” she’d say, or “Hello there, you’re looking well.” She gave me sweets whenever there were leftovers, she didn’t make any attempts to be stingy in terms of my child support, and she never abused me. At the same time, unlike my siblings, she never looked at me the way a parent does their child. To her, I was simply a girl from elsewhere who she happened to live with.

I came to terms with it all rather quickly, thanks in large part to the existence of my mother in Japan, but also because, after dealing with my mother’s attitude (or lack thereof) for days on end, I gave up and accepted things.

“In her mind, I do not exist. At least, not as her daughter. I was not family, and so she could always keep a distance between us and always be kind to me. When I saw this in her, I knew that I couldn’t simply throw a tantrum, or scream and shout about our actual relationship.”

While those around us couldn’t stand how things were, my mother and I had silently come to terms with things. That’s why there was no hatred. Reinald crossed his arms and listened thoughtfully.

“I see. I understand now, I think. Still, it’s...well, it’s rather surprising.”

I wasn’t sure I’d said anything so surprising, but Reinald did indeed look stunned.

“Given your age,” he continued, “it would only be natural for you to resent your parents. I had expected you to harbor more in the way of defiance and rebellion.”

“I won’t deny that there *were* some feelings in that direction.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but after talking to you in person, I had the strong impression that my notions of who you are were mistaken. That is why I felt compelled to broach the topic. I hope you will forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I’m not mad. This has simply given me the chance to confirm what people think of the situation.”

I wanted to give Reinald his handkerchief back, but I wasn’t sure if I should

have it washed first. As I pondered this minor conundrum, I noticed Reinald looking up at the sky. I followed his gaze and noticed drops of water falling from the leafy canopy above.

“A passing shower,” Reinald muttered.

The weather had been beautiful until now, but the sky was suddenly filled with clouds.

“Miss Karen, you’ll get wet standing where you are. Please, come this way.”

Reinald put a hand to my shoulder and directed me to the base of a tree.

“Oh, er, okay,” I said.

The thick cover of leaves above kept us mostly out of harm’s way. Slowly, I became aware of the scent of soil as the raindrops sent hints of it upward. It was not long before the rain had covered the ground completely.

“This certainly feels longer than a passing shower,” I said, after a time. “Will it stop soon?”

“It was so sunny earlier, so I imagine we’ll be fine,” replied Reinald. “In any case, everybody knows that we left empty-handed, so certainly someone will be along shortly with cloaks.”

It bears mentioning here that in this world, umbrellas did not exist. There were certain parasol-like items used for blocking the sun, but more importance was placed on the ability to wield a sword freely. Being that an umbrella would render one of your hands useless, they never fell into favor. Materials such as polyester and nylon didn’t exist either, so cloaks were the norm when it came to protection from the rain. They were made from either thick cloth or leather, coated in expensive water-resistant liquids or plant sap.

When I was younger, I had held fast to the dream that I could make a fortune by “inventing” the umbrella, but upon taking my suggestion to Arno and Gerda, the two had asked, completely innocently, “And you are supposed to hold it...*yourself*?” I then took the idea to the servants, but for them an umbrella took away the use of one of their hands. On top of that, they were frightened by the idea that the umbrella would partially block their field of view. My dream was thus summarily trampled into the ground.

While it was somewhat rare, rain also brought with it mist in some regions, so very few ventured out during rainy weather. Everybody simply stayed home, for the most part.

In any case, it was as I wandered through these old, sad memories that the rain began to drip from between the leaves and onto Reinald and myself.

“It’s not stopping. If anything, it’s getting worse,” I said.

Time passed. Certainly more than enough for one of Reinald’s servants to reach us. Reinald stood beside me, expressionless and with his arms crossed. There was no sign that any servants were coming. The sky showed no indication of clearing anytime soon either, so perhaps this was not the passing shower we had at first assumed.

“We’ve no other choice,” said Reinald. “We’ll have to run.”

Fortunately, the manor wasn’t too far away. Even if I were to be drenched, I would be able to borrow some of Gerda’s clothes. Reinald’s thick coat was sure to provide him some protection. Just as I was about to go, however, everything went black.

“My apologies,” said Reinald, “but you’ll get far too wet otherwise.”

He had covered me with his coat. Yes, there were our clothes between us, of course, but the sheer proximity of us huddled together still shocked me, and I was suddenly blushing. I was so very glad that Reinald couldn’t see my face.

Karen, you’re a married woman.

“Please be careful you don’t slip and fall,” said Reinald.

We took off running, and then it hit me. During the time we’d been talking, Reinald had always called me “Miss Karen” and never “Margravine.” I didn’t *think* that there was any deeper meaning to it, but at the same time, I still hadn’t gotten a clear grasp of exactly who Reinald was.

As we left the forest, our shoes now dirtied, the rain began to weaken and the cover of the coat no longer seemed necessary. I imagined it was difficult for Reinald to match my slower pace, and also our close proximity. I made to step away from him, and that was when it happened.

“Sir Reinald, what’s the matter?” I asked.

He stopped suddenly, his eyes on the room Gerda was in. His unexpected halt caused me to trip and fall, and in the confusion I felt one of his hands slide behind my knees and lift. My body tilted backward. *I’m going to fall!* I thought, but his other arm was waiting to catch me.

“Huh? Huh? Huh?!” I sputtered.

“My apologies, but you were about to step into a rather large puddle,” replied Reinald.

Is this... Is this a bridal carry?

“Oh?” I uttered.

Internally, I screamed.

You’d lift me into your arms for a puddle?!

With Reinald’s coat around me, I couldn’t even see his face, let alone anything around us.

Hang on, cool it, wait a second. Calm down, Karen. It’s time to politely let Reinald know that we can walk just fine by ourselves.

“Oh, um, I can manage just fine on my own, thank you,” I said.

“Quiet,” replied Reinald.

“Okay.”

I obeyed his orders before I was even aware of it. Reinald’s strength surprised me. I had assumed when we met that he was in good shape, but he did not falter in the slightest with my weight in his arms; his body remained perfectly upright. Clearly, his muscles weren’t just for show.

In the end, I relented and Reinald carried me back to the manor. But oh, the gazes that met us upon our return.

Oh please, don’t get the wrong idea, everybody, I thought to myself. Who could have possibly seen that rain coming? It might as well have been an act of god. And just look at Reinald. He’s as cool and calm as ever, accepting that towel you gave him to wipe the...

Hang on a second. His servants were waiting for us at the door. They were expecting us. What is the meaning of this?

Reinald looked picturesque, standing there as water dripped from his long hair, but I got the sense that he was asking himself exactly the same question as me. He looked upon his aides as his thin lips voiced his thoughts.

“Moritz, Nika,” he said. “I believe the two of you were well aware that when we left on our walk, we did so without wet weather gear.”

Moritz and Nika were both standing tall and at attention, the two of them dressed in black military uniforms. Moritz, a thin man in his early thirties, answered.

“My apologies,” he said calmly. “We received word from His Highness and were therefore unable to go to you.”

“The prince?” asked Reinald.

“Yes. Though to be more accurate, the order came by way of his guards. We could not refuse an order from royalty.”

Moritz looked at one of Gerda’s servants.

“It is exactly as he says,” added the servant, bowing deferentially. “We were ordered to await your return with towels at the ready.”

We were of course grateful for their concern, and the towels were indeed a godsend. The problem was the prince. The man was such a pain he gave me a splitting headache. All of a sudden, I found myself apologizing.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so very sorry.”

Even though I was a victim myself, I felt guilty due to Gerda’s involvement.

Though perhaps she, too, could not refuse the prince’s orders.

And while I had come out of the rain relatively dry thanks to Reinald’s coat, he had come out of it anything but.

“There’s no need for you to worry, Miss Karen,” he said. “I am used to getting wet in my line of work. Just ignore me and take care of yourself; there’s still a chill in the air at this time of year.”

“But I intend to borrow some of my sister’s clothes. You, unfortunately, don’t have such a luxury.”

“My current predicament makes for a good reason to excuse myself,” replied Reinald. “Even His Highness won’t order me to stay once he sees the condition I’m in.”

Reinald brushed off my apology, but it didn’t leave me feeling any less guilty. I needed to see my sister immediately; both to get some clothes and to see to it that Reinald was sent home as soon as possible. There was also the matter of my carriage home.

“I’m going to have a word with my sister and the prince,” I said.

Given how drenched Reinald was, I thought it best that I explain the situation on his behalf. But when I neared the room Gerda and Prince David were in, I found a guard at the doors. The man was completely and utterly flustered by my arrival, and he hurriedly left his post to stop me from reaching the doors.

“Please leave, my lady,” he whispered. “His Highness and Lady Gerda are in the midst of a discussion.”

“I only left because His Highness ordered as much. And I can’t simply leave without saying a word to my sister,” I said.

The guard was on edge. Nervous. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“You must be quiet,” he hissed.

I was certain that my sister would be fine with me quietly borrowing some clothes without so much as a word, but the prince was with her. I couldn’t just leave without saying *something*. But when I tried to barge my way past, the guard stopped me.

“Look,” I said, “I know what you’re saying, but I couldn’t possibly show the prince such disrespect...”

“I beg of you,” replied the knight, “keep your voice down!”

“Listen to me...” I started.

And right then, a woman’s shriek emerged from behind the doors. It was so sudden that we froze. The prince’s guard emerged from it quicker than I, closing

his eyes and looking up at the ceiling as though he were praying to the gods. His whole body seemed to be screaming something along the lines of, *“She heard it, oh my god she heard it.”*

I, for my part, still couldn’t bring myself to move. It was the voice of a woman, the voice of my *sister*, but because it continued periodically I couldn’t immediately grasp what I was hearing. It wasn’t an ordinary shriek, you see. If you had to classify it, you’d put it in the category of “the sounds a man and a woman make when they are engaging in...a strenuous bout of evening exercise.”

I do hope that my explanation suffices.

Standing in front of me was one of Prince David’s guards. I repeat: one of the *prince’s* guards was standing at the door. Not Gerda’s husband, the *king’s* guards, but his son David’s!

This guard was trying to stop me before I cottoned on to what was going on behind those closed doors.

The loyal and yet kindly guard gestured slowly for me to back away. The stubborn defiance I’d felt until now had suddenly disappeared, and as I began to shuffle away I heard a voice behind me.

“Whatever is the matter, Miss Karen? You aren’t heading inside?”

No! Not now, Reinald! Your timing couldn’t be worse!

My brain screamed in desperation. *“He must be stopped!”* In an instant, I became one with the very guard by my side. The two of us gestured in frantic silence. *“Turn back!”*

And yet, once more, that carnal scream echoed from Gerda’s room. The guard and I froze once more. Everyone understood that there was simply no mistaking what that voice indicated. It was a scandal of epic proportions. If even a word of it got out, it would ripple throughout the country like a tidal wave. Such a scandal would mark the end of the Kirsten family entirely. The prince and Gerda would not escape punishment, and in a worst-case scenario their families would also be crushed completely. I could already see it; all of my relatives, lined up for execution.

But to hear my own sister's voice like that was—as both a sister and an ordinary woman—difficult to bear.

How am I going to explain this to Reinald?

I pulled at his sleeve as I racked my brains, but I was hit by a sudden question: is Reinald even capable of being flustered? Unlike myself—still, obviously, in a panic—Reinald was the very picture of calm as he turned to leave. I almost tripped over, but before I could so much as scream, he covered my mouth and carried me to the front door. Everyone around us was confused by all the commotion, but I was worried about far more than what those people thought. When Reinald lowered me to my feet, I crumpled to the floor.

“Miss Karen,” said Reinald, “please stay calm.”

I'm not dreaming. That wasn't a dream.

“What is this?” I muttered.

Are you for real? Is this for real? What even is this?!

In my daze, I looked up at Reinald, who still showed not even a hint of surprise nor shock. I thought back to the forest, when Reinald had suddenly stopped. From there, he could have carried me straight back through the open doors of my sister's room, and yet he intentionally went through the front door. He had kept his cloak over me so I couldn't see into the room myself...

“Sir Reinald,” I uttered. “You knew?”

“Of his womanizing ways, yes. That he would go *that* far, however...”

Reinald had clearly not expected the prince to cross that particular line. And it only made sense; the sun was still up in the sky, it was daylight hours.

Ugh, I just want to go home.

There was nothing I wanted more at that moment than to simply see the calm and placid smiles of the margrave and Doctor Emma. We had spent such a short time together thus far, but their serenity had been a balm for my heart.

“I must talk to my sister...but...”

I needed to tell her that what she was doing was wrong. It was the duty of her

family to correct her ways, and to do so to her face. I knew that I should return to her room. I knew it, and yet I did not wield such courage. I was also, I should add, very confused. I had been reincarnated in this world, yes, but Gerda was my sister all the same. I had just discovered her having an affair with her own son-in-law. I did not know how to remain calm under such circumstances. As horrible as it sounds, had it been a stranger I could have just pretended the whole thing never happened.

The prince was of a far higher rank than me. Yes, I was the younger sister of the king's concubine, but even so I couldn't just barge in on him. This wasn't Japan, there was a strictly enforced hierarchy here. When I considered how it might lead to trouble for the margrave, I knew that if I said anything at all, it would have to be with the potential consequences squarely in mind.

But why? Why? Why would my sister do such a thing with the prince...?

I was lost in thoughts of it all until I became aware of the people around me.

"Oh, I apologize," I said to the nearby servants. "I do believe I will be taking my leave. Please inform His Highness and my sister that I am leaving."

For the time being, I had to escape this suffocating place and get somewhere I could clear my head. Nothing was coming together for me now, but I thought that I could work something out with Arno and perhaps return at a point when the prince wasn't here.

"Wait a moment," said Reinald, reaching out to take my hand.

Oh, right. I can't just leave without saying goodbye. That would be rude. He's literally right there. I can't just ignore him.

"I apologize. I was a touch perturbed. I did not mean any disrespect..."

"No, forget that. You intend to leave, but by what means?"

"Huh? Oh, that's right. I've no carriage."

Nor a change of clothes. But I no longer cared much for looking through rooms for something to wear. My intent was to simply attempt to commandeer a carriage, but then Reinald began issuing orders.

"Moritz, we will escort Miss Karen home. You know the way, I presume?"

“Yes, I know the way to both the Conrad and the Kirsten residence.”

“Nika, will you ready a blanket or otherwise a long coat?”

“I can ready one of my own, yes. I’ll see to it immediately.”

It all happened so fast that I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. Before I knew it, I was inside a carriage, clad in a coat that Nika let me wear, sitting across from Reinald.

“Miss Karen, we will be heading to the Conrad residence, yes?”

I wanted to go to the Kirsten home, but I suspected that Arno wouldn’t be there due to work. Given that my father and I weren’t on good terms either, I nodded, at which point Reinald’s two aides boarded the carriage. Moritz sat next to Reinald, and Nika took a seat next to me. The carriage was spacious enough that we could all sit comfortably.

“Miss Karen, please forgive us the intrusion,” said Moritz.

Moritz gave the impression of a formal individual, and perhaps this was unavoidable, given that he was a military man who lived by its strict rules. Both he and Nika wore sharp gazes, and their uniforms spoke to them being earnest and straitlaced.

“Oh, um, I don’t mind you riding with us at all,” I replied. “After all, I’m the one imposing on all of you, and you even provided a coat for me. Miss...Nika, is it okay to call you that? I’ll be sure to have it washed before I return it to you.”

Nika looked surprised.

But why?

“I assume I won’t be able to return it to you in person, so...would it be quite all right to send it to your place of work?” I asked.

“I appreciate you being so kind,” replied Nika, “but you really don’t have to go to such trouble.”

“But this coat is supplied to you as part of your position, no? I simply won’t be satisfied unless I do the right thing by you. If you need it immediately, I am of course happy to give it straight back.”

“It’s a spare, so you really don—”

“Then I’ll have it washed and promptly returned.”

I was drawn to the confident and dignified way in which Nika held herself. She had her red hair tied behind her head, and I noted some thin scars along her neck and ear. Her sword was clearly well-used, which gave me the sense that she was well-versed and well-experienced when it came to battle. She seemed to look to Reinald before replying to me, but when he said nothing she nodded somewhat reluctantly.

“Your kindness is appreciated,” she said. “Please have it sent to the third regiment, and it will get to me.”

“May I ask your surname, Miss Nika?” I asked.

“It’s Saganov. Nika Saganov.”

“Very well,” I said, making a mental note of it, “I’ll have it sent to Saganov, then.”

The carriage started to rumble onwards when a voice called out to stop it, and the door opened. It was one of the Saburova servants.

“The lady of the house says that Lady Karen is to take this home with her.”

It was the small box that held my wedding present. I didn’t feel like it was something I could just accept and so I tried to refuse, but the servant stared at me with pleading eyes. They were practically begging on hands and knees with their gaze, and I felt I had no other choice. Inside of the box was, of course, the lovely bracelet I had seen earlier.

“You are fond of it?” asked Reinald.

I don’t know why he bothered asking; he’d been eavesdropping on us earlier.

“Yes,” I replied. “My sister and I usually differ when it comes to jewelry preferences, but this is truly stunning.”

“I see. In which case, I hope you treasure it. Whatever you might say of the person who gave it to you, the gift itself bears no sin.”

“I’m surprised you are capable of such biting commentary, Sir Reinald.”

“I’m surrounded by people I feel comfortable with... The words slipped out before I could catch them.”

“You’ve got quite a way with words, I see.”

I didn’t imagine there were many who could take Reinald’s smile and stay bad-tempered. And while I replied with a smile of my own, I had lost the will to continue our conversation, and so we fell into silence.

The bracelet really did match my tastes. I couldn’t help but wonder what the pale blue jewel it carried was. A garnet? A beryl? A tourmaline? I wasn’t well-versed in gemstones so I didn’t know, but all the same I felt it was beautiful.

Is my sister seriously betraying the king?

What I’d seen today was entirely unlike the Gerda I knew. She was completely different. It was as if there were faulty wiring in her head. Had she changed in the two years that we had been apart? Or did it happen once she became the concubine?

All I knew for certain was that before I had been expelled from the Kirsten home, my sister had been rational (if a little lacking in knowledge of the real world) and strong-willed. She had looked to me as though she were straining herself somewhat, and we’d had our misunderstandings, but I had never thought of her as one to be inconsiderate of others.

In fact, when it came to my expulsion, my sister had been the most outraged of anyone, and she’d fought tooth and nail to persuade my mother of my existence. She barged into my father’s study and threw his books and papers every which way so as to express her resistance, and when she was scolded for it she went on a hunger strike until she passed out—for which she was scolded again. Yes, Gerda had her selfish, egotistical side, but she was a compassionate, kindhearted person.

Gerda had been a good sister. I did not want to believe that she was in the wrong. But Gerda was the smaller problem. Well, by “small” I still mean gigantic, relatively speaking, but there was still a chance we could talk some sense into her, and that at least made things somewhat bearable.

The bigger problem was Prince David. I was so far beyond angry that I was

simply exasperated. Who goes about stealing away his father's—the king's!—concubine? I didn't care about how he treated me; my feelings for him were as cold as ice. Below freezing. But he was also a prince, and by his sheer arrogance it was clear that telling him to mend his ways would have zero effect.

"I can't believe she'd follow in the footsteps of our mother."

The words slipped from me before I was even aware of them. I put a hand to my mouth. Naturally, in the silence of the carriage, everyone turned to look at me.

"I apologize," I uttered, my gaze dropping to the floor.

Given that I was still in the midst of being taken home, I decided to think further on the topic later. There was no grace nor dignity in my uttering anything filled with the despair of one who has just returned from the depths of the underworld.

"Miss Karen, about what happened at the manor," said Reinald.

"Oh, yes, that. I'd very much prefer that it be kept strictly confidential..."

"I can promise that my people will remain completely silent on the matter. That said, I do not know to what extent this matter has already spread."

"Whatever you are capable of...will have to be good enough."

I wanted nothing more than for nobody else to know of what had occurred, but it would do me no use complaining. Since when had those two been doing such a thing? When did their relationship begin? All I could do was pray that nobody else was aware of it.

"If it pleases you, I can have my older brother inquire into the prince's intent," offered Reinald. "It's possible he may learn something of note."

"Can you really go asking him for something so easily? I would be in your debt."

"If my brother had seen it, then he would have taken action anyway, I'm sure. In any case, it is not in our family's interests to see the Kirsten family crumble."

"Perhaps a word or two of reproach... No, I apologize. I've asked too much."

The prince had referred to Reinald's brother as a friend. I did not know if his words were true, but if they were I hoped that Reinald's brother could do something about the situation.

"In any case, I recommend you spend the rest of the day at rest," said Reinald. "You don't look well."

"You're right. I had hoped I might meet my brother later this evening, but...I must first calm my nerves."

Rain continued to fall outside. At this rate a deep fog would come next, and walking outside would be nigh impossible. The carriage, at least, made it safely to the Conrad residence, where the servants at the door greeted us with some confusion, having never seen the family emblem on Reinald's carriage before.

I just knew that when I alighted from the carriage, Mrs. Henrik and Nico would be startled. They knew I'd gone out on my own, and yet here I was returning with a most incredibly handsome young man.

"I know it would be best of me to greet the margrave's son," said Reinald as I readied to leave, "but in my current state I would only cause everyone worry. Would you mind informing them of the circumstances in my stead?"

"We've only just arrived in the capital and are in no state to entertain guests as it is, so please don't let it worry you," I replied. "I will let everyone know that the Rodenwalds treated me very well."

"Many thanks. Should the opportunity present itself, I hope we meet again."

"You are too kind. That said, it is perhaps in both of our interests to avoid meeting again if possible."

"Indeed."

Unlike the last time we met, on this occasion I could return Reinald's parting smile with different feelings in my heart. Even drenched, Reinald had the kind of elegance that made one believe in love at first sight. And this time, fortunately, I was prepared for him to take my hand and place a kiss upon my fingers. Once I had seen his carriage off, I spun around, ready to take care of business.

“Mrs. Henrik,” I said, “do you mind if I explain things *after* I have a chance to change into some new clothes...”

Mrs. Henrik stood silent with an odd look on her face. Nico was blushing. Sven had come out at some point and was standing with his arms crossed. Nico’s red visage was due to Reinald, I was sure. But what had turned Mrs. Henrik into a statue? Sven then stood before me and, quite politely, raised his little finger before me.

“Like this, I assume?” he asked.

He was flashing me the gesture that in this world, just like in Japan, referred to one’s boyfriend, girlfriend, or lover.

Well then, young man, it looks like some words are in order.

5: And It Only Gets Worse

I had seen it coming from a mile away, and yet Nico's and Sven's reactions were nonetheless awful. Nico in particular. When the girl found out that Reinald had been a potential marriage partner, she literally screamed.

"My lady! You refused *that*?!"

Yes, I did. And it seemed that, no matter how beautiful a man you were, when it came to rumors you became simply "that."

The three of us sat around a table. Nico ate some of the snacks prepared for us, and all the while she could not fathom my decision. Sven, meanwhile, listened intently with a complicated look upon his face. Nico was talkative, yes, and she couldn't keep a secret either, but she brightened the place just by virtue of her being there. In terms of etiquette, a servant shouldn't have been sitting at the table with us, but it being home I wasn't particularly concerned. I didn't expect that Mrs. Henrik would complain either.

"You certainly have a twisted sense of taste," said Nico. "You'd drop a guy like that and go all the way to Conrad? Oh, um, which isn't to say that your current husband wasn't a fine, upstanding choice, of course."

"I know what you mean, Nico, but please, a little decorum."

She didn't show a hint of reserve, even in front of her master like this. She also helped herself to some sugar in her tea while she listened to Sven and I. Five heaping teaspoons, in fact. Sweet tooth, much?

"He looks at you with great kindness in his eyes, my lady," Nico said. "I daresay he likes you quite a bit."

"Yes, I must admit I was shocked that he doesn't despise me."

"So you're interested?"

Ugh, this girl sometimes.

"When we talked, he was very understanding," I explained. "Whether it all

ends in an annulled marriage, I do not know, but he wasn't angry about it."

I was Lady Saburova's beloved younger sister. The idea that Reinald might be kind and considerate because of that was a touch disheartening, but I couldn't simply rule out the possibility.

"Yes, but! But! You're really going to keep your distance from him? From someone so dashing?"

"Yes, okay, look, we can all agree that he's very handsome, but are you suggesting I have an affair? Nico, I know you don't have any ulterior motives, but think of how such a thing sounds to someone who doesn't know any better."

"Oh, that's not what I meant."

"Imagine if Mrs. Henrik heard," I said. "That would be terrifying, wouldn't it?"

At the utterance of her name, Nico went quiet. I used it as an opportunity to make things clear with Sven.

"And as for you, Sven, it would seem your preparations for school admission are going well. There's no better time for you to start being more careful about how you speak."

"I am, but I can't be careful all the time. Even you slip up every now and again, Karen."

"But I am always careful about when and where," I replied. "Do *not* pull that little finger nonsense at school, you hear?"

"Look, okay, I'm sorry... Just knock it off, would you?"

"Knock what off?"

"You sound like my mother. It's making me feel weird, so stop it, please." Sven grumbled.

"Then don't say anything that encourages me to take this tone again."

"There! That! That's exactly what I'm talking about!"

Doctor Emma had allowed her son much freedom, and this had resulted in a slight lack in terms of etiquette. He'd been taught, of course, but even now he

always sipped his tea with his elbows on the table. I must have sounded like an old woman, which came as a shock. I wrote a mental note to myself to watch out for that.

“But you must be a little more steadfast,” I said. “I’ve been to school myself, you know, and I worry about you as your senior.”

“Yeah, but you’re dropping out.”

“My position still stands, regardless.” And I intended to keep it. I already saw myself as Sven’s older sister as it was.

“By the way, Nico, I’d like to ask about tomorrow,” I said.

“Oh, yes yes yes. You’re going out, yes? I’ll follow you anywhere!”

“You wanted to see the theater and shops stocking clothes and accessories?”

“I’d be happy to look at any delicious sweets too!”

Energy was not something Nico lacked. Her smile was from ear to ear, and her eyes practically sparkled with her hopeful excitement.

“I will be visiting the Kirstens and a friend of mine,” I said. “Do you have the courage to join me?”

Nico’s smile froze as she shook her head. She was an easygoing and carefree girl, but even she knew the folly in having a Conrad servant visit the Kirsten family home. This saved me from having to remind her of just how much harsh scrutiny she would be under were she to accompany me. The most we could expect was that she’d remain in the carriage while I attended to matters. That said, Nico had been looking forward to our trip tremendously, and ordering her to wait at the villa while I was gone was the very height of cruelty.

“You’ve been stuck here for a whole day already, so I was wondering if I might ask you to accompany Sven on a few errands?” I said.

“What? But I have preparations to do,” said Sven.

“Liar,” I replied. “All of your necessary study materials have been prepared for you. Mrs. Henrik already told me as much. All you’re going to do is sit in the library and read. The margrave told me to ensure that you spent some time outside.”

“When did you even...?”

“I’m not going to ask you to do anything difficult,” I said. “I want you to buy some souvenirs. Besides, if you’re going to be living here, Sven, then you’ll need to get a feel for the place.”

While I’d been visiting my sister, Sven’s school admission had been accepted. He had asked to live on his own but hadn’t been granted permission. According to Mrs. Henrik, the plan was to either hire a helping hand to live with Sven here in the villa, or perhaps have him board with relatives.

“Will you be quite all right by yourself, visiting the Kirstens and all?” asked Nico.

“I won’t be going anywhere I don’t already know, so I’ll be fine,” I replied. “And you don’t have to worry. Even if I return late, I’ll only be meeting with a school friend.”

I was left in low spirits on account of exactly *why* I had to meet with Arno. I let out a pained sigh and Sven looked at me, worried. He’d made fun of me upon my return, but he had honestly been concerned to see me return with Reinald.

“Did something...bothersome happen?” he asked.

“Can you tell?” I asked. “It’s horribly bothersome, yes, but...it’s not about me, at least. Still, it’s not something I can simply leave be, so I have to do the best I can.”

“You should talk to Mrs. Henrik. She’s ever so dependable.”

“When things calm down a little, indeed I will.”

This was, actually, a complete and utter lie.

I had asked Sven and Nico to run errands for me, but I’d picked out fun places for them to go so I was certain they’d enjoy themselves. They’d also known each other since they were both young, so being together wasn’t at all awkward for them. I hoped their time together would be the making of some fond memories.

With our tea time over, I had Mrs. Henrik visit my room when she had a spare moment. She’d probably known something like this would happen from the

time I'd returned. And truth be told, she was dependable; she responded to my call calmly and unperturbed, and I issued my request.

"I can't fill you in on the particulars, but I need the margrave's help looking into the Dunst family," I said. "Could you send a message for me?"

"You mean the Kirstens' head family?" she asked.

"You've heard of them, then?"

"I know of them, yes. I can pass along your message to the margrave, but please allow me a question, my lady: Should I assume that your request infers that you can't rely on the Kirstens for such a task?"

"You assume correctly."

"My lord said that we are to do anything in our power to help you, and so I will of course do as you have ordered, but if you require any further assistance..."

"Thank you, Mrs. Henrik. I appreciate what you are getting at."

In essence, she was offering her shoulder for me to lean on. And while I wanted nothing more than to spill my guts and share this secret with somebody, *anybody*, it wasn't quite so simple; it was far too heavy a burden for a servant to have to carry.

"I do want to discuss things with you," I said, "be that as it may, this is a matter I must first talk to the margrave about. For now, it's better you don't know."

As a woman who'd worked many long years in the service of the margrave, Mrs. Henrik understood the weight of my words.

"I'm sure he will be able to look into things quickly," she said. "But my lady, and I realize this is presumptuous of me but I simply *must* ask... This matter does not concern the Rodenwald family, does it?"

"It does not," I replied. "What happened with Sir Reinald is another matter entirely, so please rest easy."

Mrs. Henrik must have been rather concerned at the sight of us returning to the villa together. She was a seasoned servant and knew the capital well; she

had likely even lived here for a time. I could tell that Whateley and Mrs. Henrik were a cut above the other servants. Mrs. Henrik was someone I could trust implicitly, and she knew that here, unlike the frontier, things were not as easy, nor as cut-and-dried.

“Still, I mustn’t put too much strain on the woman,” I said to myself.

I looked around the room and was struck by the extravagance of the furnishings compared with the manor in Conrad. The frames that held the wall paintings were decorated with gold, and the bed was a four-poster affair and also the very height of luxury. Everything was vintage; well-used, yes, but extremely well taken care of as well.

A cold breeze flowed in as I opened the window, intertwined with the damp scent of rain. At this rate, the mist was bound to thicken, which would make going out nearly impossible. All I could do was simply pray that the sky cleared. I had given up on this being an enjoyable trip home, but I hoped that it would nonetheless be eventful for Sven and Nico.

I was so very tired. The only positives I could think of were the jewelry I had received and the pleasant surprise that was discovering how easy Reinald was to talk to. And yet, when I thought of what I knew of the man and his personality, I was still left confused.

Reinald was kind and considerate, of that there was no doubt, and yet something still felt amiss. And as I’d told Gerda earlier, I got no sense from the man that he was interested in marriage. There was one other doubt that gnawed at me: Even though Reinald was Marquis Rodenwald’s second son, it was odd that he was still unmarried. He was in his mid-twenties, after all. Given his family’s standing, he should have been engaged already. Even my brother Arno already had a fiancée.

I lay down on my bed, and let out yet another sigh. I decided not to think of it any further, as casting my mind back to being carried only left me with rosy cheeks. I hugged a cushion close and closed my eyes, grateful that I was alone.

“If it hadn’t been for all this baggage, I’d have happily married him,” I uttered.

But from the moment I was born, I was aware of who I was. Who I had been. But if I hadn’t had these past memories of life in Japan, how might things have

unfolded? Then again, at the age of fourteen I'm sure my heart would have been entirely battered by the experience with my mother. It was all so very complicated.

My body craved sleep, and I felt my eyelids growing heavier. Then it hit me.

I forgot to return Reinald's handkerchief.

The thought was there, but the strength to stay awake wasn't, and I stupidly fell asleep right there and then. The next day, I awoke with quite the cough.

"If you're cold, I'll bring more blankets immediately," said Nico worriedly. "Please let me know the very instant you require anything at all."

"I was just a little thoughtless, that's all."

"Just a little? You came home drenched yesterday. I gave you those warm pajamas to sleep in and they were all for nothing. Even Sven is more careful than that, and he's younger than you!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry, okay? I am more than well aware of my own stupidity. There's no need to lecture me about it..."

"I am your personal servant, my lady. And this is important, so yes, there is a need to lecture you about it. You're going to leave me for the second day in a row! I'm supposed to be your personal servant!"

"Hold a grudge, much?"

When I blew my nose, Mrs. Henrik raised an eyebrow and immediately went about preparing some herbal tea and medicine. Fortunately, my condition was a little better by the time my scarf and coat were readied, but nobody wanted me going out in my current state.

"You shouldn't be going out if you're unwell," said Nico. "Not to mention the foggy weather..."

"I'm taking the carriage, so there's no need to fret. Once everything is done I promise I'll go straight to bed."

Unlike Japan, here people stayed quietly at home the moment they seemed a little under the weather. As far as I was concerned it was just a cough, but that didn't matter to the others. In any case, the circumstances wouldn't wait for me

to get better. Mrs. Henrik was terribly reluctant about it, but she let me go all the same.

“I won’t spend long catching up with my old friend,” I informed her. “I’ll return home as soon as I’m able.”

“Miss Ernesta, yes? The girl at the House of Magic?”

“Yes, but she hasn’t started there yet, so I should have no trouble seeing her.”

I had to return the money I’d borrowed from her and get her up to speed with things. I’d sent her word when I had the chance, and she’d replied just before I left for the capital, so she was already abreast of recent happenings. I just... I wanted to see her. She was one of only a few friends, and she was important to me.

I had wanted to have dinner together, but given my cold, I didn’t want to bother her too much. I decided to visit her before I saw Arno, being that there was still some time before he would have to head out on his own business.

But I was met by a most shocking revelation.

The shop that Ern’s parents had run was now nothing more than an empty shell of what it once was. I stood in front of it in stunned shock until a kindly passerby who lived in the area spoke up.

“Ern? Well, she and her parents just packed up shop and they took off somewhere. Wasn’t that long ago. I asked them where they were headed, but they wouldn’t say. The House of Magic? Ern said she was turning the position down. Said something about her family needing help...”

Nobody knew where they’d gone.

“Huh...?” I uttered.

I held the letter she’d sent me tight in my grasp and stared at the empty husk of a shop. The shop had also been Ern’s home, and so I didn’t have the slightest clue where else she might be. I knew she had relatives, but I didn’t know where they lived.

Well, this sucks. I can’t believe it. I wasn’t even this sad when those marriage proposals were forced on me.

After talking a little further with the passerby, it seemed that Ern had left not long after she'd sent me the reply I received. She had no reason to lie to me about why she'd left, so I wanted to believe that what had happened had taken her and her family completely by surprise.

When the driver saw me returning to the carriage with uncertainty written all over me, their reaction was one of surprise.

"Our schoolteacher might know something, so I'll have to write the school," I muttered.

I wanted nothing more than to scrap my plans and head straight to school, but I knew I had to see Arno, so I pushed away the frustrating itch in my heart, gritted my teeth, and ordered the driver to the Kirsten home. As soon as we arrived, I threw open the front doors, walked into the entryway of my old home, and called for my brother.

"Arno, are you there?!" I cried.

My voice was filled with emotion and a fierce desire to vent. A servant disappeared hurriedly into the manor, and a short time later my brother appeared with our foster brother and bodyguard Achim in tow. Clearly, nobody had expected me to appear anywhere near the Kirsten household without prior word, and my brother was shocked.

I was on him like a flash.

"I need a moment, immediately, to ask you something, brother," I said, grabbing him by the collar.

Achim tried to peel me off, but I dragged Arno outside with all the strength I could muster. He must have felt the urgency wafting from me, for he did not resist.



“This is a matter of grave importance, so don’t come any closer, Achim,” I ordered.

When we were safely out of earshot of anyone nearby, I shot Arno with a fierce glare.

“Did you know?” I whispered.

“K-Karen?” stuttered Arno. “Wh-What in the world is...?”

“Answer me. Did you know about those two? Their relationship?”

“Those two...? Wait. What are you talking about? If it’s about yesterday, I apologize for the eavesdropping, but I was there by order of the prince himself...and yes, I realize that’s an excuse, but still!”

“That’s who I’m talking about! The prince!”

“So what? That was what he wanted; to take you by surprise.”

“Ugh, and I have a lot of thoughts about *that* too!”

My brother’s confusion was not an act. He really did look apologetic for what had happened, and he made no attempt to fight the grip I had on his collar. He was not so timid as to not fight back against an affront like this; he was allowing me this freedom so my anger could run its course.

“Prince David and Gerda,” I said. “Did you know that they were having an affair?”

At first, Arno looked shocked, but as the meaning of the words sunk in he laughed at the sheer absurdity of my question. He loosened my grip as one might a child throwing a tantrum, and his expression turned to that of a scolding older brother.

“Karen, that is the very height of disrespect. You would do well to watch your mouth.”

But I was not going to apologize. I was well aware of how I sounded, and my glare remained persistent. Tears began to well in the corners of my eyes. Arno initially looked perplexed by my steadfast gaze, but then his expression twisted with disbelief.

“No... Surely you jest...” he said.

“Would I visit you this early in the morning to tell jokes, brother?”

“No. No, no, no. But... I mean... You... It can’t... How...?”

He couldn’t form words for fear of who might see, who might hear. And yes, I should have chosen somewhere more private, but it was all too much for me to bear at that point.

“I heard it,” I said.

“You heard it? Heard what...?”

“I heard them...getting to know one another.”

I couldn’t say it directly, but the meaning got through. Arno gasped.

“Reinald heard it too,” I added.

This time Arno let out something akin to a squeal, and the sound made it crystal clear to me.

He didn’t know. He really didn’t know.

I had thought that Arno might have been in league with the prince.

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “To talk to you. Arno? Arno, are you listening?”

At the sight of my brother’s eyes rolling back into his head and his body toppling backward, Achim, who had been watching from a distance, cried out.

I wish you had just a touch more backbone, brother. Even I was able to fare far better than this.

Once my brother was taken to his room and looked after, he quickly returned to his senses. At first, he didn’t understand why I was there, but then the memories reassembled in his mind.

“But it’s impossible,” he said, desperate to believe his own words. “It’s a nightmare. It can’t possibly be...”

“It’s the reality,” I said. “Pull yourself together, and quickly.”

“I don’t have the faintest idea what’s going on,” added Achim. “But you’ve got to keep it together, young master.”

When they weren't around any high-ranking nobles, Achim had always called Arno "young master," and it looked like he still did. Achim had always been good to me, just like Arno, and often took me out to play. I would have loved to wax nostalgic, but we didn't have the time.

"I apologize, Achim, but I have to discuss something with Arno. Would you stand watch outside, please?"

"I can't stay?"

"It's not exactly a matter I want overheard. Should it spread, we're looking at a disaster."

"Well, yeah, I kind of put that much together myself..."

Arno's room was located in a place that made it safe from prying eyes and ears. Still, I didn't want Achim hearing about it either.

"I mean, it was bad enough that Arno fainted, right?" said Achim. "It's clearly not an easy burden to carry alone, and that makes me worried for you too, Karen."

Achim's dark brown hair was pulled into a ponytail at the back of his head. He took my hand.

"Do you hear me?" he said.

I was already aware of how accustomed Achim was to talking with women. After all, it was Achim who had taught my brother all he knew about nights on the town, and that meant he'd done his fair share of womanizing. Though he gave off a slightly less than earnest impression, Achim never did anything Arno would disapprove of, and he was always aware of exactly who he was dealing with. In other words, he kept himself out of trouble. More than anyone else in the world, he put Arno first.

"I won't let you fool me with those kinds of tricks," I said, brushing his hand away.

"I'm serious, though. I've always got you and the young master in mind. You're important to me."

"I notice you didn't mention my sister or Emil."

“Well, Gerda is beyond my reach now, and Master Emil despises me.”

This marks the first mention of Emil, the fourth and youngest Kirsten sibling. Achim’s sour face was on account of Emil not liking him very much.

“He still sees you as a threat?” I asked.

“That he does. He’s harsh about it too. Told me not to go near you... But please, don’t push me away. I can’t bear a beautiful young maiden telling me to leave; it’ll bring me to tears.”

“Your crocodile tears mean nothing to me.”

“Look at you two,” muttered Arno. “You always did get along like a house on fire. And though I’m glad to see it, we don’t have time for games right now.”

“You’re the last one in a position to talk to us about time,” I said. “And what do you mean, games? We weren’t playing at anything!”

“Oh, are you feeling better?” asked Achim.

Achim’s casual attitude showed just how close he and Arno were. Still, Arno didn’t seem to notice that Achim and I had a similar relationship. In any case, Arno was the one moaning and fainting like a noblewoman, not me.

“Achim, do a quick check on the hallway and return when you’re done.”

“Brother, are you sure?” I asked.

“I’ll need him doing work for me anyway, and it will all go much smoother if he knows. And besides, I can’t bear this burden alone. Please, you must tell him.”

It looked like my brother already shouldered enough burdens by himself, so I acquiesced. After all, he looked truly pitiful as he took some medicine from a nearby shelf. Even though the hallway seemed empty from where we were, I told Achim to clear away anybody nearby. He could see how cautious Arno and I were, so when he was done he stood with his back against the door to better hear anyone coming.

“So, Gerda and Prince David,” said Arno, holding his stomach. “You heard them...getting to know one another, yes?”

“Yes, they were in the midst of quite the tryst.”

Arno let out a shocked grunt.

“Keep it together, would you?” I said. “I had to actually hear them at it.”

“I...I apologize. In any case, tell me exactly how you came to know of this, please.”

I explained the flow of events.

“That’s everything I saw,” I said finally. “Do you believe me?”

Arno lay down, seemingly deflated. “It’s not a matter of belief, really...” he uttered. “You’re not the kind of girl to go lying at a time like this...”

My first impression of Arno after spending two years apart was that he’d grown stronger, but I realized now that at his core he was unchanged. Mentally, he was rather frail, though he did a masterful job of looking otherwise when around others. His stomach was still bothering him, so he lay back and held an arm over his eyes.

“What is Gerda thinking?” he muttered. “She was so outraged about mother’s indiscretion, and then she’s at it herself while you, her sixteen-year-old younger sister, are right there...”

“Shocking, isn’t it?” I said.

“You’re rather calm about it,” remarked Arno.

“I’ve had a night to cool my head and come to terms with things. In any case, the Rodenwald family may be able to offer some support. How should we handle it?”

I wasn’t going to take the issue to mother and father. I asked Arno if he would broach the matter with them, but to my surprise, his expression was one of reluctance.

“Let’s not talk to them about this,” he said. “I think I’ll put a stop to things myself.”

“That’s a surprise. You won’t say a word?”

“Father is already stressed enough, and I don’t want to add something like

this to his list of worries. If Gerda absolutely refuses to break things off with Prince David, I'll have her come here and talk about it with her."

"You don't need me to go?"

"No. Things are bound to be awkward between the two of you. And I assume it's something you'd rather avoid doing anyway."

He was worried because of my upbringing, and the links that it also had to illicit affairs. I was, nonetheless, worried about leaving everything on Arno's shoulders.

"But surely we'd be more convincing if we talked to her together," I said.

"Karen. You don't trust me, do you?"

I don't.

He knew it. I knew it. The hint of a timid grin spread across his features, but in his expression was a certain bold impudence that hadn't been there two years ago.

"Look, I know that I'm the same brother who sent you off to marry a stranger, but I'm not so spineless that I'd put extra stress on you even now...though, that said, I *may* need your help in the case that Gerda refuses to listen."

"Very well. I'll leave things in your capable hands, but I'll be expecting you to tell me how it all goes."

"And I will, I promise. You will be staying at the Conrad villa for a time, I presume?"

"Yes, Sven—that is to say, the margrave's son—still has some preparations that need to be seen to before he starts school."

"I must make a point of making his acquaintance. I'll handle things with the Rodenwalds too; I don't want you too involved in all of this."

"So I should leave everything to you?"

"Of course. I can tell by your face that you haven't been sleeping. Leave it with me, I insist."

"Please don't push yourself, brother."

“This is a family crisis, Karen. I doubt I’ll have much other choice.”

Given the circumstances, I knew it was best to do as Arno said. We hugged, and I took the opportunity to ask for a favor.

“On a different note, might I borrow Achim?” I asked. “I’d like his help with something. I promise it won’t intrude on his usual duties.”

“As long as Achim is okay with it, so am I.”

“Happy to help,” said Achim. “I’ll gladly accept any request asked of me.”

“There you have it,” said Arno. “Take him with you, do as you please.”

Permission granted. Still, it wasn’t like we were just going for a stroll.

“Actually, it’s more your connections I’m after, Achim...” I muttered.

I’m sure you’ve already gathered what exactly I wanted to ask of him, and yes, you’re right; I wanted him to track down the whereabouts of my friend Ern and her parents. I planned to lean on the margrave for help too, but I also wanted someone with more local connections. And while I wanted to do some sleuthing on my own, when it came to tasks of this nature, one needed to select the best tool for the job, as they say.

Now that we were done with the more clandestine part of our conversation, Achim walked over and took a seat at the end of Arno’s bed.

“Ern was the girl you were often out and about with,” said Achim. “Yes, I remember her. I’ll look into things immediately.”

“You know Ern, Achim?” I asked.

“But of course. I’m the one who did the investigating the young master asked for, after all.”

“Oh, I see. Then we can skip the particulars.”

“That we can. I do love the way you can take all of this in your stride, Karen. If you were Gerda or Emil, you’d be bright red with rage right now.”

The crux of my calm was a simple thing, really: I’d lived a simple life in which I had nothing to hide. It didn’t really matter if someone snooped on my affairs.

“By the way, Miss Karen, there’s one thing I’ve been dying to ask you...”

At this, Achim reached out with both hands and clasped my cheeks. He had always been like this; no real sense of personal space. It was one reason that he was so good at getting along with people. Because he was quite handsome, he was especially popular with women too.

“And because the young master won’t ask, I will,” he continued. “Has the margrave been pushing you around? Bullying you? You know what I mean.”

“Come now, Achim,” said Arno.

“Arno here has his guilt-ridden conscience holding him back, but if you’re in any trouble, you say something, okay? I couldn’t disobey your father back when you left, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still help you.”

“Thank you,” I said, “but the margrave is a good man, and he treats everyone kindly. You don’t have to worry.”

I’m trying to allay his fears, so why does he look disappointed?

I was grateful for Achim’s concern, but my response was for naught; Achim was more disheartened by the fact that he couldn’t do anything than pleased by the fact that I was doing quite well. With a roll of his eyes, Arno peeled Achim off me.

“As always, you’re especially indulgent when it comes to me and Karen.”

“I wouldn’t say that. The two of you are just higher on my list of priorities, that’s all.”

“Karen, don’t you think Achim’s wife is going to be in for some hard times, someday when he finally finds her?”

“Not going to happen,” said Achim. “The only woman for me until now has been Karen here.”

“And she’s married,” Arno pointed out.

“So it’s the single life for me, then. I’ve given up on the idea of a family of my own.”

Either way, Achim’s first priority was *always* my brother. He liked to play things evasively when it came to himself, and so I couldn’t even imagine the sort of woman he’d ever truly fall for.

“And you’re not in any trouble? Really?” asked Achim, prodding.

“None at all,” I said. “I think things will go swimmingly, so please, rest easy. What I’d really like is for you to do something about Prince David, who seems hellbent on getting me and Reinald together.”

“Ah... Hmm. I, uh, unfortunately I don’t think I’m capable of moving mountains...” said Achim, looking away from me for a moment.

The apology was written on his face. There really *were* people he simply could not disobey.

“The young master also told me to let that go, in his own way.”

“My saving grace, at least, is that Reinald is a man who listens to reason,” I said. “He didn’t try to force his way, and he brushed off all the prince’s suggestions.”

“And what about the Rodenwald family? It sounds like Reinald isn’t the one pushing for this marriage to go through.”

From talking to Reinald, I got the sense that he had essentially given up on me upon learning that I was married to the margrave. He, too, was obeying the prince, but the fact that he couldn’t deflect the prince more deftly was odd to me; it didn’t fit with what I knew of him.

“So the Rodenwalds want to build a connection between our houses for some reason,” said Arno, still not entirely convinced of the idea. “A most welcome bond, and yet...”

Arno’s skepticism was easily placed—it was the fact that Reinald had said the family wanted a connection to the *Kirstens*, and not the Dunsts. But if such truly was the desire of Reinald’s brother, the current lord of the family, then Arno could not easily oppose such an idea. And judging by the look on his face, he wasn’t privy to any information regarding the Dunsts on this matter. Talking about it with him would only cause greater confusion, so I did not bring it up. There was no need to give him any further stomachaches.

“Ever since Gerda was appointed the royal concubine, we’ve barely had a chance to rest,” said Arno. “It’s an honor for a distinguished family such as the Rodenwalds to reach out to us, but it’s also a heavy burden. Until now,

nobody's taken any real notice of us."

Not everyone was friendly or happy about the new position the Kirsten family occupied, it seemed. This only made the strain of it all the harder to bear.

"As soon as things settle, I'll be sure to make time to visit Conrad too. For the time being, will you apologize to the margrave on my behalf?" asked Arno.

"Of course. The margrave will be delighted to meet you."

"And look, putting aside the fact that margrave is a good man for the moment, as your brother, I truly wanted nothing more than for you to marry a man you'd fallen in love with."

Oh, so we're talking about this now?

I remembered then that Arno had been there at Gerda's manor, eavesdropping on our conversation. I wondered if he might do me the favor of forgetting that particular detail.

"All I'm saying is that I hope next time you'll choose to talk to me about it," said Arno, noticing my discomfort. "If you're struggling with anything, then I wish to be of help to you. Hopefully when you need my help next, I'll be the lord of the family. I promise that I will not allow the Dunsts to simply do as they please."

"Yes, you're right. With you in charge things won't feel so precarious."

"And would you consider forgiving Gerda, should she apologize? That is, if you can. Regardless of everything else, I'm certain that her love and care for you are genuine."

"Don't worry, brother. I'm not especially mad at her; I just don't understand it."

All I hoped was that Gerda would mend her ways. I had yet to hear her side of things, and I wasn't about to explode from rage.

"By the way, young master," Achim cut in, "I think your uncle will be arriving rather soon."

"Oh. Karen, I apologize, but..."

"It's fine, it's fine. I don't much want to see our uncle either. I'm out of here."

"I'll try to make time to visit Gerda today. Achim, see Karen home, would you? Use the time to ask around about her friend too."

"Understood. Has your stomach medicine kicked in?"

"It will momentarily. Karen, I don't suppose you'll say hello to father?"

"No. It'd be an awkward inconvenience for both of us."

Arno was at least well enough that he could stand on his own two feet. He shot me a sad smile. Unfortunately, I knew that even if I did make time for our father, we wouldn't have much—if anything—in the way of conversation. I watched Arno as he disappeared down the hallway before Achim and I set off.

"He looks a bit forlorn, a bit lonely, wouldn't you say?" said Achim.

"I feel bad, but what can I do? We'd only make his stomachache worse."

"He knows that too, but he couldn't *not* ask."

"And I know how he feels. I do."

The days of our once-happy family would never return. Back then, we had always made time, at least once every few days, to meet in the tea room and simply talk as a family. When Achim made no response whatsoever to my comment, I looked up at him, curious. He was looking down at me, stunned.

"You were lonely too then, huh?" he asked finally.

"What do you think I am? I get sad and lonely too, you know."

"Be that as it may, back then you simply marched along to the beat of your own drum. You didn't cry about it, and you didn't put on a strong front either. It's like you were brought up strong, and you took to solitary life like a fish to water. Made me lonely just watching you."

"What a strange thing to say," I countered. "It was father and the others who pushed me into those circumstances. What other recourse did I have?"

"Whoa... You know, back when you were expelled, I was ready to provide you with a shoulder to cry on, a place to stay, and a family to boot."

This was news to me. Was it possible that other options *had* been available to

me?

“I’d convinced my mother to take you in if worse came to worst,” explained Achim.

“I see. Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

It seemed I’d had more allies than I’d thought at the time, but because I’d never looked around to see them, I’d simply gone on thinking, in my own flustered, panicked fashion, that I was all alone. It struck me then that some things you simply do not notice, no matter what age you are. I was reflecting on this as we made our way to the entrance where I was roused from my thoughts by a young boy’s panting cry.

“Sister!”

In the past, he had called me “sis,” but no longer, it seemed. I turned to find myself looking at a young boy in his early teens, his eyes alight with excitement. I knew him, of course. It was Emil, the Kirstens’ youngest sibling. He had the most courageous face out of all of us, and he was big and well-built too, but all the same you could still see the child in him. It made me a little sad to think that, at just thirteen years of age, he was already growing up.

“Karen, you’ve come home,” said Emil.

“Just dropping by because I had a matter to discuss with Arno. You were out somewhere, Emil?”

“I’ll be entering school soon, so I went with some friends to check it out.”

“Oh, I see. You’re already old enough to go to school.”

“I thought it could wait until I was fifteen, but mother and father insisted.”

“That fifteen was too late, you mean?”

“They told me it was better I get accustomed to society sooner rather than later.”

“But Arno and Gerda entered school at fifteen. They’re pushing you a bit, aren’t they?”

“Right? Arno and Gerda got to go to school when they wanted. But I don’t mind; at least I’ll be with my friends.”

Unlike Arno, Gerda, and myself, who had been looked after by our servants and nursemaids, mother was handling Emil’s education herself, and she’d placed many restrictions on him. I’d entered a public school because of the incident, but even then I was given freedom, just like Arno and Gerda. Emil wasn’t entirely content with his lack of freedom.

“Oh, but I don’t want to just complain to you! If you’ve some time, let’s chat over tea.”

The invitation left me torn. I was very fond of Emil, and despite our mother saying that I wasn’t an actual member of the family, he had always adored me. Reluctantly, however, I had to decline.

“I’m so sorry, but I have other errands to run that simply won’t wait,” I said.

Emil’s look upon being turned down was exactly that of an abandoned puppy. A feeling of guilt flushed through my body as I brought him into a hug.

“I can’t today, but I’ll be in the capital for a little while. Why don’t you come visit Conrad with Arno? I’ll have all the time in the world for you then.”

“So you’ll be staying in the Conrad villa? Not here?”

“Of course. I’m married to the margrave now.”

Emil did not think very highly of my marriage. And while he would not say as much to my face, he couldn’t stop his conflicted feelings furrowing his brow. I didn’t want to force Emil to visit, but I didn’t want to stay too long at the Kirsten household either. And for good reason.

“Emil. You’re home.”

The gentle, kind voice belonged to a woman in her forties. She appeared with her maids in tow. Her lithe body, immaculate dress, and general carriage were the very picture of a noblewoman. I’d had a feeling that she would turn up, and here she was.

It was then that I realized Achim had put some distance between us. The nearby servants had also essentially vanished. They’d all practically fled, but I

couldn't blame them. The woman who had arrived was Anna, the very source of the Kirsten family's troubles. My mother. Emil's too, of course.

Emil was surprised to see her.

"You came to welcome me home?" he asked, hugging her.

"I was waiting for you. I wanted to hear what you thought of the school. And welcome, Karen. How long has it been since you were last here?"

"Mother," started Emil, "sister, she..."

"I don't remember how many days, exactly," I said, not giving Emil a chance to say anything more, "but it has certainly been a while, Mrs. Kirsten. I'm glad to see you looking so well."

My reply was polite, but there was no heart in it. The words were ultimately hollow. And though I couldn't see it myself, I knew that everyone within earshot felt their body temperature drop a few degrees.

"You got married, yes? Congratulations."

"Thank you very much."

"And to think that you were just a little girl when you stayed with us. Time goes by in the blink of an eye, it truly does. Are you done speaking with Emil? Perhaps you might join us for tea? I'd so love to hear more about Conrad."

There was a certain naivety to her smile, but it was likely that she made her invitation knowing full well what my answer would be. Emil, however, didn't, as he still held on to the nonexistent hope that our family might yet return to what it once was. He hoped that mother and I might yet reconcile. I didn't want to disappoint him, but all the same, I lowered my head apologetically and replied:

"While I am grateful for the invitation, alas, I have prior engagements."

"Oh, in which case I apologize for keeping you."

"Think nothing of it. I do so hope we can enjoy that cup of tea another time."

All of our words, all of them for the sake of appearances. I wondered if she'd seen me hugging Emil earlier. Based on her timing—a subtle power play—I felt certain that she had. And while I felt sorry for my younger brother and the sad

look on his face, I could not stand to be in this woman's company for any lengthy period of time.

Just as I was about to take my leave, mother spoke to Achim.

"You're seeing Miss Karen home?" she asked.

"Yes. Master Arno asked me to ensure her safe return."

"Arno... Yes, I see. Do be careful. See to it that she's taken home safe."

Did Arno say that to Achim? To see me home?

Mother saw us off. When the door closed behind us, Achim grinned.

"There's no point to me being at the family meeting anyway. Let's just say our talk ran long, shall we?"

"I still haven't said a thing. Are you sure you don't have to go back home?"

"I'd like to talk with you a little more. And they'll forgive me a little slacking."

"Well then, are you happy to walk with me along main street?"

"It would be my pleasure. Consider me your bodyguard."

We boarded a carriage, which would take us to main street and wait while we took a walk. There were no servants to eavesdrop on us once inside, and so Achim's shoulders slumped with a certain defeated exasperation.

"He wouldn't even look at you," I said. "Is he still ignoring you outright?"

"It's fine, he's still young," replied Achim. "Arno was about the same when he was that age, and he knows better than to berate me in front of others."

"Hmm. But he must know that he's the one in the wrong."

Long ago, Emil had let his curiosity get the better of him and played with fire during the winter, in a place that would have lit up at the slightest mistake. It very well almost did, but Achim had arrived in the nick of time to snuff the fire out. What followed was a very fierce scolding, and Emil still had yet to let go of his hard feelings.

"But I get it," said Achim. "For him, it's humiliating to have been torn a new one by a commoner. That's how he's been brought up, so I just hope he realizes

and sets himself straight.”

“But even so, it sounds to me like he could use a good talking-to. Some educating on the matter. I don’t even know how many times I told him to stop ignoring you...”

“I’m sure he’ll come around and apologize in due time. He’s a lot like his older brother.”

I was glad that Achim was so open-minded and generous when it came to Emil, but his basis for being as such was, to me, questionable. Still, he really didn’t seem to mind the situation, and he shot me a mischievous grin as he went on.

“If you ask me, the only person I know who hasn’t changed a bit as they grew up is *you*, Karen. You really haven’t changed a bit.”

“You mean to say I’ve always been like an old lady?”

“Why do you have to go and be like that? I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.”

I decided not to delve into this particular topic any further; I’d only be digging myself a deeper grave. So, I turned the topic to Ern and filled Achim in. I only had a smattering of information to pass on, but Achim assured me that it was more than enough.

We alighted from the carriage near main street. It was cloudy with a chill in the air. I was hesitant to remove the cloak I’d been given, but I knew I’d stand out among the swaggering local nobles if I didn’t.

“Why main street, anyway?” asked Achim. “If it’s jewelry or tailoring you’re after, that’s Maidenhair Street.”

“I’m after street food,” I said.

“Ah...”

What’s with that “now I get it” attitude? The only person who will allow me this particular luxury is you, Achim.

As we made our way further along the stone-paved path, the street grew busier and more crowded. If Nico were here, I was certain she’d be wide-eyed with wonder and brimming with uncontainable excitement. Brick buildings lined

the street, and the roads and shop fronts were bustling with people. Vibrant, colorful flowers decorated the verandas of nearby homes, and street performers played music or displayed their various skills wherever there was a little open space to do so.

It wasn't just local citizens who filled the street either. Tourists and merchants in foreign garb also enjoyed the sights, enchanted by the curiosities that filled the outdoor stalls. Some of the people at those stalls called out to me, too, no doubt mistaking me for a tourist myself. My destination, however, was the square with the circular fountain at its center, across from the street. It was a location filled with food stalls popular with the locals, and perfect for a light snack. Achim knew where I was headed, and he reached into his pockets.

"The perfect snack," he said. "Now, which one are you after? My treat."

"Yay! Thank you!" I cried.

"You wait over there and take a seat. Let me buy it."

The food from the stalls wasn't particularly expensive, and it wasn't long before Achim returned with a minced meat sausage wrapped in batter and deep-fried. In other words, it was a corn dog. Now, unlike in Japan, the batter wasn't sweet and you didn't get any ketchup or mustard either, but oh my, the spices! It was exactly what one would imagine when they dreamed of junk food. The kind of B-grade gourmet that was especially scrumptious when devoured freshly made.

In truth, I wanted nothing more than to explore as I ate, but walking and eating was frowned upon. Achim bought a corn dog for himself, too, and the moment he took a seat he was already biting into it.

Isn't he afraid of burning himself?

"I remember that you liked indulging in these quite a bit," Achim said. "That really takes me back."

"You were watching me that much?" I asked.

"Well, I told you Arno wanted to keep an eye on you. Your eating habits were easy to get a hold of."

“If you were watching me that much you could have at least said hello. It’s not like we were at home; who would’ve cared if we’d had a chat once in a while?”

“Well, I wanted to, but to be honest, I was worried.”

“About what?”

“Well, I’m a Kirsten too. I couldn’t stop your father from making his decision, and so I thought there was a good chance you’d be mad enough that you didn’t want to talk to any of us.”

“Why would you go thinking something so wrong about me?”

Unlike Achim, I couldn’t dive into my corn dog headlong. I was afraid of burning myself. But Achim ate his corn dog with big, chomping bites, as though he wasn’t even interested in tasting the thing. It was a kind of magic.

“If you’d turned to me with ire and hatred, it wouldn’t have been an easy thing for me to recover from,” Achim said.

“I understood the circumstances, Achim. I had no reason to hate you.”

“You’re not exactly an open book, Karen. If that’s how you felt, I wish you’d tell me what’s on your mind more often. I mean, I want to help you.”

“I’m aware of that, and I’ll do my best.”

I’d been told similar before, and it was something of an ongoing issue of mine.

“By the way, Achim, I’m wondering if you could enlighten me on something.”

“Happy to help if it’s something I know anything about.”

“What kind of person is Reinald Rodenwald?”

The look on Achim’s face was one of *“What the heck? Did she really just ask me that?”*

“Wait a second. So you dump the guy and now you’re interested in him?” he replied.

“Yes, well, let’s just say I’m curious.”

“But why even ask? You’re Lady Conrad now.”

“I’m not asking for schemes or plans or anything like that. It’s as I told you; I’m just curious.”

And though I really didn’t have any ulterior motives, Achim still looked skeptical.

“But you’ve never shown so much interest in somebody like this before. *Especially* when it comes to men; you’ve always treated them like they were just blades of grass in a field. Any time someone asked you out for tea you ignored them.”

“No I didn’t... And just how much do you know about me anyway?!”

Wasn’t it natural to want to look into something you were curious about?

Achim crossed his arms, a troubled look on his face and the corn dog skewer dangling from between his teeth.

“I guess if it’s you, nothing weird’s going to happen,” Achim muttered to himself.

The words puzzled me, as his judgment seemed to come from circumstances beyond my understanding.

“Look, I can tell you what I know, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“What? Does he have such a bad reputation?”

“Reputation? Reinald’s reputation is stellar. On the surface, at least.”

Achim looked hesitant to go on, but this only made me all the more curious.

“What is it?” I asked. “Arno asked you to look into things, didn’t he?”

“And I did. Then I reported everything back to him. Reinald’s records, his bloodline, they’re exemplary. His promotion to general at his young age points to his superiors thinking incredibly highly of him. The guy’s got nowhere else to go but up, and it’s like he already exists above the clouds compared to the rest of us mere mortals. In every way he looked like a safe and stable match for you, but...lend me your ear a sec.”

Achim’s gaze shot around as if wary of those around us, then he brought his face closer to my ear. But why? We hadn’t looked like we were talking about

anything particularly secretive until now.

“His records looked a little *too* spotless to me, so I dug a little deeper. On my own. And just as I thought, there are rumors.”

“Did you tell my brother about them?”

“How could I? I did this extra stuff without permission, so I’m expecting you to keep it quiet too.”

I finished my corn dog, stood to my feet, and motioned with my thumb for us to move. While I felt the hustle and bustle of the square would mask our conversation, Achim clearly felt differently. We went back to the carriage, and Achim directed the driver to take us to the city outskirts.

“This came up the moment I dug into things, so it’s not something anyone is trying to hide,” said Achim. “I told you about Reinald’s military position, but do you know who’s working under him?”

“I got the sense they were very conscientious, if taciturn, soldiers. Well-trained military men and women.”

“And you’d be right. All of the people under him are military types. However, you haven’t been to the garrison, have you? You don’t know a lot about our nation’s military so you probably didn’t notice, but hard-nosed military types? You don’t see them here. Even the knights on patrol are brighter in terms of personality.”

It felt odd to me, the way he said “our nation.” Now I had an inkling as to why this was not a topic Achim wanted to discuss out in the open. It wasn’t something you wanted people overhearing.

“A few decades ago it might have been different, but we haven’t seen war in a long, long time. And while we still have a military force, the battle-ready soldier class is on the decline. The closest we’ve had to war has been small skirmishes on the border. In other words, peace has made us soft.”

“The war was before both of us were born,” I said in agreement.

You could say that the high level of general education in Falkrum was thanks to the government’s ability to focus on domestic matters. However dangerous it

was outside our borders, I had lived in peacetimes since the moment I was born. I didn't really know what war was. Not really. Still, Achim seemed to have acquired information on the state of things by way of merchants, and while he was careful about how he worded it, he was saying that our military was weak.

"So if Reinald's soldiers are strong, then you're saying he hired mercenaries or the like?"

"Not mercenaries. They're too well-behaved and orderly to be mercenaries. Of course, some of them are better mannered than others, but in general mercenaries are rougher and more uncivilized."

He spoke as if he'd seen some himself. It struck me as strange, but the next thing Achim said took me completely by surprise.

"Ah, so you never heard from Arno? My father was a wandering mercenary, and my grandparents died in a conflict over the border. The only one who survived was my mother."

I'd never known, and I was stunned. It didn't seem to bother Achim, however, and he went on calmly.

"My mother took me and fled, and when we were all out of money, Lord Kirsten brought her into his employ."

"Father hired your mother? I'd never heard that before."

"Well, it's something the family keeps quiet. My mother was educated, yes, but we were refugees nonetheless. We owe Lord Kirsten a great debt."

It was a most unexpected revelation. But according to Achim, my father had aided many such refugees.

"Anyway, let's get back on track. That charming knight you're asking about leads the kind of soldiers who wouldn't hesitate to cut another down at a moment's notice. They're used to it, in fact. I went myself to check it out; the rumors are very likely true."

Achim told the driver to slow down and gestured for me to look out the window. I looked outside to see that the road ahead was now paved, with buildings packed tight on either side of it.

“Might not be easy to tell, but look further down the road,” said Achim. “There are two people standing on either side of the entrance.”

The road led to a guardhouse for the soldiers under Reinald’s direct command. And just as Achim had said, there were two men in black uniforms standing at the entrance. There was a tall steel fence with trees, and beyond them a few rather plain but sturdy-looking buildings. I was struck by the sharp gazes of the soldiers and their upright bearing; perhaps because until moments ago we had been in a place so bright and lively.

“You just don’t see that kind of hard-line soldier in this country very often,” said Achim. “Now, Rodenwald’s soldiers make up some of that guardhouse, but more than half of them are of foreign birth.”

The conversation suddenly took on something of a darker tone. I had not expected this at all, and I could not hide my shock. I kicked my brain back into gear and thought back to the history I’d studied with my tutor and at school.

“If you’re talking nearby countries, then the Empire?” I said. “We may be on friendly terms with them, but there’s no official alliance, is there?”

“Not officially, but we’re pretty much at their beck and call. Those guys are imperials, all right. They’re all from a country looking to start a war with pretty much everyone.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch, isn’t it? Reinald is a member of Falkrum’s nobility.”

I thought back to the man and woman who had accompanied Reinald. If it were true that they were career military types, that explained a lot, and yet both struck me as loyal. Neither looked as though they were putting on an act. However friendly relations were between Falkrum and the Empire, it didn’t make sense for imperials to become soldiers of Falkrum; they wouldn’t simply abandon the place they called home. I brought this up with Achim.

“They’d have a valid reason to do such a thing if it were Reinald, the individual, that they were soldiers for,” he said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“There are rumors, one of which is that Reinald isn’t related to his older brother *or* his father. Some say that his actual father is someone high up in the

Empire's ranks, and the previous Rodenwald Lord and the King both accepted the arrangement."

"You're saying that Reinald's real father gave him soldiers?"

"This is not a nice way of putting it, but Falkrum survives by groveling to the Empire. I don't know the circumstances, but I'd say it was an offer they couldn't refuse."

Which was to say, Falkrum was in such a weakened state that it had no choice but to accept the Empire's demands.

"Reinald's soldiers are essentially a private army. Word is, he was given his rank because it's unfathomable for an individual to wield such military might. There's a lot you can read into it, but the crux of it is this: he's got foreign soldiers under his command who hail from the Empire, approved by the state. We're talking about a major international issue here, if it were to get out."

If what Achim said was true, it was astounding. There were other generals leading many of the nation's soldiers, which meant it wasn't like the country's entire military was under Reinald's command, but it was scary, all the same, that the imperial soldiers were his private force. The Rodenwald family had soldiers of its own, and this amounted to quite the amount of military power when combined with those under Reinald's command. It was a rather terrifying thought.

"But Reinald's father must have quite the authority to split a portion of his own nation's military like that. Just who is he?"

"I wondered the same thing, and so I looked into it, but unfortunately I came up empty-handed."

The people working under Reinald were tight-lipped, and nobody said a thing. The Empire, too, was much too far away for Achim to handle the snooping alone.

Oh, I see. That question he asked...

I was reminded then of my conversation with Reinald, and how he'd asked me what I thought of my mother. Perhaps that had had something to do with his own origins.

“But here’s what’s frightening: Reinald really is as powerful and competent as they say. That’s why when I heard that you’d chosen Conrad, well... I couldn’t help thinking that was the right move.”

Reinald had apparently been active in a few border skirmishes. Once every few years there were periods during which he left under unusual circumstances, and nobody knew where he went. It was all so murky and mysterious that I felt a headache coming on.

“Whether he was even in those border skirmishes is unknown,” said Achim. “Some rumors say he was somewhere farther away.”

There were other things that Achim was skeptical of, but when he looked at my face, he chuckled wryly and brought things to a close.

“In any case, just keep in mind that there’s something fishy about the Rodenwalds. That, and though they do a good job of keeping it under wraps, the reserve guardhouse on the outskirts is apparently home to some real nasty types. Don’t go anywhere near the place if you can help it.”

“Thank you, but I’ve no intention of visiting anytime soon.”

“Yeah, but I’m worried by how pale you’ve gotten. No need to talk about this any further. Let’s get you home.”

Achim thought he’d ruined my mood, but the truth of the matter was that I was still feeling unwell. That said, going home was the right call; I felt very much in need of a chance to lie down.

I arrived home without issue, but discovered that Nico and Sven still had yet to return. Once Achim had succeeded in charming Mrs. Henrik, he politely refused a carriage home and left. I went straight to bed, where I snuggled under the covers and fell fast asleep until the evening, when Mrs. Henrik woke me.

“I’m so sorry to disturb your rest, but I think you’d best hear this,” she started.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, and was met by the sight of Mrs. Henrik, looking terribly flustered. My headache had only gotten worse, and while Mrs. Henrik knew I was sick, she took it upon herself to inform me that Nico and Sven still hadn’t returned home.

“They said they’d be back by nightfall, but they’ve yet to return.”

“It’s only the second time they’ve had a chance to explore the capital,” I said. “I don’t suppose they’re still out there enjoying themselves...?”

“That’s what I’d been hoping, but...they’re with guards. They’re with a driver. Surely they’d be cognizant of the time. I was considering whether or not to go looking for them when a guardhouse soldier arrived with a letter.”

Mrs. Henrik passed me the letter, which had already been opened, and I proceeded to unfold it. Even in my groggy, half-asleep state, I knew that this was an emergency. And as I continued to read the letter, my sleepiness vanished in an instant.

“I’ll get ready to leave immediately,” I said. “Mrs. Henrik, please prepare the money.”

I no longer had time to relax in bed. The letter said that Sven was being held in custody after having caused injury to another person. The amount necessary for his bail was written neatly, and this was what had Mrs. Henrik so terribly flustered.

“Sven and Nico just aren’t the types to hurt another person,” she said. “There must be something more to it.”

“I know,” I said. “I expect that it’s a misunderstanding or an accident, but they’re both minors. It makes me worried to think that they’re being held in custody, so let’s first pay the bail and bring them home.”

I, too, didn’t for a moment think that Sven or Nico would have willingly hurt someone. I had only spent a short time with both of them, but I knew that they were good-hearted. If they’d encountered a situation that landed them in a guardhouse, they’d both be terrified right now.

“Please prepare more money than what is written in the letter,” I said. “Given that our guards haven’t returned either, it’s possible that they are in custody also. We’ll want to bring everyone back with us.”

“Y-Yes, my lady. But that will be quite the sum of money...”

“For now, just prepare as much as you can. The margrave won’t be mad if the

money is being used for Sven, and I'll take responsibility for the whole thing."

Mrs. Henrik wasn't used to such circumstances. Not that I was either, but I was powered by the need to get everyone home safely.

"We may find ourselves on the end of quite the verbal lashing when we pay the bail, but we'll just have to take it on the chin. We'll discuss things with the margrave later, and if necessary, my sister."

I didn't want to think about it, but for one thing, we didn't know the circumstances in full, and for another, we were talking about people who had taken a noble child into custody. This was no time to be laboring over whether or not to use the authority at our command; we had to be ready to use whatever means were available to us.

"I will accompany you," said Mrs. Henrik. "Shall I prepare anything else?"

"Send word to the Kirstens," I replied. "Have the messenger inform the eldest son Arno, or his assistant Achim, of the situation. Tell them that we are heading to the guardhouse posthaste, but are requesting their support, just in case."

"I'll send a servant immediately."

Mrs. Henrik left the room while I changed clothes. Just as I was about to leave, I found my gaze catching upon the small box on my desk. Perhaps my mind was thinking in terms of preparing items of monetary value. Regardless of how it had come into my possession, I adored the bracelet and didn't like the idea of giving it away, but nonetheless thought that it might come in handy, so I put it on my left wrist.

The sun had almost set by the time we began getting the money ready, and the sky was quickly darkening. I had wanted to leave while it was still light, but there was nothing that could be done. The carriage that set off included Mrs. Henrik, two guards, and myself. I had wanted more company, but our experienced guards were out. I knew that we were only going to arrange for Sven and Nico's release, and I knew that support would be coming from the Kirstens, but my heart refused to calm all the same.

"Are you quite all right, my lady?" asked Mrs. Henrik. "You're terribly pale. When we arrive, let me handle the particulars of the bail while you rest in the

carriage.”

“Given that we don’t know the circumstances, it’s best that I’m there with you. I’ve quite the headache, yes, but I can rest once we return home. I’ll be fine.”

“Then at the very least, please keep warm.”

While Mrs. Henrik put her coat across my shoulders, I took another look at the letter we’d been sent. It was written on parchment, and there were no issues that I could discern in the wax seal on the envelope or the signature of the guardhouse supervisor. The messenger was also confirmed to be a soldier, which made it unlikely the letter was a forgery. That left only one pressing concern.

“The guardhouse written here is one I haven’t heard of before.”

The location was one of much greenery, surrounded by fields. It likely served a different purpose to the sentries who watched over the castle and the city, but my sense was that, given the vast forest and mountains that spread out around it, people didn’t pass by the place very often. The truth of the matter was, it seemed pointless for there to even be a guardhouse there in the first place. Mrs. Henrik seemed to feel the same.

“In the past there was never any big guardhouse in the outskirts,” she said, placing a hand over her mouth in worry. “Sven and Nico were in the city, so why would they be brought out to a place like this...?”

“Outskirts...?”

A guardhouse on the outskirts... I feel like I heard something about that not so long ago... Didn’t I...?

“Mrs. Henrik, just to be clear, are there any *other* guardhouses in places that might be considered the outskirts?”

“No, not as far as I can remember.”

“Oh.”

This is very bad.

I had completely forgotten, but now my conversation with Achim came

rushing back to me.

The guardhouse...on the outskirts...imperial soldiers...real nasty types...

That's exactly where we're headed!

"Wait! Stop!" I cried. "Stop the carriage at once!"

We'd been traveling for some time already, but I knew that what we needed was someone like Arno or Achim. We needed someone who could clearly assert their rank and authority. And as much as I hated to admit it, there was every chance that, given my age and gender, I simply would not be taken seriously. While it was possible that my family name *might* work in my favor, we could not put much stock in such a thing while I was still so unknown.

The driver brought our carriage to a halt and everyone looked at me. My face was as pale as a sheet.

"I was too hasty," I said. "We should return immediately and regroup with my brother."

"But my lady, Sven is being held in custody."

"I know. But we're talking about the guardhouse on the outskirts, yes? I've heard certain...unsavory rumors. If we go without adequate support..."

...we might be put at a distinct disadvantage.

Was what I was going to say when the driver looked in through the window.

"Uh..." he uttered. "My apologies, but it took some time to stop, and the guardhouse is now in sight."

"What?" I cried. "What, what?! We must return at—"

"And, uh...they've sent a horse this way," continued the driver.

Has someone cast a curse of horrendous timing on me?

Mrs. Henrik and the others must have seen the stress in my face because they all sat up straight. We could no longer escape the guardhouse envoy. After all, it wasn't like we could simply say "No, we're going home," when offered an escort. Fortunately, the rider appeared to be a man of calm disposition.

"My lady, I think it's best that you remain in the carriage," said Mrs. Henrik.

And though she had said as much with conviction, her spirit was crushed the moment the carriage doors were opened. Before us was our escort, but others stood in front of the guardhouse, grinning with a vulgar, disrespectful air. Mrs. Henrik saw it too, and she stood in front of me as if to shelter me from their prying eyes.

“Don’t either of you let them harm a hair on the Lady Karen’s head,” she said quietly, addressing our guards.

For my part, I wanted them to make sure no harm came to Mrs. Henrik either.

It was dark out now, and the only light was that which flickered from nearby torches. It was not your usual guardhouse. It was surrounded by walls, in the middle of which was a grimy building of simple design. Soldiers were everywhere, and while their uniforms were similar to what I had seen on Nika and Moritz, the impression I got from the people wearing them was entirely different. They lacked Nika’s aura of grace and virtue, replaced instead with boorish grins. Their lack of care for their own uniforms gave them a certain grubby look.

A man with a five o’clock shadow in his forties walked toward us and asked us why we’d come. His voice was low, and he spoke in a high-handed, arrogant manner. Though he smiled as he talked, there was no levity or kindness in his gaze, and Mrs. Henrik had trouble hiding the fear in her own responses.

You might be thinking, “*What, that’s it?*” But this was a rather big man who, as he talked, had a habit of sliding his sword from its sheath and letting it slide back into place. He did this repeatedly. The repeated *clink* sound it made as he talked was terrifying. Our own guards looked to take a step forward, but I held them back with the wave of a hand and looked the man in the eye.

“We received word that you are holding a young boy and girl in custody. Their names are Sven and Nico,” I said. “We have brought bail money as requested. Now, who is the person in charge around here?”

“Ah yes, the young Conrad noble and his maid. We have them in our custody. We requested the boy’s guardian, but it would seem none of you fit the bill. Where are his parents?”

“If it’s a guarantor you’re after, that would be me.”

The man couldn't quite accept my words at face value, and his lips curled into a demeaning grin.

"I am their guardian," I repeated. "If you're asking for a relative, that's me."

"A relative... Ah, so you must be the maid's master. That would make the boy your sibling, I assume?"

I could have corrected the man and told him I was Sven's stepmother, but I knew that would only serve to complicate matters. The man scratched at the stubble on his jaw, and for a brief second he looked as though he were considering something.

"As for the bail, you said that you'd brought the agreed-upon sum?" he asked.

I pointed at the leather bag one of our guards was carrying. He shook it slightly, and the coins clinked together audibly. The stubbly knight let out a whistle when he heard it, then turned to the men behind him. He spoke with a sudden rush of excitement.

"Let them through so we can deal with the paperwork. And mind your manners."

When he turned back to us, it was to offer a most exaggerated bow.

"As you heard, there's some paperwork to get to," he said. "Please, come inside."

Let me state that his behavior was anything *but* respectful. His casual, careless manner came from the fact that he looked down on us. The proof of that was in the fact that he wouldn't even give Mrs. Henrik or our guards the time of day; he'd ignored them entirely.

The very last thing I wanted to do was enter the guardhouse, but there was no avoiding it. Not if we were to get the paperwork completed and leave with Sven and Nico. We followed the man through a wooden door, and I regretted it immediately.

The guardhouse stank.

Now, this wasn't because the place was dirty, *per se*. But it wafted with the...unique aroma of those who haven't bathed in several days, and the

mixture of all their scents was...quite the essence, so to speak. It was bearable, yes, but surely it was avoidable too. Mrs. Henrik's eyebrow twitched as the stench hit her, and the man leading us grunted through his nose.

"Yeah, it might be a little rough here for you noble types, but do your best to bear with us, please. After all, you wouldn't even be here if the young master didn't break one of my companion's arms."

"About that," I said. "You mentioned that Sven had injured one of your soldiers, but how?"

The man didn't even turn around to look at me, and instead waved me off with a hand.

"Yeah, yeah, we'll talk about it inside," he said.

This wasn't just a lack of respect. It was the complete *absence* of it. My displeasure meter had passed the eighty mark by this point.

"We've got a lot of people here, and that means the first and second floors are dormitories for the soldiers. It's not easy for us to prepare a room in which to properly accommodate visitors."

Were it not for the need to free Sven and Nico, I would have already been well on my way home. I had assumed that the man would take us to a conference room, but he instead proceeded further into the guardhouse. The floor was covered in grimy, reddish-black straw, and when I noticed some iron bars my nose was hit by the pungent smell of rusted metal. I stopped in my tracks when we stood before a dark corridor that appeared to lead to a basement.

"Relax," said the man, "I never said anything about going to the basement. We're going to the room next door."

We passed through a simple door into a mostly bare room that could hardly be called an office. A number of burly men were awaiting us, and the man who led us gestured with his chin for me to take a seat. None of us appreciated this treatment; we weren't asking for the guards to kowtow to us, but we did expect at least the bare minimum when it came to manners.

"Since when did Falkrum soldiers treat women with such a lack of civility?!"

cried Mrs. Henrik. “This is the very height of disrespect!”

The man, however, was unfazed by the outburst.

“If you don’t like it, go home. Be my guest,” he said easily. “But your young master is going to be eating filth for a little while.”

“Mrs. Henrik, calm down,” I said.

In the face of such arrogant disrespect, Mrs. Henrik’s rage was quite impressive. Then again, she and our two guards had known Sven and Nico for a long time, so I suppose the reaction was only natural. But just as Mrs. Henrik was calming down, our would-be host decided to rub salt on the wound with another snide remark.

“You see?” he said to one of his men. “This is why I can’t stand the countryside nobility. So big-headed. *They’re* the ones in the wrong; you’d think they’d show a little gratitude for us being so polite about things.”

I was fuming, just like the others, but I did my utmost to remain calm amid my fury. In front of the small sofa was a table, on which there was only paperwork and a dirty cup. I took a look at the papers on the desk.

Hang on. What the...?

“I have a great many questions,” I said, “but first I’d like to confirm something.”

“Please, be my guest.”

I was all too aware of how easy it was to look down on a young girl, but I was nonetheless shocked by this treatment. Did these guards treat everybody in this manner? Or were they actually treating me slightly better on account of the fact that, as a noble, I had the scent of money on me?

While I couldn’t be completely sure, I had a feeling it was the latter.

“We have brought the requested bail money, but was it necessary to make it an amount high enough for an ordinary family to live a half a year in luxury? There are also additional amounts listed here for medical expenses and bail for two others. These details were not listed in the letter we received.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, about that,” said the man, heaving an overly dramatic sigh.

“The boy’s the perpetrator, but at the end of the day he’s just a kid. We knew his family would be worried about him, so we sent word ASAP. The thing is, it turns out our buddy, who suffered broken bones, had it worse than we thought. The doctor’s sum was nothing to balk at. We’ve laid everything out in the paperwork so you can see it nice and clear.”

I...see...

“All we’re asking for is what’s fair,” the man continued. “Is there a problem?”

“There is,” I replied. “These prices are well above fair rates.”

“Yeah, well, I’m guessing you haven’t spent a lot of time out in the real world, have you?”

True, I hadn’t actually *worked* anywhere, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know when I was being swindled. The man’s act must have been amusing, because his compatriots began to chuckle. One of them even whispered that he was taking things too far.

“What you’ve just talked about has nothing to do with paying bail,” I said.

“Oh, but it does. Your servant, for one thing, could do with a proper education. Screaming and shouting about your boy’s innocence and even physically attempting to stop us from doing our job. We didn’t have any other choice but to arrest them.”

Well, now I was certain: Sven was innocent. Now that we’d come this far, I was all but sure of it.

“I would like to see the injured party,” I said. “You said they’ve broken bones, but to what extent, and who was the doctor? Surely you know that much.”

“My apologies, but we can’t have you seeing him for fear of you doing him harm. As such, we can’t provide further details.”

“Then all we have to go on is your word, and your word alone. Explain to me exactly how this broken bone happened.”

“It was a carriage, you see. Your driver wasn’t looking where he was going and he hit one of our men. Your young master was sincere in his apologies, but the crimes of the servant are the crimes of the master, and we weren’t about to

overlook a hit-and-run incident.”

I wanted to scream my rage out into the world. These guards were swindlers. The types that, in my home world, threw themselves in front of cars then demanded reparation. But this guardhouse variety was new; in this case, these men had an established position.

“And what happened to our servant?” I asked. “I see only men here. She has committed no crime. Is she being kept in a separate room somewhere?”

“Oh no, no, no. When we tried to bring the young master in, she flew into a rage. Even gave one of the men a shiner. I assure you, we were most generous with her. We forgave her for the outburst. Oh, and where is she? Have no fear, my lady, she’s with the young master, resting in the basement cells.”

You didn’t even separate them? You just threw her right into the cell along with him?

Given that this was an updated type of swindler, I had to assume that the room we were in was meant to be where we had “the talk.” We weren’t dealing with guards, but gangsters. Still, knowing that I was dealing with a con man calmed me slightly. But wouldn’t a swindler usually want to avoid revealing their identity? Generally speaking, the more you had to lose, the more you’d want to hide who you were.

And who would run a con in a state-owned building?

I’d fallen into silence to mull over these thoughts, and the man across the table saw this as a good sign.

“I have no issues regarding the circumstances that led to this paperwork,” I said.

“My...My lady?!”

Mrs. Henrik was as suspicious of all of this as I was, and so my statement came as a total shock to the woman. But I’d said as much because there was one more thing I wanted to know. The man grinned as he slid the paper and a pen toward me.

“I’d just like to confirm,” I said, “that when you visited our residence earlier,

you were aware that the Conrads are a noble family.”

“But of course.”

“Which means you would have heard the rumors, then; that a daughter of the Kirstens recently married into the family. If you require me to sign this document, circumstances dictate that I must sign as a member of the Kirsten family.”

In truth, there were no such circumstances. I had made them up so as to have a reason to bring up the Kirsten name. I had hoped it might invite some hesitation on the part of the guards, but the man across from me simply nodded.

“Sign with whatever name you please. What matters to us is that you take responsibility for what happened and pay the bail money.”

Mrs. Henrik and our two guards were silent. My reading of the situation had been right, and it gave me a moment of pause. If these guards were of imperial birth, it stood to reason that they were less knowledgeable when it came to Falkrum’s societal hierarchy. This, however, raised yet another problem.

In this guardhouse, we were just simply marks. The guards did not know that we were a level of nobility that was not to be touched. I had spelled things out, and even given them our family name, but still nothing. This was dangerous. *Incredibly* dangerous. The way that they’d looked at us upon our entrance to the guardhouse was now, in hindsight, all the more ominous.

“And you understand that the total amount you have written here is an amount we will need time to pay in full?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. Which is why we’ll have a guard accompany you. A proper bookkeeper, so no foul play. It’s written in the paperwork.”

The document was packed with a horrendously long list of clauses, and likely designed especially so that one would not even want to read the particulars. That said, all of it was most certainly there to put us at a disadvantage.

The last thing I wanted to do was sign, but complaining was only going to start a quarrel. I cursed myself for being so careless. I should have remembered Achim’s warning the very moment I’d heard the location of the guardhouse or,

at the very least, I should have forced us to turn back once our carriage had come to a stop.

But for all my regrets, I had to put my priority on getting our people out, or getting to my brother—who was hopefully on his way.

“I assume that our four people being held here will only be released upon payment, and that releasing them upon guarantee of a later payment is unacceptable?”

“You assume right. It’s the way we’ve always done it, and we can’t just let criminals out scot-free, can we?”

Mrs. Henrik and the guards were beginning to realize that something wasn’t right, as their ire had turned to caution. I had a number of ideas for what to do next, but before I could do anything Mrs. Henrik spoke.

“You,” she said to the man across from me. “What’s your name?”

“What?” he said.

“Your name. What are you called?”

The man gave Mrs. Henrik a skeptical look, then introduced himself as Lang.

“Well then, Mr. Lang,” said Mrs. Henrik, standing up a little straighter. “You must be aware that Lady Karen’s family are well acquainted with the Rodenwalds, yes? Do you know exactly who you’re talking to in that manner of yours?”

These men were Reinald’s soldiers. Mrs. Henrik’s statement had just revealed that we knew that, and it left them shocked and flustered. I, too, had considered using the Rodenwald—and Reinald’s—name, but I had held off for one important reason.

“The Rodenwalds?” uttered Lang, looking suddenly pale. An instant later, he bowed his head. “M-My humblest of apologies!”

None of us saw it coming. It was as though he were intending to headbutt the desk itself. His sudden change in demeanor surprised us all, and his fellow guards moved in to make him lift his head. The effect of the apology was immediate, and Mrs. Henrik was taken completely off guard.

“Please, forgive us for such disrespect toward friends of the general! I beg of you!”

We were all left cringing at the sight of the man, his head firmly planted on the desk as he shouted his apology. We were at a complete loss for words, and it was the guards behind us who were quickest to regain their wits.

“Oh, n—” uttered one.

First, I heard something cutting through the air, followed by a loud sound behind me. I turned to see our guards, one clutching his head, the other his shoulder. Something thin and metallic poked out from between their fingers. I didn’t realize they were throwing knives until the men behind Lang attacked the guards. Before I could react, someone grabbed me by the neck and slammed me against the desk. I didn’t even have time to brace for the impact, and the force of it took my breath away.

My head flashed white with pain, and Mrs. Henrik’s scream sounded suddenly distant. Lang was looking down at me, and he let out a long sigh as he held his free hand to his forehead.

“Old hag’s got some schemes up her sleeve, does she?” he spat.

The act was up. *This* was the real Lang.

This was also the reason I had not brought up Reinald’s name: I was afraid it would result in them silencing us for good. You see, to use a name as a threat, one must be on even footing with their opponent—fifty-fifty—or at least in the realm of forty-sixty, pending the situation. Even with our two guards, we were entirely outnumbered. We were, all things considered, just a teenager and a maid, and it was my fear that using Reinald’s name would only infuriate Lang and cause him to threaten us. I’d imagined it might happen, and as it turned out, I’d been right.

“I know you’re shocked, little missy, but don’t do anything rash now. The old woman’s head goes flying if you make so much as a peep.”

“What is the meaning of this?!” cried Mrs. Henrik.

“Shut it. I wasn’t talking to you, and you’ve no permission to speak.”

I heard a thick, dull sound from where our guards were. Mrs. Henrik made to scream, but she found her mouth quickly covered, her shoulders shaking as she struggled. I should take this moment to state that this wasn't Mrs. Henrik's fault. Nor was it the fault of our guards. Yes, they'd slipped up somewhat and made some mistakes, but never would you expect such violence at a guardhouse. On top of that, Mrs. Henrik's statement would have, under the usual circumstances, likely have had its desired effect.

But more importantly, what happened to our guards?

I couldn't see them from where I was, and I heard no signs of struggle. Then I noticed Lang's companions getting to their feet.

"You gave the signal, so uh...we killed 'em," said one, looking a bit troubled. "What now? We don't know nothin' about this."

"Meh, who cares?"

"But they mentioned the Rodenwalds..."

"They won't mention anything when they're dead. True or false, we shut 'em up and we're good."

Having said this, Lang looked at me with a grin.

"That's right, little missy," he continued. "You being so young, you wouldn't dare speak publicly if you were to be sullied here, huh?"

Well, this sucks.

They weren't going to kill me, but I was heading for what I considered a fatal wound all the same. Mrs. Henrik would likely fare no better, it seemed. She tried to launch herself at Lang, but she was knocked away easily.

"Who do you think you're...!" Mrs. Henrik cried. "My lady! You must f—"

She was going to say "flee," but one of the guards covered her mouth.

"What do we do about grandma?" he asked. "We spared her, but should we...you know?"

"Knock it off! She's a hag! Even my own son would turn *that* down. Hey, Lang, give us the girl already."

“Give me a minute. I’ve never had a noble girl before...”

This was the most disgusting conversation I’d ever had the misfortune of hearing. I couldn’t bear to simply sit there, so I scratched and I struggled, but to absolutely no avail.

“You’ll only get hurt worse if you fight,” said Lang.

But the future waiting for me if I *didn’t* struggle was easily going to be just as painful. So I did not give up struggling, and then I felt a sudden shock. My vision blurred and wavered. Mrs. Henrik screamed. It took a few moments for me to realize that I’d been punched in the head. Then, I was being dragged by the arms. I stumbled and staggered to keep up with Lang’s long strides. It was a wonder I didn’t trip and crumple.

I was taken down a corridor and into the basement. It was damp and rancid, and the sight that met my eyes was one of gloom. Lang had one of his men unlock a barred door, then pushed me against the bars, which were freezing.

“Karen?!”

The shout came from a voice I recognized. Sven. He tried to reach for me, but I was once again pulled away. The force of it caused me to bite my own tongue.

“Figured I should show you that the troublemakers are right here,” said Lang.

The way he hummed so happily made me sick.

“Sven, I’m so...” I mumbled.

I could do nothing to stop being dragged away. It was all I could do just to muster an apology.

“Hey! Stop!” shouted Sven. “What are you doing to her?!”

In the dim light of the cells, I could just barely make out the painful swelling on one of Sven’s cheeks. When I heard sniffing, I turned my gaze to the cell straight ahead and saw a girl in a maid’s uniform weeping uncontrollably as she looked at me. Her face was a swollen mess of red and purple bruises. It took a moment for me to realize that I was looking straight at Nico.

Sven yelled at the top of his lungs, but his voice echoed with little weight through the basement. Lang closed the cell door behind him, then threw my

body against the wall with a wicked grin. I heard someone nearby laugh derisively.

“You’re gonna do her *here?*” they said.

Buttons flew from the collar of my shirt as a hand clutched it violently. My hair stood on end, and the blood drained from my face.

“Stop!”

I knew I had to stay calm, but my brain was in full-on panic mode. I tried to kick Lang between the legs but he was grappling with my skirt already, which hampered my movement. The face that approached me was disgusting, and I pushed it away with both hands. I wanted to back away, but with the wall at my back, there was nowhere to go.

Perhaps he was toying with me, or perhaps he wanted to show me that he had all the time in the world, but either way Lang closed in slowly. I fell to my butt as despair itself began to descend upon me. Nico was roughed up but her clothes were not in disarray; perhaps the best I could do was be thankful that she had escaped such a fate as mine.

When Lang’s hand groped at my brassiere, I fought with everything I had and was smacked a few times for my trouble. Still, I did not give up. I clawed outward with my fingernails. I felt the sensation of them gouging into something soft; an eye.

A gruesome cry echoed through the basement. Lang held his eye as he screamed in pain, blood dripping down his face and soaking into my skirt. My understanding of what I had done, and what dirtied my fingers, came instinctively rather than through any logical reasoning.

“Oh,” I uttered.

A distance had opened between us, but I couldn’t run; my body refused to listen to my commands. I knew I had to flee, but I had just gouged my fingers into a man’s eye. Alarm bells rang incessantly in my brain. My heart pounded in my chest.

Run! Get out of here!

Just as my knees bent and my feet began listening to my instructions, I felt a shock wave reverberate through my stomach. It was so hard to breathe that the world around me fell away. I slumped to the ground, bent in half, and coughed up my lungs as my cheek hit the floor. Above me, I heard a dreadful, horrible voice, but what it said I do not know. Hands touched my legs as I fought just to breathe. I could no longer fight back. I swallowed the bloody saliva that filled my mouth.

And yet, Lang did nothing. Amid my confusion, I heard something thud to the floor nearby. I squinted through my blurred vision for a better look at what sat on the ground in front of my eyes.

It was an arm.

Blood oozed from one end of it, spreading across the floor. I couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. My vision was blurred with tears, and then a person came into view.

"Are you hurt?"

It was a woman's voice. Her thin, scarred fingers gently pushed away the hair covering my face. When I saw her dark red hair, I realized I was looking at Nika Saganov, one of Reinald's aides.

"It's okay," she said. "Don't speak. Just focus on your breathing."

In her hand was an unsheathed sword. As she tried to help me sit up, I became aware of a commotion. I could barely hold myself up, and my head drooped between my shoulders. It was then that I noticed long blond hair, like golden threads. I lifted my head to find a handsome man on one knee, looking at me.

"She's still rather dazed..."

Through the ringing of my ears, Nika gave an explanation. I was glad for this, as it saved me the hassle of having to do it myself. Pain throbbed in my mouth with each movement of my tongue, but it was not so bad that I couldn't speak.

"I am...conscious..." I uttered.

My ribs hurt, which made breathing difficult. I wondered if the arrival of Nika

and Reinald meant that we were saved. I was tempted to simply pass out right there on the spot, but the wailing cries of the men nearby made that entirely impossible.

“You came...to help us,” I said. “Thank you.”

Could they understand me as I tried to speak through my swollen tongue? Reinald issued orders to Nika, who sheathed her sword, then put an arm behind my knees in order to carry me.

“Wait,” I said. “What of Sven and Nico?”

We have to bring them home, together with the imprisoned driver and our guards.

I was weak but intent, and I struggled against Nika’s grasp. Reinald put a hand to my cheek and brought my gaze to his.

“Miss Karen, listen to me now. They’re right here.”

Reinald’s voice rang clear in my mind. I followed his hand as it pointed to Sven and Nico, both in the company of Reinald’s officers. Sven was pointing at me while Nico was weeping. The driver of their carriage looked decidedly relieved as he spoke to Reinald’s men.

“Nika, take Miss Karen and the others upstairs,” Reinald said.

“Yes, Your Excellency. And what of you?”

“I will talk to the man responsible. Does he still breathe?”

“He has merely lost an arm. He will last a little longer.”

Your Excellency?

Reinald’s finger traced the grazed bruise on my forehead and the cut on my lip. When he lifted a clump of my hair, I winced as pain ran through my face. He was inspecting my wounds. My senses felt dampened, dull. For some reason, I felt nothing in the way of antipathy. What bothered me, however, was that the soft, gentle gaze I’d seen in Reinald when we spoke at my sister’s manor was now nowhere to be found.

Now, you may think that such an observation is odd given the circumstances.

However, for whatever reason, when Reinald observed things in this scholarly way, it felt like a natural part of his character.

Nika lifted me up and carried me, and I felt so safe there, being held in the arms of another woman. As we walked the steps back to the first floor, she spoke gently to me.

“You’re safe now,” she said. “We’ll protect you. You can rest.”

Her arms and her body never faltered or trembled under my weight. Someone referred to her as “captain” to get her attention, then covered me with a blanket, for which I was grateful.

The commotion wasn’t just in the basement, and I could hear movement and voices as we exited the guardhouse. Mrs. Henrik rushed over to us the moment she saw me, tears of frustration running down her face and dirtying her makeup. Nika lowered me to my feet and returned back to the guardhouse before I even had a chance to thank her.

The wind had a slight chill to it, but the gentle cold felt wonderful. As Mrs. Henrik dipped a hand towel in some water, I noticed that her hair was all messy.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“Worry less about me and more about yourself, please!” came her reply.

She just scolded me.

When I asked about Sven and Nico, Mrs. Henrik informed me that they were in a carriage behind us. I looked behind her and saw Sven. He was lending a shoulder to Nico, who was fast asleep. Our eyes met, but he didn’t speak, perhaps worried he might wake the girl. “Are you okay?” he mouthed, to which I offered a somewhat stilted smile.

A distant voice called for Mrs. Henrik. It was one of Reinald’s aides. Among the darkness I saw a cart on which a blanket covered two human shapes. Nearby were Sven and the driver, anguish clear in their faces.

“The medical supplies will arrive shortly, so just stay put for the time being,” said Mrs. Henrik.

I hadn’t been able to see properly what had happened behind the sofa in that

office, but now I had a fair idea. Mrs. Henrik turned away so I couldn't see her, then cried on the shoulders of the others. Pain throbbed throughout my body, but it was dawning on me that we had been saved.

As things calmed, I was able to more clearly reflect on what had happened and where I was. I knew that my blouse had been torn, but I hadn't noticed that I'd lost a shoe. When I touched the side of my face that Reinald had traced with his finger, I felt blood. There was an open cut on my forehead too. I didn't have full scope of vision, and my stomach still hurt from where I'd been kicked.

This damage might actually be pretty serious.

Then again, I'd been punched, kicked, and thrown around by a man at least twice my size. I found myself actually impressed that I hadn't lost consciousness entirely. In my desperation, I'd made a complete and utter mess of my fingernails. I didn't know how you'd mend them, but as I stared at them my attention was drawn to my left wrist.

The bracelet I'd put on before I left the manor was gone.

"No...but where...?"

I looked around the immediate area but saw only rocks and stones. Lang had thrown me all over the place, and I had also swung my arms around a lot in my attempts to get free. The bracelet's chain was very thin and delicate. It was fragile and easily broken.

I have to find it.

I was dazed and my thoughts were unclear, but I couldn't bear the thought of leaving such a bracelet in a place like this. I wanted to ask somebody to accompany me, but I couldn't find anyone free; everybody was busy talking with somebody else.

"Well, I won't be gone long..." I muttered.

In later days, I would think back on this night and wonder at how strange it was that I was able to get to the basement without being seen. I hadn't been trying to hide; there were people around, and the area was lit by torches. And yet, I made it there without being stopped all the same.

It was odd to think I was returning to a place I had just escaped, but there I was, my hand against the wall as I walked the stairs to the basement. I assumed that somebody would be down there still, and while I felt bad about it, I intended to have them help me find my bracelet. But when I reached the door, I heard a man's voice echo from within.

"Your Excellency," he cried, "this is some kind of mistake. We revere the Emperor. We are comrades with the same resolve in our hearts as you. We are loyal servants. Please, I beg of you, have some mercy in your generous soul."

The tragically pitiful and distressed voice belonged to Lang. I couldn't make out what was inside because somebody's back blocked my sight, but I knew that if I got any closer, someone would realize I was there, and so I remained still. It was unclear to me exactly what was taking place, but I knew enough to know that Lang was having anything but a good time.

"You are a disgrace. You are scum."

Those words, delivered with great disdain, were uttered by a red-haired woman. Lang continued to spout excuses, most of which were to explain his violence toward me, but he was very fond of bringing up the emperor too. At some point it was clearly too much, for someone else begrudgingly spoke up.

"Putting aside your twisted...reverence, as you call it, you had no reason to abuse a girl from a foreign nation, and one who lacked the ability to even fight back. Your duty is to maintain standing and behavior among the soldiers. Yet, instead of being a support to His Excellency, you instead sullied his authority."

"She's just some girl from some minor nation! *She* is the sullied one compared to our motherland's subjects! Is *she* not the truly despicable, detestable monster?!"

The matters of the emperors and excellencies no longer mattered to me. Awful was the only word I had for what I had just heard.

"What you *think* of Falkrum's citizens has nothing to do with me," came a clear voice.

The moment the man spoke, the basement fell into complete silence. It belonged to the man I knew most out of all the people gathered. But his tone of

voice, so completely devoid of emotion, sounded out of place in the dim gloom of the dungeon.

“Your claims fall on deaf ears. Tell me why I should help you.”

“Because...we’re the same!” cried Lang. “We’re both citizens of the empire!”

“We share the same home, yes, but I will not have myself compared to *filth*.”

The words carried a finality, and Lang let out a moan. Others then began to cry and beg, their voices filled with anger, sorrow, and a host of other emotions as they implored.

“A fair trial, please!” cried Lang.

But his begging was denied without a hint of mercy.

“Such a thing is unnecessary. I’ve no time for filth. A useless soldier is of no value whatsoever. You are all nothing but chains around our ankles. As such, you do not deserve a trial.”

A cry rang out as Lang was sliced down. It was true to say that in this world, lives were taken more easily than in Japan, but it was my first time to hear it happening firsthand. And as I was hit by the fact that this was the reality of this world, the pieces fell into place.

Reinald.

The impression I’d gotten of him when we first met and the feelings for him that I’d tried to explain to my sister all suddenly came into greater focus. He was not a hero, walking the path of the righteous. He was, in fact, the opposite. He was the villain. And though I did not know why, in my heart I was strangely and suddenly sure of it.

So lost was I in this moment that I did not notice the red-haired woman turning to realize I was there. As Reinald began to leave the basement, our eyes met.

“I...lost something...in there,” I uttered.

My body hurt, but my heart felt suddenly calm. And for as long as I live, I will never forget the way Reinald met my gaze with a look of complete and utter shock.

6: With the Worst Behind Us

The shock on Reinald's face was but a fleeting thing. It was gone in the blink of an eye.

"You lost something... Which is to say you lost what, exactly?" he asked.

His words alerted everyone to my presence. Moritz, who was standing behind Reinald, shot me a harsh glare.

"I lost...my bracelet," I said. "I thought it might have...fallen on the ground somewhere...in here."

I considered making up an excuse and saying that I'd never meant to overhear their conversation, but I didn't quite have that luxury; though I could speak in stops and starts, every word I spoke was painful thanks to the cuts in my mouth.

"You know it...I think," I said. "I received it...from my sister. I simply came to...find it..."

I took a few steps forward so as to enter the room, but a hand blocked my way.

"Stay back," said Reinald. "There's too much...refuse in here. Will someone do a search for a woman's bracelet?"

Someone in the room quickly volunteered and began rifling through the area. I knew that, though I'd come straight to the cells, there was every chance my bracelet might in fact be somewhere on the ground floor. But as the thought crossed my mind, Reinald held up a delicate piece of jewelry, which glimmered in the dim light. It wasn't easy to make out in the darkness, but I could tell by the blue gemstone and the design—one uncommon in Falkrum—that it was my bracelet.

"It was in the cell at the end of the room," said a soldier.

"Good work. Handle the rest of the cleanup in here, please," replied Reinald.

The end of the room would have meant where Sven and Nico were. I'd lost it back when I was marched over to their cell, but I didn't even notice. Reinald brought forth a handkerchief and put the bracelet in the center of it before bringing it over to me.

"This is your bracelet, yes?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Thank...goodness."

It had fallen from my wrist at some point when the chain had been damaged and broken. I didn't have the faintest idea how much it would cost to repair, but even in its current state, having it back was so much better than losing it forever.

"I thought you were assaulted in the smaller room," said Reinald. "Why would the bracelet have been over there?"

"I was brought to...the other cells so...I could see Sven for myself. I assume...I lost the bracelet when...I was pushed against the bars or...the wall?"

At first, I had assumed that Reinald's question was one of time, which is to say *when* did I lose the bracelet? It was later that I realized he was, in fact, trying to ascertain if I'd been abused on more than one occasion. At this point, the interrogations of the soldiers at the guardhouse would have been ongoing, and given the severity of the issue, Reinald did not ask his question directly.

However, even though I was a little worse for wear, I could stand on my own two feet, and my answer—which was clearly not what the man was expecting—seemed to allay Reinald's fears.

"Well, now that we've found your bracelet, let's go back upstairs," he said.

Reinald then folded the handkerchief neatly over the bracelet and put it in his pocket. I was stunned; I had assumed that the next step was, obviously, to give the bracelet back to me.

"Oh?" I uttered. "Um, I..."

Reinald gave me a gentle push in the back.

"Come now," he said, "the cells are a depressing place."

No, no, no. Wait just one second. Why did I even bother going to the cells if

your plan was simply to keep the bracelet?

“Yes, but...can I...have the bracelet...back? It will need repairs...”

“Indeed. It cannot be worn until it is fixed. I was the one who had it made, so I will keep hold of it to make sure it is seen by the proper craftsman.”

Huh? He had it made...?

“As an apology, I will ensure it returns to you fully repaired.”

But I received this from my sister, as a wedding present? Why would Reinald have ordered it?

“I see,” uttered Reinald, when he saw that I did not understand. “Oh, my apologies. I did not realize you lost a shoe. Nika, can you carry Miss Karen, please?”

“My clothes are bloodied,” replied Nika. “I fear carrying her might only result in distress. Elena!”

A most energetic voice boomed a “Yes!” and a woman came bounding over soon after. It was the woman who had brought me a blanket. She was beautiful, with black-blue hair and noticeably cute, round eyes.

“I’m on it,” she said to Nika, then turned to me and said, “excuse me a moment.”

And so it was that, once again, I found myself carried in the arms of another. Upon closer inspection, I realized that Elena and I were likely around the same age. But contrary to her delicate appearance, Elena had no problem holding my weight. All the same, in just a few short days I had experienced being carried more than was necessary for a single lifetime!

“I um... I have...enough strength to walk on my own, so...”

“No, no,” replied Elena, “you just rest. You’re injured, so just stay nice and still!”

Her smile was like the sun, and completely out of place in such a gloomy environment that I couldn’t bring myself to struggle. I felt apologetic and embarrassed, but Elena’s smile also put me at ease. Thus, I resigned myself to my circumstances; my whole body felt suddenly drained of energy, and pain still

radiated throughout it.

“I apologize,” I said, “but on...second thought, I’m not sure...I can move another inch. I am...in your debt.”

I was so embarrassed. Why had I even thought to leave to look for my bracelet alone? Why did I even say I could walk on my own when I clearly couldn’t?

All things considered, I was more relaxed being carried by a woman than a man. I was grateful to Reinald for calling upon Nika, and to Nika for calling upon this girl in her stead. Elena was so light on her feet that a part of me wondered if she had wings as we made our way out of the guardhouse. Mrs. Henrik came rushing over the moment she saw us, and thanks to Reinald speaking first, I managed to avoid a scolding.

“We’ll handle everything here,” he said. “For now, all of you head back to the villa and rest.”

I didn’t care where we went, so long as we could feel at ease, but Mrs. Henrik looked a touch unsettled.

“Do you mean the Rodenwald villa?” she asked. “While I appreciate the offer, my lady is...”

“I am aware that you have deep ties to the Kirsten family, and that you are worried about Miss Karen, but our first priority should be seeing to the injured.”

Mrs. Henrik was no less apprehensive, but she looked from Sven to me before agreeing with Reinald, if with some reluctance.

“One moment,” said Mrs. Henrik. “Why isn’t my lady in this carriage?”

Being that we couldn’t all fit in the one carriage, Sven, Nico, and Mrs. Henrik were in one, while Reinald and I were in another.

“Miss Karen’s wounds will have to be seen to,” said Reinald. “I’ll have a woman do it, of course, but there’s a few things I’d like to ask her too.”

Mrs. Henrik said that she was more than capable of such a job, but before she could make a move, Elena was already a step ahead of her.

“All right, in the carriage we go, then,” she said.

Elena had been in motion from the moment Reinald had made his decision, making Mrs. Henrik's suggestion null and void. A first aid box and wet towels had already been placed inside the carriage, and Elena quickly took my hand once we were inside and began cleaning my fingers.

"I'm just going to clean you up as best I can," she said. "It's a bit makeshift, I know; usually, I would want you to remove your clothes so I can do a more adequate inspection, but given that Reinald will be riding with us, this is the best I can do."

"I'm okay," I said. "The worst of it is...the damage inside my mouth."

"Okay, that's a relief to hear. You were very lucky to escape with so little in the way of harm."

She says it so easily. So casually. Clearly, this woman has experience...

"Tell me if it hurts, okay?" Elena continued.

The girl was deft and careful in her work. She made sure to avoid the injuries on my fingers, so I didn't feel any particular pain. I was thinking vaguely of how my fingertips had hurt like the devil earlier, but were now oddly fine, when Reinald entered the carriage. He gave a signal and the carriage set off.

"Your maid was very worried about you," he said. "The margrave hires good staff, that much is certain."

"Mrs. Henrik is a very kind woman," I said.

I agreed with Reinald wholeheartedly. Mrs. Henrik hadn't just complained and shouted when we were in trouble, she had tried to help me when I'd been pinned down. She had willingly leaped upon a man she didn't stand a chance against. And this was *after* our guards had been killed. There were not many who would have shown Mrs. Henrik's bravery in the same position.

Even though Mrs. Henrik was the margrave's servant and not my own, it nonetheless made me happy to hear her praised. I was saddened whenever I thought about our guards, but I was at least glad that Mrs. Henrik had survived relatively unscathed. As I let out a sigh of relief, Reinald spoke.

"So, how much did you hear?" he asked, cutting straight to the chase.

I had expected this when Reinald had decided to separate me from the others. In his question he had not mentioned “what” I might have heard, and I knew this was intentional. In manga and novels, when the main character suddenly learns of something going on behind the scenes, the person in question changes. It’s common for the air around them to shift, or for them to make clear their murderous intent, or even for their personality to change. But Reinald was the same as always. His attitude was so calm and collected he may as well have been asking, “Do you take sugar with your coffee?”

Elena, sitting next to me, continued to smile and work diligently. And it wasn’t put-on either; in fact, her calm, easy manner was so natural it struck me as odd.

“I do not know how long you were talking...but as for the extent, I cannot say for certain...” I started, and I kept going even with my cut mouth because I knew this was a serious subject for Reinald. “But probably...I got the gist of it all...?”

“I admit that it was our fault you made it so close without us noticing you, but you understand that you heard something you shouldn’t have, yes?”

“That was my assumption.”

I was aware my answer sounded stupid, but I had no idea what the right thing to say was. Even if I *did* try to sound smart, I’d only stumble over my words and cause myself more stinging pain, thanks to the cuts inside my mouth. What more could I do?

“Let me be clear: at present, I do not intend to hurt you,” said Reinald.

“That’s good. And the others?”

“Do you intend to tell your husband or the Kirstens what you know?”

I had expected this to be his issue. From the moment he’d had Lang and the others cut down, I’d looked at him through different eyes. It did not escape me that he’d said “at present.”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“Hmm. Which means there are circumstances under which you would?”

“If you were...to do something to the margrave...or my brother and

sister...and the empire was wrapped up in it...how could I stay silent?"

"You are honest, and that honesty is a virtue, but sometimes others may look to take advantage of the openings your honesty leaves. You'd best be more cautious if you want to look out for yourself."

The way he spoke the words sounded to me more like a warning.

"Are you...asking me...to *lie*?"

Reinald's eyes went wide, then relaxed into something more kind.

"No," he said. "Depending on the time and the circumstances, your blatant honesty is something I quite like. It is much easier than having to go through the hoops and over the hurdles of a longer back-and-forth."

"I've...never been...very good at that..."

"In which case, is it okay for me to assume we will remain on good terms?"

"I've no reason...to say no. But if relations are built between Rodenwald...and the Kirstens..."

"Rest easy."

The conversation filled me with unknowns. I was relieved at how things had worked out, but through it I was trying to build a picture of who Reinald was and still didn't have a clue.

"Ow..." I murmured.

"Oh, sorry," said Elena.

She'd been continuing with her light inspection while Reinald and I talked, and a jolt of pain flashed through my fingers. Elena released her hold immediately and her face, which had been the picture of calm, now showed hints of surprise and confusion.

You've been so gentle about cleaning me up. I won't get mad at you for one little mistake.

"They're clean again," I remarked. "Thank you."

"Oh, no, it's okay..."

The fingertips themselves would have to wait until later for proper treatment. I had thought that perhaps my fingers and fingernails would be fine, but I now knew better. It wasn't at all that they didn't hurt, it was just that with everything else that was going on, my mind had somehow dulled the pain. My body felt suddenly hot and I began to sweat. At first, I thought it was due to my injuries, but then I remembered that until leaving the margrave's villa, I'd been in bed. I had a cold. It was no surprise I felt the way I did, given my fever and my injuries. I let my body fall against the carriage's wall, and breathing became a touch easier.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered. "I'm just...so tired..."

The carriage was rocking to-and-fro in such a way that it wasn't going to lull me to sleep, but I closed my eyes anyway, hoping to get a little rest. It felt much better than I expected.

Oh, that's right. You've forgotten something so very important, Karen.

"Whether or not...you're from the empire," I said, "the truth is...you saved me..."

Nika had saved me, and Reinald had been right behind her. But regardless of the particulars, he'd had me looked after and told me that I would be okay. It didn't make sense to hate him just because he was a foreigner from a different country. I'd been brought up on a variety of different media in Japan and I knew it simply didn't make sense to go starting fights about such things.

I wasn't about to deny the truth for such a thing, anyway. What the whole ordeal told me was that I needed to learn in more depth the relationship that existed between Falkrum and the empire.

"Miss Karen...?"

It was actually rather nice to have Reinald calling my name, and though I wanted to reply, my body felt suddenly heavy—as though it were sinking into mud—and just like that, even the voices of those around me suddenly drifted away.

I'm so very tired...

This was the last thought that flitted through my mind before I lost

consciousness entirely.

7: Can I Rest for Just a Little Longer?

It was anything *but* a gentle awakening. It was rather like floating up from the bottom of a pool of water. I felt intense exhaustion, and one of my arms seemed heavy. As I lay there with my eyes closed, my senses gradually returned to me and I began to make out the voices of those around me.

“So you knew that she was unwell even before you left, yes? Then why let her go? The girl has a fragile constitution. Surely my grandfather told you as much.”

“You have my humblest apologies. All of it was my fault.”

“Gerda, you must calm down. None of this is anybody’s fault.”

“I can’t believe those words, coming from someone who got angry at Reinald.”

“I’m just saying that *now* isn’t the time. Your voice carries, so you must be prudent. What if you wake Karen?”

I could hear Arno holding back a clear rage. This was unusual for him. The one apologizing was none other than Mrs. Henrik. A quarrel between siblings I didn’t mind, but I wouldn’t stand for them blaming Mrs. Henrik.

“You will have my apologies for what happened. However, I ask that we move this conversation elsewhere. If we do so here, then Miss Karen won’t be able to rest.”

So Reinald was with them too. Quite the gathering. I tried to call out, at the very least for Mrs. Henrik, but the group left, their voices and footsteps growing distant. The sweat on my forehead and the back of my neck made me feel horribly uncomfortable, and I was just about to moan when I felt something cool on my skin. The sensation of it helped clear my senses.

“Let me wipe that sweat away, my lady,” came a voice.

I heard it just as I was about to give up and fall back into slumber. The voice of a girl. I opened my eyes just so and saw Nico, a worried look on her face as she

pressed a towel against my skin. The swelling on her face had gone down considerably. When our eyes met, she responded with surprise. I tried to grasp the hem of her dress and failed. The tips of my fingers felt dull and heavy.

“My la...” Nico uttered.

“Are you...all right?” I asked.

I knew that she was safe, but I also knew that she’d been beaten. I was worried that perhaps she’d been scarred by the experience. Her heart had been battered, I knew that, but if Nico were to have been left with an injury that would never heal, how in the world could I ever apologize to her parents?

Nico reached out and took my hand, tears welling in her eyes as she spoke.

“I’m fine... I’m safe! And Master Sven too. You made it to us just in time, my lady!”

“Oh...” I uttered.

“I’m so sorry! So very sorry! I made such an awful mistake!”

As long as they were both okay, I didn’t care about the particulars. I liked Nico, and I would have hated to have lost her. I wasn’t a big fan of making others cry, and so I hoped she would stop that.

“Would you...stop them...from fighting?” I asked.

Another thing I wasn’t a big fan of was people fighting over me. Gerda was the fiercer of my two siblings, but when Arno got mad, he lingered on the feeling incessantly, despite his ordinarily calm demeanor.

“Oh, Master Sven! Sir Achim! Lady Karen has just woken...”

I heard Nico calling out to them, but with my eyes closed I couldn’t help but fall once again into sleep. When I awoke next, Gerda was sitting by my side. I had fallen in and out of slumber a few times, but it was only now that the pain in my head had subsided to that of a dull throb.

“Your fever is still high, so stay there and rest,” Gerda said. “Or would you like something?”

I told her I was thirsty, and a soft cloth was pressed to my lips. Then I felt

liquid sliding down my throat. It was water mixed with syrup and fruit juice.

“Lady Gerda, please let the servants handle the nursing. There’s no need to lower yourself...”

The voice was one I hadn’t heard before. Perhaps one of my sister’s servants.

“I’ve done this since we were both little,” said Gerda, her voice stern. “If you’re just going to get in my way, then I’d rather you leave.”

Despite her tone of voice, however, Gerda’s gaze was soft as she dipped a cloth in water.

“I’ve a long list of things to say, but for now I’ll keep it all to myself,” she said. “You’ll have to bear with the pain of your fingers for the time being, but a skilled mage will heal you in due time. They’re on their way as I speak, so just hold on until then.”

I wasn’t sure what Gerda was talking about until I raised my hands and took a look at them. I understood then why they’d felt so unwieldy; they were both wrapped in bandages.

“The mage will ensure that not a single scar is left on your body or your face, so you can rest easy,” Gerda continued. “Now, how do you feel?”

“Awake, at least,” I replied. “My head doesn’t feel as stuffy as earlier.”

I was shocked to see my sister here, but even before that, I was shocked by the four-poster bed I found myself in. Then, there was the comfortable white lace hanging from my arms; part of the silk pajamas I’d been dressed in. Even outside of the bed and the pajamas, the furniture and decorations around the room brought the atmosphere into a kind of shared theme—it all screamed of wealth.

“Where...am I?” I asked.

“That’s the second time you’ve asked that question,” replied Gerda with a troubled sigh. “You really don’t remember, do you?”

With a look of exasperation, Gerda gave up on stopping me from rising and instead placed a few cushions behind my back. It made sitting up feel much better, but the inside of my mouth still felt uncomfortable. I knew that I’d cut

my tongue and the inside of my mouth, and when I searched around with my tongue I could feel the odd swelling where I'd been hurt.

"I've been told that a powerful ointment was used on the inside of your mouth," explained Gerda. "You're not to eat anything solid, so please be careful."

"It feels a bit weird, but it's not so bad. More importantly..."

"We're at the Rodenwald villa. Which is to say, Reinald's villa. Apparently, you were brought here because it was the closest place to the guardhouse."

"What of Sven?" I asked.

"He was taken back to the Conrad villa, but he comes here every day. The maid, Nico, stayed here so as to act as your nurse."

"Every day...? How long have I been here?"

"Five days have passed since you arrived."

That was a much higher number than I'd been expecting. Even having caught a cold, I felt sure I'd slept entirely too long.

"Usually, when you come down with a fever you're in bed for three days," said Gerda, closing her eyes and scrunching up her face. "But this time you were injured on top of it, which lengthened your recovery."

"Huh...? No. That can't be right...can it?"

"You've always had the weakest constitution of all of us. It's high time you realized."

That's what Gerda claimed, but I wasn't convinced. I could exercise like anyone else, and running wasn't an issue for me. Like anyone in their teens, I found pulling an all-nighter easy, and when I was lacking in sleep a short afternoon nap set everything back to even. I was a sparkling example of health for my age. And okay, yes, so I was prone to high fevers, but that alone wasn't enough to consider me of weak constitution.

"You can't go comparing me to Arno, though. His health is unnatural, if anything."

While Arno was admittedly mentally weak, his physical health was anything but. He never came down with any colds or illnesses. Gerda muttered a few complaints about my comment, but she soon realized that I had something on my mind I couldn't easily share. She turned around to where her servants stood at the ready.

"We've something to discuss between us," she announced. "You may leave."

When all the servants had left, Gerda turned back and looked at me expectantly.

"I'd like to ask you something," I started.

"What is it? If it's about what happened at the guardhouse, you needn't worry. It's all been taken care of."

"Did you consent to it?" I asked. "Or did you not?"

Silence hung between the two of us. Gerda's head tilted sideways.

"Karen?" she asked, still not getting it. "Could you say that again?"

"Did you agree to it, or did you not?"

"Did I agree to what?"

"To the prince and...you."

Why is she looking at the ceiling? I don't understand why she's doing that.

"I clear the room and *that's* the first thing you ask?"

"Huh? Isn't it important?"

It was exactly what I wanted to talk to Gerda about. I thought the question was entirely self-explanatory, but Gerda didn't see it that way. Gerda's brow furrowed, and then she let out a long, long sigh, after which her shoulders slumped.

"It disheartens me to have my own younger sister not trust me, but I suppose it can't be helped. Do you think I'd consent to such a thing?"

"Look at it from my perspective. How it looked to *me*. What else was I to think?"

In truth, I should have approached this topic with more caution. But I still felt so sluggish, and when I saw how casual Gerda looked about it, I just thought, “Screw it, let’s dive right in.” And while Gerda herself looked a little irritated by the topic, I didn’t get the sense she was going to skirt the issue either.

“Arno said the same thing. I’m so sorry you had to hear something so shocking.”

“It was terrible for my heart.”

“I’m sure it was... To be honest, until just a little while ago I was convinced that Arno would demand that I just go home.”

“So you didn’t consent to it?”

“No. If you’re asking me if I *wanted* to be in that sort of relationship, then the answer is no.”

I had other thoughts and opinions on the matter, but digging them up wasn’t going to be much fun for anybody. There was also something of an unwritten rule that you didn’t go any deeper when talking to relatives about such matters, particularly when you wanted to maintain good relations with your siblings.

“According to Re...one person, you and the prince have a close relationship.”

“It was simply that when he began to put the pressure on, brushing him off wasn’t a simple matter. It wasn’t easy. Until recently I rarely, if ever, had to deal with men in such ways. Do you really think me the type that can deftly turn down such men?”

Gerda wasn’t the type to indulge in late-night excursions, and she wasn’t the amorous kind either. She was, in every way, an ordinary noblewoman. It was like when a girl starts working at a new company and her sleazy manager hits on her; she tries to play it all off with a smile so as to keep everything running smoothly, but he takes it the wrong way.

“Oh, I see. So...”

“I know how it looked. It didn’t help that I didn’t take a firmer hand,” said Gerda. “As far as family relations are concerned, he’s my son-in-law. I wasn’t interested in him, not like that. Clearly it didn’t make a difference to him. Even

his father's concubine is just another woman, as far as he's concerned. The type to revel in the immoral."

She tried to play it down, but Gerda gripped her elbows with both arms and squeezed as she talked. For a brief instant, something like hatred flashed across her eyes, but she buried it a moment later.

"In any case, you're not to get involved any further. You don't have to worry," said Gerda. "Zakhar and Arno are going to handle things now. I'll be okay."

"Zakhar... Is he the lord of the Rodenwald family?"

"Yes, Reinald's older brother. Please remember it for future reference."

"I know the name. But the prince has his eye on you. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Don't ask anything more if you're not prepared for the responsibility. This is a matter of the balance of power, and you belong to Conrad now. You can't be half-in, or you run the risk of making things worse for you and for the Rodenwalds."

Gerda said it calmly, but her warning was utterly serious. Truth be told, I was reluctant to shoulder such responsibility.

"Fine, then at least tell me this. You don't harbor feelings for the prince...?" I asked.

"I wish him dead."

My sister had been brought up with the care and affection afforded princesses, and so it was a shock for me to even hear her utter such words. She went on.

"While I don't think you'll find yourself in such circumstances, avoid being alone with that man, whatever it takes." She then glared at the close door from which her servants had left. "And whatever you do, make sure your servants are women you can trust."

"Got it..."

"That's all I wanted to warn you of, but you don't have to worry about me, little sister. Thank you for confiding in Arno, however. It wasn't something I

could easily approach him about myself, and...thanks to you, things will work out just fine.”

And with that, Gerda poked a spoon full of fruit juice at me. *Drink*, the gesture said.

“By the way, you forgave Reinald, did you?”

“Does this have sugar in it? And what do you mean by forgave him?”

“I heard it was his men who put you through that horrendous experience. And yet, instead of attacking him, you promised you wouldn’t even bring charges to bear.”

I did?

Gerda told me I was being too lenient, but I didn’t even recall having such a conversation. Had I been muttering in something of a half-daze? I was still thinking about it when word arrived that I had woken up, and people came to visit.

It was Reinald’s aide Moritz and the young woman who had treated me in the carriage, Elena. With them was a man in his mid-twenties whom I did not recognize. He was thin, dressed in a military uniform with rather lavish accessories. At a glance, his lustrous white hair made one think of the elderly. However you looked at him, he did not seem the military type.

The man was introduced to me as the healer Reinald had sent for. I couldn’t hide my surprise; I had expected someone older. He had beautiful skin and slender eyes of silver gray. I was meeting so many stunning individuals of late that my senses couldn’t quite seem to handle it all. When the man introduced himself, he did so with the hint of a smile on his lips and quite the impressive bow.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I’m so happy to meet you, little friend of my comrade.”

His name, Sixtus, was unusual and quite rare. He seemed kind and gentle on the surface, but my first impression, personally speaking, was that there was something very suspicious about him. Moritz said he had business with my sister and excused himself. Sixtus took a seat at the edge of my bed and, after

asking my permission, took my left wrist in hand.

“Six, Sir Reinald has requested that you work quickly,” said Elena.

“Yes, I understand. And there’s no need to worry; I’m not much for making young maidens suffer unnecessarily.”

When Sixtus gave his reply, Elena’s gaze turned cold. I couldn’t tell why. Sixtus, however, ignored her and hummed to himself happily as he took my pulse and inspected me the same way a doctor might.

“Unfortunately, now is not the time,” he said. “I can, however...yes. I’ll heal the inside of your mouth. Not being able to eat must be torture, I imagine.”

“Did you not hear me, Six?” asked Elena.

“I cannot do what I cannot do. It is as simple as that. It would be different if the girl didn’t have a fever, but at present she’s very weak. If I were to attempt to fully heal her like this she’d likely faint. I doubt that’s what Reinald wants.”

“And you are completely sure?”

“You know how healing magic works. And besides, there’s a time and a place for mischief, and this is not it. You need not worry.”

Elena’s eyes went wide with ire. I got the sense that the two did not get along.

“I will see to the rest of your healing once your strength returns,” said Sixtus. “Do take care of yourself, Miss Karen.”

He then promptly stood up and left without so much as a second glance. No more than five minutes had passed, and though I initially found myself somewhat disappointed by Sixtus’s so-called healing, I couldn’t dwell on the thought long. Something was happening inside of my mouth. I suddenly felt strangely sick, as though I had just chewed on grass pungent with the stink of soil. I instinctively put a hand to my mouth, and at the very same time I felt the swelling inside of my mouth subside.

“Oh, it’s healed,” I remarked. “It feels normal again.”

“That’s Six’s healing magic,” said Elena. “I’m glad it worked.”

“It’s quite different from what I’ve heard of healing.”

“You mean because it’s so quick, yes?”

For a moment my vision blurred and my head spun.

“However,” Elena went on, “magical healing draws upon the body’s strength and endurance, so as to speed up the healing process. That’s why it has little effect on those who are in a weakened state. It can even result in death. So please take it easy. You’ll heal better once your body is in a healthier state.”

Oh, is that so? So magic wasn’t simply a case of drawing on a mysterious power to heal someone in an instant like “Hey! Presto!” In that sense, magic isn’t quite as versatile as I had thought.

With Sixtus gone, Elena’s expression relaxed, and her smile reminded me of something.

“That’s right,” I said. “I forgot to say something of great importance.”

“Did something else happen?” asked Elena.

“I wanted to thank you for saving me. And for carrying me, and for seeing me back to health.”

For a moment Elena looked stunned, but then a genuine smile bubbled up from the bottom of her heart, and she placed a hand over her chest as she replied.

“You do not need to thank me; I was merely doing my job,” Elena said. “Well, that is what I would like to say, but I must admit, it feels wonderful to be thanked for your work. My name is Elena Kokoska, but please, call me Elena.”

I wanted nothing more than to talk a little longer, just the two of us, but it was then that a knock came at the door. As Moritz entered, Elena stood up a little straighter and took a step back. Moritz remained standing, bowed, and then proceeded to speak.

“I apologize, I know that entering a woman’s bedroom like this is unbecoming, but I have an important matter to discuss with you.”

Moritz was so serious in manner and tone as to feel utterly inflexible. There was something almost high-handed about it, to the extent that, depending on the circumstances, it might even have felt put-on. But perhaps this was simply

his natural state of being. I did not feel any emotion from the man as he looked at me; it was as though his eyes rested upon me merely because I was there.

“This matter you speak of, is it related to the fact that, even now, you still haven’t called for my own personal maids?”

“If you would like them, we can call upon them, though I would not recommend it. Please consider that what we are about to discuss has implications for your future.”

Moritz’s words were enough to convince me that this matter was, indeed, of great weight. So as much as I wanted to see Nico again, I put that desire to the side. Truth be told, I wanted to take a break to rest, but with something of a sense of defeat, I gestured for Moritz to continue.

“This incident caused you a dire inconvenience, and it came about as a result of our mismanagement. The perpetrator of it all has already been sentenced to death, though I doubt that offers you much consolation. We are prepared to apologize in whatever form necessary, but we would also like to ask a request of you: to not speak of the incident or the identity of the soldiers working in the guardhouse.”

Moritz spoke his words without any discernible tone, and his flat, emotionless manner of speech made it difficult to catch what he was saying. There was also the fact that I still felt dull and a touch hazy. It was quite a lot to take in all at once, and I needed some time to consider my response. As I’d said to Reinald before, this particular type of conversation was one I was not particularly comfortable with. There was more to Moritz’s words than just the words themselves, and speaking in a way that asked me to read between the lines was enough to give me a headache.

“Are you saying, in other words, that you don’t want me to speak of the existence of the empire here?”

“Indeed. Your understanding in the matter would be most appreciated.”

“According to my sister, I already said that I wouldn’t press charges. So I don’t quite understand; wouldn’t you usually make such a request *before* such a decision?”

“Lord Kirsten and Lady Saburova were furious. We had no other choice.”

In other words, they lied. Which was why I didn’t remember the conversation.

“Putting the Kirsten family aside, what of Conrad?” I asked. “I wasn’t the only victim in this; there was also the margrave’s son. You’re not asking me to talk him around, are you?”

“We do not intend to place such a burden on your shoulders,” replied Moritz. “We will see to that particular matter ourselves. The problem for me is the information that you overheard.”

“Ah, you mean when someone referred to Sir Reinald as ‘Your Excellency.’”

“That in particular, I beg of you, must not be shared with anyone, not even the king of Falkrum.”

“I have already discussed the matter with Sir Reinald himself. So long as you make no attempt to harm my person or those of my family, I promise to say nothing of the matter.”

That had been enough for Reinald, but clearly not enough for Moritz. I suppose it was only natural; it was a very delicate matter.

“That alone doesn’t seem to satisfy you,” I said. “Shall I prepare a statement in writing?”

“Were it allowed, I would want nothing more, but such a thing would go against my master’s will, and I can’t have it. I am here now not on behalf of my master, but as an individual.”

“I see. And Sir Reinald?”

“This particular matter does not warrant his attention.”

Which meant that Moritz had come of his own accord. Which was not to say I could simply discard Moritz’s intent; Elena was here as well, and she had not once tried to put a stop to our conversation. Which likely meant that she, too, sided with Moritz.

“To be completely transparent,” said Moritz, “I would have opposed allowing you to live had I not been ordered otherwise.”

“Enough with the threats. They will only serve to have the opposite effect.”

The reply left me like a reflex, before I had any chance to stop it. Which was unfortunate; I hadn't intended to start a fight. Moritz's gaze remained steadfast, and internally I sighed. I got the sense that Moritz wasn't likely to let this go until I was crying at his feet, promising never to say a word to anyone. He'd already refused me when I said I'd put it in writing, so I didn't know what else might reassure him. I was far too tired to panic and put up a fuss about the whole thing.

I let out a pained, worried sigh. It was something I'd learned from Gerda. Moritz and I hadn't talked particularly long, but it had the desired effect.

“Perhaps we can strike a deal?” I asked.

Moritz's eyes narrowed. He did not refuse the idea, but he was no doubt running a number of internal calculations. I had made the suggestion because Moritz clearly did not trust me, and he did not believe that I would keep my promise unconditionally. Appealing to his emotions would get me nowhere. I saw him as the type more open to calculating a profitable deal, something that would reassure him that I would not renege on my word. I was sure of it, in fact.

Which left one problem: I wanted nothing of a value befitting such a negotiation.

Given the stage our discussion had entered, it wasn't as though I could simply ask for some time to consider it either. I put on a deeply thoughtful expression while I screamed internally, and in that panic a memory surfaced.

“Oh, yes,” I said, looking to buy myself time, “I know I was attacked, but that's all I know. I've yet to hear any of the particulars of how the whole incident came to be. Would you mind informing me?”

“We have already explained the details to everyone...”

“Which I will confirm later. What I want to know is the *truth*. I want to know about you. The circumstances that led to all this happening.”

I got the sense that Moritz was judging me in this moment, but it was not enough to put me off my game.

“If you want to know such a thing, then I assume you have a reason?”

“Nothing in particular. Call it curiosity. Do I need to have a deeper motivation?”

I suddenly felt terrified. Yes, I was half-serious about it all, but I decided to stop with the attitude.

“The staff at the guardhouse were seemingly ignorant of Falkrum and its society,” I continued. “The Kirsten name meant nothing to them either. You are supposed to be in charge of them, managing their matters, and yet they struck me as most despicable. It was, in a word, terrifying, and so I believe that as a victim I have a right to know.”

There were so many unknowns in all of it that it seemed that the best and quickest thing to do was ask directly. Moritz and I then shared a silence. It didn’t seem there was much we saw eye to eye on, but he at least seemed open to talking to me about this.

“You overheard our conversation at the guardhouse but did not seem surprised. And it’s true to say that we haven’t gone to great lengths to hide everything. Am I right to assume that you have already looked into the identity of His Excellency?”

“Yes, though don’t expect me to tell you how much I know.”

“Such a thing is unnecessary. There is only so much you could ascertain from within Falkrum, anyway. The more pertinent point is that you heard the words of his betrayer.”

Moritz was confident in their control of intel. Which meant he likely knew that all I had found out was that Reinald’s father was someone important. The air felt sharp with tension, and it prickled at my skin. A part of me wanted to flee and run back home, but I knew now that I was in far too deep for that.

I knew immediately that by “betrayer,” Moritz meant Lang. But I did not know what he’d said that was of importance. All I knew was that these words were what was most important to Moritz.

Which means I missed part of their conversation. Which also means I slipped up when I told Reinald that I’d heard “the gist of it all.”

“As you already know, we are imperials, and the personal guard of His Excellency. We are here as people of Falkrum because His Imperial Majesty demanded it.”

I knew that Reinald's father was someone important, but the Emperor is also involved?

“Please, do not misunderstand,” continued Moritz. “The sole reason the guard is here is to ensure the protection of His Excellency. We have no plans to invade your country. Our movements were approved by Falkrum's own king.”

So knights had been dispatched from the empire, but that didn't mean they were all trustworthy. Among the imperial knights were many who despised foreigners and many who did not follow orders. The worst of the lot had all been gathered in a single location.

“All of the men at that guardhouse are recent arrivals,” explained Moritz. “We were waiting for the right opportunity to have them sent back to the empire. However, the current lot of soldiers were especially twisted.”

They were his own countrymen, but Moritz spoke without a hint of sympathy for them. He apologized, saying that it was not Reinald but himself whose supervision had been insufficient. He also said that if other victims of similar crimes were found, they would receive compensation.

“We are currently in the process of interrogating the remaining guards,” said Moritz. “Further details *will* come to light, I'm sure of it.”

“Those are the empire's current circumstances?”

“I have told you no lies.”

His silence said he had nothing more to say on the matter, and his posture indicated that the topic was now closed. All I could do now was talk to Mrs. Henrik and the others and put together any threads and disparate intel. When I asked Moritz how to explain things to Arno and Gerda, I was told to say only that they were of imperial descent.

But knowing Arno, he'll have Achim look into things further.

“So all of you are here for the purpose of protecting Sir Reinald, and for only

that purpose, yes?" I asked.

"Of course. It is not our desire to do anything outside of that which he asks of us."

"The people at that guardhouse had an experienced air about them. This was not their first swindle, and other victims will be found. Knowing this, you will not simply leave them to their own devices, will you?"

"I assure you, we didn't know what they were up to. Nevertheless, we will take responsibility for what occurred."

Moritz never faltered in the slightest, making it difficult to ascertain whether or not he was lying. Was it even possible that a person of this caliber was clueless as to what his own men were up to? Still, there was nothing more that a girl in my position, and on her own, could do.

"Very well. I will trust your words...or more to the point, I trust those who came to save us."

Which meant Nika. Moritz glanced at Elena, but she had nothing to add. The topic was getting me down, however, so I opted to change the subject.

"As for our negotiations, I have just realized that there *is* something I want."

"And what might that be?"

I could tell by Moritz's body language that he was ready for something truly exorbitant. However, what I was after was not a physical object and, on top of that, some might have found it entirely worthless.

"I would like Imperial Treasury Trade Rights," I said. "In return for that, I will not speak a word on the incident as requested, except in the case that it might bring harm to those closest to me."

Though only for the very briefest of possible moments, I had succeeded in leaving Moritz, a military man to his core, speechless. Which was understandable. I had not asked for gold, or sparkling jewels, or clothing or anything of any monetary value. Instead, I had asked for something that only imperial citizens and a select number of merchants had access to: rights to the use of the empire's domestic banks.

“You ask for such a thing because you intend to do business in the empire?” Moritz asked.

“I have no plans to do any such thing,” I replied. “So I am not asking for Conrad or Kirsten to be given the trade rights I asked for. I want them for me, as an individual. As for exactly why, given that this is a negotiation, I don’t believe that’s information I have to share.”

This, right here, was a chance for me to attain that which I wanted more than almost anything else in the world, and I felt the joy of it spreading through my face. I’ve already mentioned that it was my desire to someday leave Falkrum, and the empire was one potential place for me to go. After some research, it seemed to me the location was quite convenient, but then there was the matter of Imperial Treasury Trade Rights. These rights, in essence, gave me access to the banking system in this other world.

As you might have already guessed, banks and similar convenient financial services did not exist in the world I now called home. This was true of Falkrum too, and so one was expected to manage their own assets. Money and valuables were thus stored securely away in private safes. But if those assets were stolen, it was all over, and such occurrences weren’t exactly rare.

The Empire, however, approached things differently.

While they didn’t offer any convenient interest plans, the state *would* manage your assets for you, so long as your application for trade rights was approved. If it was, you were free to withdraw or deposit money as you pleased. Exactly how the government oversaw the whole system was unclear, but it apparently involved mages and close cooperation between all concerned. It was a method unique to the Empire which allowed them exacting control.

The difficulties this system presented meant that it did not spread any farther than the Empire itself, but when one owned trade rights there were actually dedicated locations in other countries for the depositing and withdrawing of money. In Falkrum, it was the Imperial Consulate. It was how a lot of merchants accessed their money.

A wonderful system, to be sure, but it wasn’t available to just *anybody*. Rights were awarded only to imperial citizens and merchants who satisfied a number

of set conditions.

And now, I hoped, me.

I intended to live on my own, but living as a single woman was not particularly easy. I had become painfully aware of that fact when I had been expelled from the Kirstens and made a commoner. As such, I no longer wanted to tear my hair out deciding where to hide my valuables. If a convenient system existed that would take care of my assets for me, then that was where I wanted my money. And given that the Empire was on my list of potential future locations anyway, there was great benefit to owning trade rights.

“You say you wish for our nation’s unique trade rights, not as a merchant, but as an individual,” said Moritz.

“If you have the authority to dispatch soldiers to Falkrum, I would assume that this, too, is within the bounds of your authority,” I replied.

“And it is. That said, how much are you asking for?”

“How much...?”

“Gold. Conversions from Falkrum currency are allowed up to the sum of two thousand.”

Two thousand gold coins. With that kind of money, I could easily buy a fully furnished house on a plot of land and live in luxury for a good while.

The amount of gold that Moritz was talking about told me *exactly* how much these people wanted their secret kept secret, but even then it was ridiculously high. If he’d said thirty coins, I would have agreed on the spot. But instead, he had gone much higher. I should add that the trade rights alone were something some people wanted bad enough to happily *pay* for.

“Oh, um...” I uttered. “No, perhaps even just a hundred coins would suffice...”

“I must insist that you stop it with the jokes. Or is there more to your negotiations?”

No! This isn’t a negotiation tactic! One hundred coins is a lot for me!

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. Clearly the two of us saw money through entirely different eyes. “*I’m not the sort of person who just throws gold*

around like it's nothing at all!" I wanted to shout.

Naturally, I kept my thoughts to myself.

"I cannot decide on such a number," I said.

"And what, pray tell, does that mean?"

"I ask that *you* decide on the sum. It is impossible for me, a mere citizen of Falkrum, to put a price on such information."

Moritz said nothing for a time, then, with a bow, he turned to leave.

"Vice Captain Kokoska, with me," he said.

"Sir."

Elena offered me a secretive wave and a smile as she left. I smiled as I watched them go, and when the door closed behind them I felt all of my energy leave me.

My god, I am exhausted.

I had made a play to have Moritz decide the sum of money. I'd put the burden on his shoulders. But, had I succeeded? In any case, I felt sick of it all. I wanted all the bothersome things to stay away until later. For now, I wanted to sleep!

Let me sleep! Does nobody realize how tired I am, or that I still have a fever?!

It's so odd that when one has a fever, being alone is somehow saddening. It was my intent to simply sulk in bed from the occurrence of that thought, but the moment I closed my eyes the sandman had me. Somewhere in that slumber, I heard a voice talking to me, but I ignored it and tried to return to sleep.

I tried to call out to Arno, tried to stop him, but my words were slurred. It was Arno whose voice I thought I heard. In the haze of my sleep, I reached out and clutched his clothes, but that was all I could muster. I couldn't open my eyes to see him, and sleep once again won over me; Arno cradled my weight as my body once again sunk into the bed.

I won't ask you to stay for long. But for just a little while longer? Won't you stay by my side until this cowardly fear inside me passes? I know you are busy,

and it is all too easy for me to imagine the countless sleepless nights you endure through your own stress. I don't want to make you cry the way I did two years ago. I don't want to be a burden either, but with Ern gone, I've nobody else left to talk to. The only person to offer their shoulder was you, and now I need it.

I heard a voice call my name. I knew it, I heard it. It was my brother's.

I was so scared.

I had to bring them back home. If anything were to happen to Sven or Nico, how could I ever show my face to the people who had shown me such kindness? In the end, I'd been useless, but I'd given it all I had and put on a brave front, even though I wanted nothing more than to burst into tears.

Wouldn't you have been the same? The men waved their weapons with bad intentions, and those very intentions had seen our guards slain. Even now, the image of that man, assaulting me with his fists, is burned into my mind. As my head reeled from the shock, they laughed at my pain.

No matter how strong I might have thought I was, such a fear is insurmountable.

I held tight to Arno's clothes, squeezing them tight. I was still dazed, still lost in a half-sleep, but surely, I thought, Arno would understand my plight.

When I awoke, it was morning. My eyes were swollen from the crying, but I felt quite good, strangely enough. A pleasant scent wafted through my nose and so I held it tighter, closer, but as I felt something cold upon my forehead, I opened my eyes.

The sensation upon my forehead was a medal, or perhaps a badge of rank. What I clutched in my arms was a jacket that was unfamiliar to me. I had no recollection of bringing it to bed, and as I raised it up for a better look I saw that it was black and, thanks to having been in my grasp, all wrinkled.

Whose...jacket...is this...?

Suddenly it dawned on me that, perhaps, I was familiar with this article of clothing. And perhaps, in fact, it belonged to a certain blond-haired individual I had been meeting a lot recently.

“Was it a dream?” I pondered.

I decided simply to go back to sleep. I threw away all thoughts of why. Thinking about it only made me blush to the point that I feared I might die. My whole body felt suddenly hot. Perhaps it was my cold, but I no longer cared. I had decided to go back to sleep. The plan was simple: sleep until someone got rid of the jacket, at which point I could pretend that I didn't even know that I'd had it.

“My lady,” came a voice. “Are you awake?”

Nico... You may have a true, however unfortunate, talent for horrible timing.

8: Good Moods All Around

Arno was in fine spirits. Spirits so fine they sickened me.

“How’s your headache, Karen?” he asked. “If you’re not feeling well, we’ll call a doctor, so just say the word.”

“I’m fine,” I replied curtly. “No problems. Thank you kindly.”

“Your bandages haven’t been removed yet, and your recovery will be slow and gradual. You mustn’t push yourself until you’re fully recovered. If you have any errands to run, just say so; we’ll send Achim out to see to them for you.”

“Unnecessary. Leave him be. Stop it, please, I beg of you.”

“There’s no need to be so embarrassed about it. Right, Achim?”

“Seriously, I think that’s enough,” replied Achim.

What sickened me was the unsightly grinning face of my brother, Arno. And now Achim, who usually would have loved such an opportunity to tease me, was suddenly sympathetic. I wanted to dig myself a hole that I could crawl into and hide.

As for *why* things ended up this way, we need look no further than my disastrous morning. Or, to be more accurate, the evening that preceded it.

“All right, young master, we get it. When Karen was in need of help, she called for you,” said Achim. “That’s the truth, and you’ll always have it. But she’s also a grown woman and she didn’t know who was actually here. You’re humiliating her. Just look at that withered face of hers.”

Stop it, Achim. Stop that right this instant. I know you mean well, but by recounting the details you’re only rubbing salt into the wound.

“My lady *does* have her adorable traits, doesn’t she?” said Nico.

Nico wore a soft expression, and Sven a most mischievous grin. Mrs. Henrik appeared as calm as always, but I could read her mind through the sweetened tea she served me; it was in her very nature to serve sugar and sweets

whenever she felt sympathetic!

“Karen has always been adorable,” said Arno. “That she has. It was a shock that she grabbed a hold of Sir Reinald, but there’s little we can do about that; she thought he was me.”

“Young master, listen to me, shut up,” said Achim.

What he said. What he said!

It was all a mistake. I heard Arno speak and so I reached out and grabbed a hold of...the wrong man entirely. Putting aside the fact that I wished they would have had their conversation somewhere other than in my room while I was sleeping, I had been completely out of it when I’d clutched at Reinald. However, because I refused to let go of him, he’d left his jacket with me when he left the room.

When I’d been made aware of it all, I thought I’d go insane with embarrassment.

“Don’t worry, Karen. Sir Reinald was very understanding about it all,” said Arno. “In consideration of your feelings, he opted not to come see you this morning.”

I groaned.

“Young master, *please*, enough already. You’re so over the moon you’re reaching for the stars, and Karen, it’s too fun...*ahem*, it’s beyond pitiful, really.”

I won’t forget that, Achim. And why doesn’t Arno realize that his every word is like the blade of a knife?

I couldn’t understand why Arno was in such excessively high spirits, but when he fell into conversation with Sven, Achim shifted in closer and began to whisper an explanation.

“You’ll have to forgive the young master. Ever since his fiancée left him, he’s been terribly blue. He’s just happy to have someone who needs him.”

“What? Left? When did this happen?”

“A short while before the king began courting Gerda.”

“Huh? But I didn’t hear a word of that...”

“It’s because he couldn’t easily talk about why it happened.”

Arno had been engaged for more than ten years. I recalled that he and his partner had always dated with the end goal of marriage in mind, but when I mentioned this, Achim could only respond with a wry grin.

“Well...I suppose he was...too kind. Kept the girl on a pedestal, when what she really wanted was his attention. In any case, she’d cheated on him and then before he could even say a word about it, she was married. She said she couldn’t rely on him, and those words have weighed on him ever since.”

“I’m surprised her family allowed her such freedom,” I replied. “Aren’t they friends of father’s?”

“Both families were mad about it, but...we were still only middle-class nobility at the time, and the guy Arno’s fiancée ran off with was higher in rank. But when talk turned to Gerda...”

Achim began to laugh. There was a lot hidden in it. It was like he was glad that Arno’s former fiancée’s true nature had been revealed; I wondered if he hated her.

“Whoa!” said Achim when I brought it up. “We’re talking about Arno’s fiancée! I didn’t hate her; I just always thought she was hiding something.”

He didn’t sound particularly convincing to me.

In any case, while I’d been sleeping, Sven and Arno had gotten to talking and hit it off. Achim glanced at the two of them, then lowered his tone slightly.

“By the way, can I ask you something serious for a moment?” he asked.

“What is it?”

“It’s your condition. You’re still bandaged up and you haven’t fully recovered. I know it bothers you to be in the care of the Rodenwalds, but isn’t it best to return home *later*, once you’re in better shape?”

“I might never go home at all if we do that.”

“But, what if you’re left with permanent scarring...?”

“I believe we can trust the image that Reinald assigned. And besides, the bruises on my face are gone, and what’s a few bumps and bruises on my head, my arms, or my legs, anyway?”

“No. No, no. We can’t have that. Absolutely not.”

Achim was trying to stop me from going home today. I’d been at Reinald’s villa since the incident at the guardhouse, but my fever was gone and I no longer had trouble walking. I felt good! And while saying as much only caused Mrs. Henrik’s brow to furrow, I was ready to return home, where I could truly, actually relax.

“I can’t just let the Rodenwalds take care of me for eternity,” I said. “Sixtus said that we only need another two sessions, and he’d be happy to stop by the Conrad villa to do them. I want to go home.”

I could also sleep in blissful freedom on Conrad property thanks to there being fewer people and no peeping servants. I was all ready and set to go home then and there, but first tea was served. Gerda didn’t attend, but I assumed she was busy with more...pressing matters.

“We’re here because you and Achim knew I was too unwell to go anywhere else at the time,” I continued, “but I can’t just have everyone visiting me here, that’s not fair on anyone. And I want to rest somewhere where I don’t have to worry about such things.”

“I know what you’re trying to say, but you have to take better care of yourself.”

“And I *am*. But I don’t think it’s good for me to stay too long at the villa of a once prospective marriage partner.”

“Well, as far as anyone knows, you’re currently staying at the Conrad villa, and Sven is coming here in a Kirsten carriage, so there’s no need to worry about rumors.”

“And then there’s *that*. You’ve all gotten very chummy very quickly, haven’t you?”

“Well, Sven is a good, honest kid. Considerate. I like boys like that. In fact, he’s a little *too* honest, so if he’s really going to be making a home of the capital

then he's going to have to learn some things."

"If he's in your care, then I suppose there'll be nothing to worry about."

Achim had taken a liking to Sven, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. That much was clear by the fact they appeared to be on a first-name, no-title basis. Achim was worried about Sven's tendency toward frank honesty, which had likely, in one way or another, gotten us wrapped up in the whole kidnapping and extortion business in the first place.

Which was not to say that Sven was at fault. The fault could be directly attributed, in every way, to Lang and his cronies at the guardhouse. Nonetheless, the truth of the matter was that Sven's personality *had* been the impetus for the opening argument.

The whole thing had started when Nico and a guardhouse knight had walked into one another. Nico had apologized, but the knight, having apparently woken up on the wrong side of the bed, barked at her. Sven had taken offense to this and in speaking his piece, an argument had ensued. Sven's behavior was, to me, commendable.

But this was where the problems began. You can't really call it anything other than bad luck. Despite his gentle appearance, the young Sven was a good talker, and when he successfully talked down that guardhouse knight—in front of a crowd, no less—he'd only brought the man's ire on himself. And so a trap was set for when Sven and Nico made their way home.

Just as the carriage driver was about to depart, the "victim" threw himself in front of the carriage. The people making a big fuss about how bad it all was were, of course, Lang and his cronies. The local guards had briefly gotten involved, but Lang's men had quickly smooth-talked them out of the picture so they could whisk Sven, Nico, and the others to their guardhouse on the outskirts.

As for Nico's injuries, she had actually received them in trying to protect Sven from harm. She had quickly realized that their ire was directed at the young boy, and so she had made a huge fuss of her own, drawing their attention away from him and directly to her. Things had just been about to get much, much worse for them both when Mrs. Henrik and I had arrived, and they'd been

moved to a cell in the basement. What we learned, I supposed, is that a ravenous, starving beast cares not for gender when it comes to the target of sexual assault.

And while I had been completely useless in my attempts to free the two of them, at the very least I could feel some relief in the fact that my timing had been fortuitous.

“Just how long are the two of you going to keep whispering like that?” asked Arno, turning briefly from his conversation with Sven.

“Don’t let it bother you,” I replied. “I must say, Whateley appears to be running rather late.”

“Everything is clear on our side of the family, but things have to be talked through with Conrad, still. Not surprising that such a discussion might run long.”

Arno was being kind on behalf of the younger people in the room, but basically what he was getting at was that while the margrave was on friendly terms with the Kirsten family, he did not have deep ties with the Rodenwalds. The Rodenwalds wanted to keep the entire incident under wraps, but such a suggestion might not go down very easily with the margrave, whose own heir and legal wife had been harmed as a result. Sven felt a certain obligation to Reinald and had spoken in support of him, but the discussions were slow going nonetheless. Sven understood that the crimes lay with the perpetrators, but there was also the issue of the management of those perpetrators, which fell to Reinald. Arno had avoided saying all of this in front of Sven in the name of kindness, I think.

Whateley had thus come to the capital as the margrave’s proxy. When the news of the injuries had arrived, he’d come flying, it seemed. Sending word to Conrad and then sending someone to the capital should have taken at least ten days, but Whateley did it in record time. The news that he was the margrave’s acting proxy surprised me, but Mrs. Henrik shared none of my shock.

“Even now, he manages all the family’s internal matters and is the lord’s secretary. The margrave likely deemed that the matter was safer in Whateley’s hands than any of his relatives.”

His speed of arrival also indicated that the man knew his way around a horse.

The margrave was unfortunately ill, which was the reason he had not come himself. As for Doctor Emma, though she was worried about her son, it was her duty to ensure that the margrave was nursed back to health.

But just what did Mrs. Henrik mean when she insinuated that Whateley was more trustworthy than the margrave's relatives?

I waited for the moment that Mrs. Henrik excused herself to go and speak to her.

"My lady?" she said. "If there's anything you need, I'm happy to go on your behalf."

"Er, no. I'd like to ask you something, actually."

"Me?"

"Yes, though it might not be an easy question to answer."

To put it bluntly, I wanted to ask her about what she'd said at the guardhouse.

"Right before Lang revealed his true colors," I continued, "you brought up the Rodenwald name..."

"Oh, that..." replied Mrs. Henrik, her shoulders slumping. "I thought doing so might stay in their hands. My lack of foresight only saw you injured, however. How can I ever apologize..."

I waved my hands to let her know she had it all wrong. I knew that Mrs. Henrik had done her utmost to help, not harm.

"No, no," I said, "I'm not blaming you or scolding you for what you did. I had actually heard, quite by coincidence, that the guardhouse was linked to the Rodenwald family. That was the reason I panicked in the carriage and asked the driver to stop. But how did *you* know of that connection? The truth of the guardhouse isn't exactly public knowledge, right?"

"Oh, I see..."

Mrs. Henrik did not look as though she were trying to hide anything. She knew the point of my question. After taking a quick look around to make sure there was nobody within earshot, she leaned in and began to whisper.

“It’s not something anybody would hear about, ordinarily. A long time ago, I lived here in the capital and I visited the royal court with Margrave’s wife. It was there that I overheard it; that the Rodenwald family oversaw the guardhouse on the capital’s outskirts.”

“Which is to say that, even then, the people of the court already knew about it?”

“No, I overheard it quite by accident. There were no such rumors floating about, and it wasn’t something that was widespread.”

“So, what about Margrave and Whateley?”

“I believe that they know. But rest easy, my lady. I’m certain that the margrave would have given fair warning, and Whateley isn’t the type to go poking at hornets’ nests.”

For a moment, Mrs. Henrik’s gaze was downcast.

“And, as far as I know,” she added, “most of the people who *did* know of the Rodenwald and the guardhouse have since passed away.”

“Did their passing have anything to do with Sir Reinald’s past?” I asked.

Mrs. Henrik was silent, but in that silence was her answer. She had just revealed, much to my surprise, that she knew something about Reinald’s father. However, when she saw this in my face, she shook her head.

“I apologize,” she said. “I did not think it through enough. The very idea that such people...if you can even call them *people* at all, would have been at that guardhouse... But I can’t answer your question, no matter how much you ask; all I heard was a rumor. Not the truth.”

Moritz had also told me that the matters of the dispatched imperial soldiers and the link between Rodenwald and the Empire were not hidden. However, when it came to Reinald, they were desperate to keep his identity and his past a secret.

So is this a matter of hiding a tree among a forest? Is it a matter of camouflage? Aha! So that’s why Mrs. Henrik froze when she saw Reinald, the day he brought me back to the Conrad villa!

That solved one mystery, but I decided not to press further. If Moritz were to somehow find out about things, it could put Mrs. Henrik in danger.

“My lady, as much as it pains me to ask,” said Mrs. Henrik, “it would seem you are...interested in that gentleman.”

“Huh?”

“I thought it best to inform the margrave sooner rather than later...but am I mistaken?”

“Y-Yes, you are mistaken. It’s a mystery, and I couldn’t help my curiosity. My goals remain unchanged.”

“I see. The two of you seemed close, so I...” Mrs. Henrik paused. “My apologies.”

“Er, no, think nothing of it.”

Well, I’m glad that was sorted before it could get wildly out of hand.

“If we go on too much longer it’ll make my brother uneasy,” I said. “I apologize for keeping you so long. I’m going to the bathroom.”

“In which case, please take Nico with you.”

“I’m quite capable of handling the bathroom by myself. The pain medication is working wonders.”

The bathroom was something I wanted desperately to keep my own, anyway. I brushed off the worried-looking Mrs. Henrik and walked into the corridor. The toilet was, in fact, not my destination.

“Hmm, I wonder where everyone is,” I muttered to myself.

I looked out the window and was met by the sight of people in black uniforms. The person I was after was easy to spot, however. I went downstairs and said what I needed to, and when I returned to my room I found Whateley there.

“I am so very sorry for the wait,” he said, with the kind of smile only afforded those who have passed a certain age. “The lord’s business is done, so let us return to the villa.”

And so, we left Reinald's villa. Reinald was there to see us off, as were Moritz and Nika. Given that I was in the company of Whateley and my brother, however, I felt that I needed to speak more formally. Though thankfully, I'd since mostly let go of my past humiliation, and so I could at least thank Reinald with a smile.

"You have been nothing but wonderful and accommodating. Thank you so much."

"I would have admittedly preferred for you to stay here until you were fully recovered, but I understand that would have placed something of a burden on you, Miss Karen. Sixtus has a surplus of free time on his hands, so use him as you like."

"And where is Sir Sixtus?"

"His movements are a mystery to me, but his treatment I can guarantee."

"Given that you introduced him personally, yes, I believe he can be trusted."

Forgive me, I simply cannot bring myself to give voice to an apology for what I did to your jacket. But thank you, for speaking not a word of it.

It was a simple goodbye on account of my injuries, and there was no kiss on the fingertips, for which I was glad, though I also scolded myself for even having the thought.

"Stay well, Sir Reinald," I said.

"Take care of yourself, Miss Karen. As for your request, which I found surprisingly intriguing, I promise that what you have asked for will be delivered."

The comment was a very good sign. He was talking about the trade rights, which meant that Moritz had informed him of our conversation. Ours being a deal made in secret, we spoke no more of the matter and instead simply looked at one another and smiled; Reinald's clear and calm, mine as warm as I was able. Admittedly, I was a little flustered and a little embarrassed by Reinald's words, but I couldn't let those feelings show with others around me.

"Until next time," I said. "I pray that you all remain in the best of health."

Reinald turned back to his villa, as did my brother and Achim, who were staying behind. From the window of the carriage, I waved at Nika and mouthed a silent “thank you.” She was taken slightly aback but waved back.

“Hey, Karen...” said Sven.

“Sven, no,” said Nico.

“But Nico, she just...”

“Even I know better than to comment. No means *no*.”

Just as I thought. It's not easy to hate someone just for being an imperial.

9: There's So Much I Want to Learn

“The reason the empire isn't well-liked is, to put it simply, because nobody knows when they're going to launch an assault on our country, I suppose,” said the margrave, mixing a teaspoon of sugar into his cup of tea.

“Though this sense of hostility has faded somewhat in the young, thirty years ago territorial disputes between our nations were a common thing. Falkrum was stronger then, and it had bold, fearless generals leading its military. Resources were abundant, and because the empire was always on the invading side, we always had the geographical advantage. Even as a rather small nation, we held our own.”

The empire was a superpower among nations at present, but it had not always been so big. It had, in fact, been built on the invasion, destruction, and rebuilding of the smaller surrounding countries. What remained across the continent now, from one side to the other, was the allied city-states of the desert region, the empire, the small nation of Falkrum, and Latoria. Across the sea was a nation rather like a cross between Japan and China, but outside of trade there existed nothing in the way of exchange, so to speak.

“My textbook said that the states in the central part of the continent united around fifty years ago. Why did Falkrum remain separate? The war of thirty years ago was to destroy us, was it not?”

“It was less a matter of survival and more a matter of being overlooked,” replied the margrave. “I think, if anything, we were simply lucky, though many mistakenly think that the empire feared Falkrum. In truth, we actually teetered on the edge of being completely invaded.”

“Falkrum was in danger?”

“It is true that we fought valiantly against the empire, but it seems likely that if it had come down to a matter of sheer resources, we would have fallen. But remember: the empire was founded on the overthrowing of other nations. Falkrum was fortunate that the people of these nations chose this time to

revolt. Also, we were perhaps fortunate that the king did not want to engage in a die-by-the-sword resistance, but rather an allegiance. Instead of throwing the lives of his people away, he was ready to discard the pride of the royal family so as to ensure the continued existence of his nation.”

“However, the empire still wanted to overthrow us.”

“Yes, they wanted our abundance of natural resources. They were hampered, however, when their internal conflicts grew more intense than they could have expected. Then news arrived that Latoria, located over the mountain range, was also preparing for war. Given the circumstances, forcing their way into our nation would have done them no good.”

“No good? But why?”

As the margrave reminisced on the time, a cheeky, youthful smile crept upon his face.

“Our nation declared that were it attacked, we would fight to the bitter end. The empire’s goal, right from the start, was to overthrow us anyway. Even if the empire were to kill the king, that would by no means ensure that the nation would neatly come under its rule.”

“Oh, I see. So there were those among the nobility and the citizenry who were prepared to revolt.”

“You have read the situation well, Karen.”

The margrave gave the satisfied nod of a teacher holding a lecture. In many ways it was exactly what he was; I was, after all, essentially a student taking his history class.

In this world, war was no mere game. By killing our king, the empire could not simply declare Falkrum as its territory. The margrave explained that dealing with the aftermath of war was no simple task. The soldiers were exhausted, but they would nonetheless be put to work suppressing rebellions wherever they broke out. The issue of supplies also had to be carefully considered.

“The empire would not have been able to use our nation as an effective stronghold even if they did successfully invade. Our diplomats at the time knew that the empire wanted our mines, so they marched into the imperial capital of

Gnodia and declared that if our nation was to be overthrown and destroyed anyway, we were prepared to blow those mines up.”

“Would that really have been such a blow to the empire? But as long as they had the miners, then...”

“In their declaration, the diplomats made it clear that no information would be given to the Empire, even if it meant the deaths of everyone involved in the nation’s mining operations. I wasn’t there myself and only heard the story secondhand, but even now I remember the desperation on the king’s aide’s face upon his return.”

Whoa. If you’re going to take it, we’ll destroy it first.

The guts of those diplomats. They were announcing suicide, essentially. It reminded me that while I was glad to have been born in a time of peace, Falkrum nonetheless had a cold, battle-hardened side to it.

“This is all, of course, confidential,” chuckled the margrave. “We would have lost all the technology and wisdom we had acquired until that point. Such a loss would have been crushing. The King of Latoria at that time was infamous for his greed; it was obvious that he was waiting to pounce when both Falkrum and the empire were weak.”

This was when the flexibility of the king came into play. In return for Falkrum’s continued existence, he was willing to agree to terms resembling a surrender. He brought the empire the offer of trade deals that were of great advantage to them. This brought with it a number of other disputes, but it allowed Falkrum to survive without entering into an official alliance. Things had continued this way since.

“Falkrum certainly walked a tightrope, didn’t it? It’s a little embarrassing for me to think that I had no idea until now. But what an amazing story. Why isn’t this in any of the textbooks?”

My question made the margrave chuckle.

“Because our hard work was, in the first place, for the sake of surrender. The declaration of the diplomats was also, even outside of the issue of the mines, quite cutthroat. To write the truth as it was would only have resulted in a loss of

dignity for the royal family.”

“But the efforts of those involved...”

“To hear a young person say as much makes me feel that our efforts were not in vain. Regardless, that is why people have a less than positive view of the imperial military.”

I had told the margrave I was interested in relations between Falkrum and the empire, and had asked for him to tell me more about it. He had clearly realized that I wanted more; perhaps he had noticed me reading all those books upon my return to Conrad.

“I daresay that’s enough about the empire for today, then?” said the margrave.

“One last thing,” I replied. “You were on the front lines, yes? Which means you experienced the battlefield firsthand. If possible, I’d like to hear about that too.”

“I was there, yes, but I did nothing more than run errands. I doubt it will be very interesting.”

“Oh, but it’s something I’m quite interested in. Could you please share with me some of your memories?”

I wondered if it was strange for a girl of my age to be interested in tales of battle. The margrave mulled it over for a while but eventually promised to talk to me about it at a later date. He said we’d talked enough for today and took his leave.

“My lady,” said Whateley, who was passing by. “A letter arrived for you from your family. I’ve put it on your desk.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “Do you happen to know where Nico is?”

“She went off to help Master Sven. If you’ve some time, please go see them.”

“Okay.”

It was the time of day where the servants were busy with washing and cleaning. I walked up the deserted staircase and rolled onto my bed. I held up both my arms and looked at my now beautiful hands.

“All perfectly healed,” I said to myself.

To give a brief summation, it had been one month since the assault we’d faced in the capital. Upon returning to the Conrad villa, I rested, and when Sixtus was finished healing me, I returned to the Conrad domain. There were a number of reasons I did this, but in order of importance: firstly, it became clear that the incidents involving Gerda and Ern would not be easily solved. Then there was the fact that, as a newly wedded young woman, the longer I stayed in the capital the more I made myself fodder for the rumor mill. Then there were all the invitations to tea parties, and not as Conrad’s Margravine, but as a daughter of the Kirsten family. Declining these invitations was such a bother that it seemed easiest just to go back to the countryside.

While I’d been in the capital, the margrave and Doctor Emma had managed to talk my grandfather around. Gerda had also put in a good word for me, it seemed, and I was all set to make the most of my new relaxing life in the countryside.

“Hah...” I sighed. “I just want to go straight to sleep...”

The Conrad family was all about a healthy life of early to sleep, early to rise. Nico came to wake me every day a little after sunrise, which meant that sleeping until noon was out of the question. Healthy lifestyles might indeed be wonderful, admirable things, but sometimes a girl wants to be a sloth!

With a walk that Mrs. Henrik would have certainly called slovenly, I took the envelope on my desk and checked the sender. It was stamped with the Kirsten family seal, and inside were letters from Arno and Achim.

Achim was looking for my friend Ern, but her whereabouts were still unknown. He promised to continue the search. Arno, meanwhile, informed me that Gerda had been successfully distanced from the prince, and that they had good relations with the Rodenwalds. He also, worriedly, asked after my health. The contents of the letter made me think he and the Rodenwald family had the same goals in mind.

“The downfall of the Dunsts... Who would’ve thunk it...”

Let us turn to the favor I’d asked of Mrs. Henrik. After looking into the Kirstens’ head family, the Dunsts, it was revealed that the family shouldered a

rather impressive debt. The eldest son and heir turned his hand to trade, a field in which was unaccustomed. Even while I'd been staying in the capital, they'd been in quite the financial conundrum. Arno didn't speak on the issue, but they'd approached the Kirstens about a loan which, much to my surprise, was declined. According to the margrave, the collapse of the Dunst family was simply a matter of time.

"They approached me about a loan also, but the amount was so exorbitant that I had no choice but to turn them down."

I'd been unable to hide my surprise. The Dunst family had likely reached out on account of the relationship they'd made through my marriage. I suddenly felt like disappearing from view, but the margrave told me not to worry.

"Had their investment not been in an imperial trading company, I might have been able to help them in some way. I think it likely that the Kirsten family didn't get involved for the very same reasons."

"I...see. I have a cousin among the Dunsts who was awfully good to me."

"This may sound harsh, but should they contact you it would be wise not to get involved. Be sure to talk with Whateley or me before you do anything."

It was just like the margrave to research all the particulars. His understanding was that the Dunsts were on a fast sinking ship—one constructed from mud, to boot—and that reaching a hand out to help would only result in getting pulled into the sea. And while there was no love lost between myself and the Dunsts, I did worry about what would happen to my cousin, Marie.

Thinking about the situation left me in low spirits, and so I left my room in hopes of brightening them. I bid good day to the servants I passed and headed for town. There was nothing in Conrad as showy or ostentatious as the capital, but the town was a lively place abundant with nature. The citizens adored their margrave, and thanks to the local guard, people were always out and about.

By the grassy roadside, paved with old stones, people had put out cloth and placed vegetables on them to sell. Stalls were also stocked with freshly dressed meat. There was a single canal that ran through both the town and Conrad manor, and at the far end of it housewives gathered to chat over their washing. I walked by an old woman weaving with straw, who looked up at me with a

smile.

“Why, hello there, my lady,” she said. “Out for a walk today, are we?”

“Hello. I’m looking for Sven. Have you seen him?”

“He’ll be with the hunter, Danny. Nico is with him.”

“Thank you.”

“The sun has a bite to it today. You’ll want to wear a hat.”

As I got more accustomed to life here, more and more locals began to talk with me. At first, they were rather apprehensive about it, but it got better because Doctor Emma and Sven took me around the place. You might be thinking that this all happened much too quickly, being that, in terms of appearances, I was a young girl who had seemingly jumped in to take Emma’s position away from her and lord it over the people as the margrave’s legal wife.

However, there’s a reason things changed, and in a word it was Nico.

After everything that happened with us at the guardhouse, it was only natural that Nico was going to talk to her family about it. She told them all tearfully of how I had come to help and done my best, and all of a sudden I was receiving thanks from her parents, her grandparents, and many others too. News spread far and wide. Let it be known that the rumor network in country towns is nothing to take lightly.

For some reason, some even said that I punished the perpetrators, but there was no stopping the stories when they escalated. I could barely stand it, but the margrave told me that it was all a part of becoming a part of the local tapestry of the place, and so here we were.

And of course, everyone also knew that I was the younger sister of the king’s concubine.

“I wonder if I can make it to the hunter’s lodge in time for the deer dressing. I hope they’ll let me do it myself.”

Sven was almost ready to start school in the capital, though it had been postponed a touch later than scheduled. Arno had purchased a house for personal use, and it was decided that Sven would live there during his time at

school. At present, however, he was making the most of his remaining time in Conrad, and crafting some fond memories to boot. Nobody was angry about him running around and having a good time.

I didn't want to bother Sven and Nico and the fun they were having, but Doctor Emma recommended that I meet and talk to the locals, and more importantly I was very intrigued and interested in the act of deer dressing.

The Conrad domain's town was at the top of a calm mountain range and surrounded by rugged walls, at the entrance of which was an equally rugged and simple set of steel gates.

"You'll probably come home with Master Sven later anyway," said the guard at the gates, "but do tell him not to stay outside too late."

"Okay!"

Past the gates were vast grassy plains that took your breath away. In the past, leaving the town gates had been dangerous for me because of roaming bandits, but this was not a problem in Conrad. There was a forest on the other side, but here there was only grass. Any bandit would be spotted from miles away, and the guard would quickly come running to take care of them.

But I wasn't interested in the plains, I was headed around the walls to the forest. Soon, it was trees as far as I could see. Past them was the nation of Latoria. Keeping a watch on the forest area here was the margrave's duty. And while one wrong step could leave you lost in a sea of trees, for the citizens here the place was a treasure trove of foodstuffs. Case in point, when I reached my destination there were already a number of deer and pheasants hanging upside down, and a couple of familiar faces peeking over the shoulder of a hunter at work.

Nico was the first to notice me, then Sven. Both of them waved and called me over. As my hair was carried on a passing gust of wind, I couldn't help but smile at the sight of their grinning faces under the sun; the scenery, the weather, all of it was a portrait of everyday life here in Conrad. I ran straight over to them, hungry for a lesson in how to tan leather. A few hours later, I was utterly exhausted.

"Dressing animals certainly takes endurance," I remarked. "I can barely feel

my arms anymore!”

“Well, of course it’s tiring,” replied Nico. “Why else do you think the hunters are always complaining about their poor backs while they do it?”

I stretched my arms as I sat in a shallow tub of hot water. A proper bath was the best way to wash yourself clean of grime, but we didn’t live in a world where you could just turn a tap to access warm water. Here you had to have your water warmed and then poured into a tub. A full-blown bath was reserved for occasions when you’d been drenched in sweat. And while there was an actual spacious bathtub right next to me, I had opted for the smaller tub, as the amount of water necessary for each was completely different.

“A noblewoman who stinks of blood? Ridiculous! Into the bath with you, my lady!”

Nico had scolded me as such, then gotten some dried flowers from Doctor Emma. They emitted a delightful aroma as they floated up on the bathwater and helped my body to slowly relax.

“I want to get into the actual dressing of the animal next time. Do you think the hunters will mind?”

Nico was stunned at my words. I got the sense that while many a noble enjoyed the act of hunting, very few of them derived much pleasure from the dressing of their fallen prey.

“Huh...? But look at how much you dirtied your clothes from your mishap...” she uttered.

“I’m quite confident I’ll do better next time,” I said.

“Leave the dressing to the hunters, my lady!” said Nico. “You can live a fine life without ever having to do such a thing.”

“One never knows what might happen to them in life,” I replied. “There’s no harm in at least learning the ropes.”

Nico had taken care of me back when I’d been bedridden, and it was because of that experience that I was fine with her washing my hair now. She poured water over my head and then scrubbed my hair as if she were washing a cat.

“Well, Sven’s still here too, so if you say so then I’ll be right there with the both of you.”

“Then it’s decided. And don’t worry, I’ll have you spend most of your time with Sven anyway.”

After all, we wanted Sven to enjoy himself to the fullest before he departed for life in the capital.

“But isn’t it all a bit much for you, my lady?” asked Nico. “You’re already undertaking school studies and helping Doctor Emma with her work, aren’t you? I also heard that Margrave Conrad and Whateley are teaching you something or other too. And now you intend to add hunting skills to it all...?”

“Prepare to be even more shocked,” I stated, “for I have started horse riding lessons too!”

“But why?!”

Well, to learn and master a variety of skills, of course!

School studies and helping Doctor Emma were my priorities. The rest had come as a result of discussing things with the margrave and Whateley. Upon considering the future that I wanted—and my goal of eventually living independently—Doctor Emma had told me to help her with her work.

“It’s a good thing for a girl to learn some doctor’s skills,” she’d explained. “In the countryside, someone who knows their way around medicinal herbs is a valuable asset, and in the cities male doctors may ask you for help with cases where a woman’s advice is necessary.”

She spoke as if she had seen such things firsthand, which, in point of fact, she had. As a doctor in training, Emma had spent some time traveling across the lands with a professional.

The margrave, however, had wanted more from me than just medical skills.

“As I understand it, you left school before graduating,” he’d said. “I’ll see if there’s something we can do about that, but in the meantime, I’d like you to continue your studies. People are likely to treat you entirely differently based on whether you are a graduate or a dropout.”

In the days following this discussion, the margrave really had looked into things for me, and a letter arrived from my previous school. It stated that my graduation would be recognized as long as I passed an exam at which a proctor was present. I would have thought it was some kind of prank, had it not been for the fact it was signed by the principal.

All of this made me very curious as to the extent of the margrave's network, but the elderly man explained calmly that "old families are well connected."

As for everything outside of my studies and helping Doctor Emma, I had kick-started all of that myself. I wasn't content to simply live a pampered life while I remained in the care of the margrave. That said, on the face of it I was, as always, the Margravine of Conrad. Behind the scenes, however, I asked to be taught more about the family's accounting situation in case of emergencies. I also made sure to assert that I was not scheming anything, and I was happy to have someone watch over me whenever I was learning or handling such matters.

It goes without saying that the family accounts were of great importance. And though the margrave mulled over it for some time, in the end, he acquiesced. Partially because he had fallen ill not so long ago; in such emergency situations, Doctor Emma would be at something of a disadvantage due to her status as the margrave's common-law wife.

"It saddens me to say it, but my relatives can't be trusted," explained the margrave. "Whateley will teach you everything you need to know."

I had prepared myself for quite the struggle when it came to grasping the family's accounting matters, but it was all surprisingly simple. As a Japanese person in my previous life, I'd already developed skills and knowledge in this sphere. Whateley was shocked.

"I know you've already heard tales of the margrave's experiences during the war, so let's start by looking at the price of dispatching troops and construction related to flood prevention, as well as the cost of necessary supplies should we find ourselves under siege.

"What does a siege have to do with the accounts? My lady, the Conrad region becomes a stronghold in such circumstances. We have to keep it well stocked at

all times, and as such it is our job to manage the storehouses accordingly. Learning about the flow of money is a good opportunity to learn more about the merchants that travel between nations. Liz will help you to remember it all.”

Putting aside the fact that I was now dealing with matters of both war *and* accounting, there was a lot to remember. Liz, as it turned out, was Mrs. Henrik.

If you’re wondering about the horse riding, that was just a hobby. In my past life, I’d had nothing to do with horses. In this life, the ability to ride a horse simply struck me as cool, and despite it being something of a vague motivation, the margrave approved, commenting, “When you can ride a horse, you’re afforded the means of a fast getaway should you need to flee.”

I had sensed something similar to the margrave’s life perspective in Whateley too. Both of them essentially played life on a high difficulty setting; they viewed everything in terms of how it related to survival or death.

With my schedule thus arranged, the various people of the Conrad region taught me all the things I’d never even had a chance to learn when I lived in the capital.

And then one day, it happened.

I was struggling to sort through medicinal herbs at Doctor Emma’s workplace when her younger son, Wendel, came flying in.

“Karen, Mrs. Henrik is calling for you,” he said. “She said a package has arrived.”

Because Wendel looked similar to Sven, I had assumed that they were siblings. However, Wendel was neither the margrave nor Emma’s child. Misfortune had befallen one of Emma’s relatives, and so she had raised Wendel in their stead since he was a baby.

“You can’t mix that one with medicine,” said Wendel, peeking over my shoulder before plucking the flower in my hand. “You’ll froth at the mouth and faint.”

“Yes, sir...” I replied.

I still struggled to tell herbs apart from one another, which in effect made the

almost eleven-year-old Wendel another of my teachers. With Sven away at school by this time, Wendel and I talked more frequently, and because he was the amiable sort, it hadn't taken long for us to become friends.

When I returned to the manor, I was led to the living room doors. Mrs. Henrik looked the way she always did, but Nico and the younger servants all had a certain excitement glittering in their eyes.

"A gift has been delivered for you, my lady," said Nico.

"A gift?"

At first, I had to think, who did I know that might send me a gift? And then it hit me: I had older siblings.

When the doors to the living room were opened, I could only gasp. The table in the center of the room was piled with fabrics in a whole range of different colors.

"Huh? What is all of this?" I asked.

"It's from your elder brother and sister," said Mrs. Henrik. "It arrived via caravan earlier. The jewelry and accessories are in the smaller boxes. This appears to be everything, but do make sure."

So saying, Mrs. Henrik passed me a list detailing everything that my siblings had sent, along with a letter from Arno. In short, the letter said that while I had married into another family and left the Kirstens, they had sent me all of this in consideration of the fact that I was still lacking in personal wealth. Basically, he was saying, *"If you need more, just say the word!"*

"There's quite a selection of ordinary cotton fabric," said Mrs. Henrik, taking some in her hand and looking it over carefully, "but there's also silk, and...more. This here is, without a doubt, real velvet, and there appears to be some satin also. There's also a vast amount of gold and silver thread, allowing you a host of different tailoring options."

As for the jewelry and accessories, there was a wide enough selection to cover me from head to toe. While there were the gaudy and ostentatious gemstones set in gold that my sister preferred, there was also a selection of more refined, delicate pieces too.

Taken as a whole, it was a spectacular gift. I felt somewhat blinded by the sight of it all, but Mrs. Henrik wasn't done.

"You also received a package from someone else, and the lord took the liberty of having that placed in your room. Be sure to check on it yourself."

Someone else? Who?

I asked, but Mrs. Henrik wouldn't answer. Instead, she was more concerned with what we were going to do with this exorbitant array of fabrics and jewelry.

"The margrave feels it would be rude to your siblings to simply put them all away..." she said.

"But we can't just leave it all out here like this! We have to tidy it up and find a place for it all."

"If you'd like to put it on display, there is always the adjoining room."

"No, I'm not very interested in just gazing at the stuff. It'll only get dusty anyway. And wouldn't that just make for more cleaning work for you?"

"Understood. Then allow us to take care of it for you. But one thing first," said Mrs. Henrik, her expression suddenly deadly serious. "Take off your clothes."

"Why?"

Seriously, what?

I was suddenly aware of Nico standing beside me. She clutched my shoulders tight in hand, and I could feel the message through her fingertips: *No fleeing from this, my lady*. Mrs. Henrik, however, instead of scolding Nico for her behavior, nodded in agreement.

"Your siblings did not send you *just* this wonderful selection of fabrics and jewelry," she explained. "Knowing full well that you would simply pack it all away in a cupboard somewhere, they also sent a tailor."

"What?!" I cried.

"We servants are obliged to ensure that your brother and Lady Saburova are both appeased, and for that reason, you will need to become a doll for a short period of time."

Mrs. Henrik's gaze was intent. A moment later, a gaudily dressed tailor entered with seamstresses in tow. They looked more than ready to have their fun with me; that much was obvious in their full-faced smiles.

"Lady Saburova has requested that we make for her adorable younger sister a number of dresses in the most current styles," said the tailor. "We'll also make you a range of clothing for daily use, so please leave things in our trustworthy hands."

"Er, no, no. I quite appreciate the gesture, but...!"

I wasn't interested in tailor-made clothes, and I was quite fine with the ready-made garb I already owned. I also had a terribly horrible feeling when it came to Mrs. Henrik's use of the word *doll*. I wanted nothing more than to run, but the living room was filled only with those who'd stop me.

"My lady, it is my ardent desire to see you adorned in the beautiful fabrics and jewelry you have been sent," said Nico.

The young woman had been crestfallen since Sven's departure, but none of that loneliness could be seen in her now. If anything, she was having a ball! Behind me, I heard the door slam shut, and I knew then that it was all over, and I gave up.

I didn't want them to dress me up in lavish clothing. I told the tailor that I wanted something simple, but there were also reasons they couldn't do this or that, and they took my measurements and spent the next few hours working out which fabrics to use for what while they explained things. By the time I was finally allowed to return to my room, it was evening.

I considered simply lying in bed until dinner, then remembered that there was another package waiting for me on my desk. And when I saw the seal stamped upon the envelope—with the ostentatious animal design reserved only for esteemed families—I understood why it had been brought to my room.

In the package was a small box. When I opened the lid, I found the bracelet that Reinald had promised to get fixed for me. The letter said little, but it was simple enough to understand.

"Fully repaired and returned to you, as promised."

The script was very neat, and slanted slightly to the right. But that was not the only package on my desk. There was one more, a smaller box this time, and I was surprised to see who it was from.

“Nika...”

In the box was a fountain pen and ink. It was a simple, subtle design, wonderful to hold, and with a pattern carved upon the tip. I had gone looking for pens on a number of occasions but had never seen one quite like this. As did the bracelet, this too came with a letter.

“She didn’t need to do such a thing. I was thanking *her*,” I muttered.

When I’d sent Nika her jacket back to her, I’d also been sure to send a number of other items as thanks. I’d asked Elena about Nika’s preferences before I left Reinald’s villa, so I was fairly certain she would have liked the gifts.

Nika had a number of other women under her command, so I’d sent some cheap consumables that she could share with her soldiers, and some of the wine she apparently liked. But perhaps I’d put her in a spot; forced her to respond with yet another gift. I felt somewhat conflicted about it all, but my feelings were eclipsed by the joy I felt at receiving such a gift from such a dashing woman. I promised myself that I would treasure the pen and decided to write a letter of thanks. But when I took the ink in hand to try out my new pen, I remembered something.

What ended up happening with regard to my imperial trade rights, I wonder?

I didn’t actually know *how* they were going to send them to me, but I believed Reinald and Moritz when they said that they would arrange things for me. I knew that it was not an easy thing to prepare, and I was about ready to assume that they were still in the midst of preparations when my gaze fell upon the small box on my desk.

The velvet lining struck me as curious. Unlike the boxes I’d received from my sister, the lining in this one was removable. When I took it from the box, I found an envelope hidden in the space beneath it, decorated with gold foil and stamped with a family seal I did not recognize. I knew immediately that within it was a document of importance.

There were two documents, in fact. The first was proof of my honorary imperial citizenship, and notice that the empire was now bearing the responsibility of looking after my personal finances. The second document was a record of those finances.

I now had assets currently being held in the empire. I scanned the document to ascertain the amount that Moritz had prepared for me, but something was amiss. I closed my eyes for a moment, then looked again, but no matter how I chose to read the document, the numerical amount written upon it did not change.

“Five thousand gold coins...” I uttered.

It was so much more than I was expecting that I felt dizzy. I was an overnight member of the nouveau riche. It was terribly annoying, which admittedly was not at all the reaction that one would expect when they sent someone five thousand gold coins.

10: Bothers from Afar

The changing of seasons in Conrad was a truly breathtaking thing. The leaves in the forests turned to yellows, oranges, and reds, and the flowers delighted the eyes. As hints of winter showed, everyone began to talk about how cold it was going to get. It was among this beautiful scenery that I was hard at work removing a deer's entrails while I talked with the old hunter sitting on a nearby tree stump.

"The animal numbers are going to dip soon, so it's time to get into making the nonperishables. And I reckon you'll be fine, but all the same, if you see a bear, you *run*," he said.

"I've heard they're rather terrifying," I remarked.

"Yep. They're stuffing themselves for hibernation so they shouldn't be a problem, but a bear out of hibernation early is a scary thing. Last winter, two hunters were eaten."

"That *is* scary. I'm so sorry I can't be of more help..."

"It's not a job for a novice, and you're already doing us a service by helping with the dressing. With you here, our older guys can rest."

I'd been visiting the hunters with some regularity, and I was getting to be quite good at dressing hunted prey. When I started, naturally I'd been so bad that I'd been a nuisance, but I'd gotten good enough now that nobody needed to hold my hand through the process.

"To be honest, I never imagined you'd get so good at this, my lady," said the hunter. "You've got resolve, that's for sure."

"Well, it's certainly not easy work. The animals are heavy, and the smell of all that blood takes some getting used to."

"But even having said that, you're always working hard. And not just with the dressing either; you're even doing cleanup. Nothing for any of us to complain about."

The old hunter burst into laughter, then tossed another dried grape into his mouth.

“I’ll stick around if you want to hang and dry it,” he said. “How about it?”

“Yes, please. Doctor Emma is out, so my schedule is free. I’ve plenty of time.”

“I see. Then you can take some salted meat with you when you leave.”

“But what about your winter stockpile?”

“You gave us that ointment the other day, remember? Still haven’t properly thanked you for it.”

“But I’m just a trainee, and so the quality of it...”

“For us fellas here, if it works, it works. And it works!”

Since starting my studies under Doctor Emma, I’d gotten to the point where she sometimes asked me to make up simple ointments and the like. Though she had a friendly auntie side to her, when it came to work and matters of medicine she was incredibly strict. I was still rather useless when it came to telling the various herbs apart, so Wendel was often yelling at me for picking weeds and poisonous herbs.

As the deer was hung, my eyes met with the animal’s. I said a few words of thanks in my heart and took a deep breath. Dressing an animal was work that required a tremendous amount of strength. Cutting into the body always brought sweat to the brow, and stripping off the hide was slippery work because of the fat. Then there were the entrails, which had to be carefully taken out because they were used for sausage making.

Just as I was slicing apart the different cuts of meat, I heard a girl’s voice calling out in the distance.

“My lady!”

It was Nico, waving both of her arms to get my attention. It wasn’t uncommon for her to come calling for me like this, but the people walking behind were not Conrad locals. It was a man wearing finely tailored clothes, and I knew him as Arno’s foster brother and bodyguard.

“Achim? What is *he* doing here?” I muttered.

"That's how you're going to welcome him?" remarked the old hunter.

I remember the third member of their party too...

"Leave the rest with me," said the old hunter, lifting himself up and taking out his blade. "You can head on back to the manor."

"But I'm still not done..." I started.

"I see the way they're dressed. All fancy. They're from the capital, yeah? Which means they're guests of the margrave. Don't think I'll let you entertain your guests here."

Are they really all that fancy? I wondered. Achim was, to be sure, a little more dashing than I was accustomed to, but otherwise his usual self. I suppose that to the old hunter, he must have looked quite dressed up.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," I said. "I apologize. Next time, I promise I'll see it through to the end."

"Don't worry about it. You've done more than enough."

I took off the big, thick gloves I'd been using, and as I cleaned the blood and fat from the blade I'd been using, Nico arrived.

"My lady! Guests from the capital!" she announced.

"Yes, I realized that the moment I saw Achim," I said.

He looked shocked at the sight of me. I turned to the third person with them and nodded politely.

"Sir Sixtus, it has been a long time," I said. "I'm glad to see you looking well."

"Hello there, oh little friend of my comrade. You look in fine health."

Sixtus was the mage who worked under the command of Reinald. He was clad in a fur coat and, as always, carried with him a certain shady deviousness.

"Why would you be here with Achim?" I asked. "Dropping by for some sort of work?"

"I happened to meet with your brother during my travels," explained Sixtus, "and given how fortuitous the timing was, I joined them on their way here. Nothing more than a little fun, really. Not work related, so there's no need for

you to worry.”

I didn’t even know what Sixtus’s work was in the first place, so his comment did little to put me at ease. Still, Sixtus himself looked to be in high spirits.

“I realize my name is something of a tongue twister. Feel free to call me Six. It’s what everyone else calls me.”

“Oh. Sir...Six, then...”

“No, no. Just Six. I don’t like the ‘sir’ thing very much.”

He wanted us on a first-name basis, and I had no reason to deny him. When I called him simply “Six,” he nodded happily, which struck me as strange.

“Anyway, Achim,” I said. “What’s got you so quiet?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this before,” replied Achim. “At first, I didn’t even realize it was you...”

Nico nodded knowingly. I was dressed light, though it didn’t strike me as particularly odd. When I started helping with the hunters, my skirts were getting in the way of things. So I switched to a horse-riding outfit, but that wasn’t quite right either so I prepared some work clothes that I didn’t mind getting dirty. The quality wasn’t fantastic, but the outfit was durable and easy to move in. Above all else, as a former Japanese person, working in pants was just the most comfortable way to go about the work. Still, Achim took a glance around at the hunting lodge and the dressed deer, and he cringed.

“So you’ve been dressing animals, huh?” he said. “Looks like you’re pretty used to it now...”

“Lady Karen has been doing this for quite some time,” said Nico.

“None of that blood on you when you meet with the young master.”

“Oh, hush, of course I’ll get changed. I’m not going to bully someone who’s so weak to the sight of blood,” I said, pouting.

Arno quite literally went pale at the sight of blood.

In any case, given that we couldn’t just stand around at the hunting lodge all day, we did the rest of our catching up as we returned to Conrad Manor. At

first, I tried to engage Six in conversation, but he was more interested in simply observing the Conrad domain and didn't seem in the mood for talking. As such, I turned to Achim.

"Why did you come to Conrad anyway?" I asked. "I'm quite certain we didn't receive any word that you were coming."

"It all happened in quite a hurry. I apologize. We left the capital for some matters that needed attending to, but the timing turned out inconvenient for the other party. Given that we happened to be nearby, the young master decided to pay you a visit."

"Matters that required Arno's attention *away* from the capital. That's rather uncommon."

"We received a new domain, and went to inspect it."

While it was good for one's assets to increase, it also meant extra management. In the case of territory, this made things especially hard on the Kirstens, who were based in the capital. I wondered if they had enough people to take care of it all.

"You just keep getting busier and busier. Do you ever get a day to rest?"

"Nope. The young master kept saying he wanted to come to Conrad but it just kept getting put off."

I did recall Arno saying something to the extent of wanting to make the margrave's acquaintance. My brother had also written in our letters that he was in dire need of a little rest.

"Well, now that he's come to the quiet of the countryside, I do hope he can relax."

"That's actually why I recommended that we stop by. I'll need your help actually getting that rest to happen, though."

So coming here was Achim's idea. A scheme of sorts. Still, I agreed that Arno needed to rest, and if Achim had gone to such an extent, then it was likely that Arno was, in fact, incredibly exhausted. That much was evident the moment I saw my brother for myself. After I'd gotten changed and gone to see him, I

found him on a sofa looking much thinner than when we'd last met.

"How did you lose so much weight?!" I cried.

There was still life in his eyes, which was a relief, but he was so skinny. Just how many kilograms had he shed?

"I'm glad to see you looking well, Karen," he replied.

"Don't try to act all casual with me; look at how gaunt you are!"

I ran over and touched his face with my hands, taking in the horrifying new contours.

"Come now," he said, taking a warning tone but doing nothing to stop me. "You're the wife of the margrave now, so show a little more decorum, please."

His skin was dull, his lips were parched, and he was so deathly pale!

"But this is just awful!" I cried. "How haven't you fainted yet? If you did that you'd at least be able to rest some, wouldn't you?"

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

"Karen, your brother has his duties to see to," said the margrave.

"What good are his duties if he isn't healthy enough to see to them?" I replied. "He wasn't this skinny when we last met."

The margrave had been talking to Arno while I made my way over from the hunting lodge. Our relationship had concreted itself as one of teacher and student, perhaps because of all the discussions we'd been having about the domain, the war, and the margrave's past experiences. At present, the margrave looked a little troubled by my sullen attitude.

"Sir Arno," he said. "I know you said that you have to be off again rather quickly, but given what Karen here has said, perhaps you would consider taking a chance to rest? I understand how busy you must be, but you won't see to any work at all if your body gives up on you."

"Thank you, but..."

"More importantly, upon your return you will be succeeding your father as the lord of the family, yes?" continued the margrave. "Pardon me for being so

blunt, but you'll only cause everyone worry if you go home looking so pale."

It was times like these that the words of the elderly held the most power. Gravity hadn't just increased the margrave's wrinkles, it had also instilled itself in his words.

"You have come all this way to our domain," he said, "and it would be undignified of me to send a young person home in such a state. Though the countryside has little to offer but food and wine, the quiet of the place is indeed perfect for resting one's body."

The margrave then glanced at Whateley, who read his master's eyes and nodded.

"We have readied rooms on the second floor for the guests," he said. "Should you require anything more, please don't hesitate to call upon the staff."

"Oh, how wonderful," remarked Sixtus with a broad grin. "After sleeping on hard floors all this time, I'm about ready to snuggle up in a soft blanket and sleep until noon."

It was my understanding that the words "restraint" and "modesty" did not exist in the mage's vocabulary.

Aww, but sometimes I want to be allowed to sleep until noon too...

"My apologies, Margrave," said Arno. "We arrived without invitation or word and you have offered us such hospitality."

"Think nothing of it. Regardless of the particular circumstances that brought us together, the relationship between our houses is now a close one."

That the margrave avoided the use of the words "family" and "relatives" was a mark of his kindness. In terms of social appearances, Arno was the margrave's younger brother-in-law, but very few knew that the margrave and I were not an actual couple. Nico had been good to me, and I now considered it safe to tell her the truth, but for whatever reason the chance to do so just hadn't come up yet.

Arno smiled wryly, catching the margrave's drift, and accepted the offer of the room.

“Karen, I know it’s been some time,” said the margrave, “so make sure to enjoy your time with your brother. If you have to reorganize any of your schedule for today, do not hesitate.”

“You are too kind,” I replied. “Very well, leave the care of my brother and his party to me.”

“Thank you. I still have some work to do, so let’s talk later, when everything is done and we’re all rested.”

The margrave left, and so I took it upon myself to drag Arno into bed.

“This way, brother,” I said. “Achim, I noticed you wanted to say something earlier. What was it?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. Don’t mind me.”

I wasn’t so sure. Not with that curious look in his eyes. It wasn’t until Achim was away, when we arrived at Arno’s room, that my brother told me what was on his bodyguard’s mind.

“He’s just a bit conflicted by the sight of you and the margrave getting along so well.”

“I’m happy he cares, but wouldn’t it be worse if we *didn’t* get along?”

“To be completely honest, I’m a little conflicted by it too, but I’m happy as long as you’re happy. More importantly, what a wonderfully well-kept room.”

“The people of Conrad are very hard workers, brother. But please, you don’t have to worry about me so much.”

“You’re only seventeen, Karen. Of course I’m going to worry. Which reminds me, happy birthday. I’m sorry we couldn’t celebrate it.”

“You sent me a letter and a gem. That was more than enough.”

Though he looked no different in terms of appearances, I couldn’t help feeling that Arno looked more energetic.

“You look so much more vibrant here than you were in the capital,” remarked Arno.

A relieved smile rose to his lips as he closed his eyes. With just his little sister

for company, he finally looked ready to let himself relax. Arno had his secretary with him on this trip, but I would make sure that no work was brought his way.

“Brother, the margrave mentioned you succeeding as head of the family. Is it official?”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. Yes, father has officially begun talks of stepping down.”

“He’s retiring, then? No more work?”

“Not exactly. He’ll take up a position as an aide.”

Since becoming more acquainted with the Rodenwald family, Arno had been meeting much more frequently with the nation’s most distinguished. Now his workload would only increase due to his position as head of the family. Father would work behind the scenes to help lessen that load.

“Preparations are currently underway,” said Arno, “and there will be a public announcement. If at all possible, I’d like you to return to the capital for it.”

“Well, of course, I’d be happy to, but...with the margrave, you mean?”

“We’ll invite him, of course. Oh, and another thing: the king is holding an evening ball the day after, and I’d like you to attend.”

“A ball, you say? I think I might pass...”

“With everything that’s happened, you’ve never had the chance to attend such an event. And now that you’re married you should attend at least one to get a feel for them. It’s not going to be a major event, anyway.”

Oh, how I wish I had the luxury of only attending the daytime events...

I was going to make a fuss about things and complain, but it was incredibly difficult to refuse my brother when he looked so utterly *exhausted*. And putting aside the ball for the time being, the succession ceremony was something I knew I had to be present for.

“Under ordinary circumstances I’d want to shower you with congratulations,” I said, “but why did you have to come in such a state, Arno?”

But my words fell on deaf ears. Arno had arrived here looking as though he

were afflicted with an illness of some kind, and within seconds of saying his piece, he was asleep. I would have liked to move him to a proper bed, but now that he was finally slumbering I didn't want to wake him. So I covered him with a blanket to ensure he wouldn't catch a cold and left quietly. Achim was on standby in the corridor, but I thought it fine to leave Arno to rest.

"Arno is asleep," I informed Achim. "Please, don't wake him. Have you been getting enough rest, Achim?"

"I'm not kept as busy as the young master," he replied. "I make sure to rest when I'm given the opportunity."

"I wonder how true that is... In any case, what of Six?"

"I think you can leave him to his own devices. We ended up traveling together by coincidence, and he's about as free a spirit as they come."

I didn't like the idea of speaking about matters right in front of Arno's door, so I invited Achim to tea in my own room, but he looked reluctant.

"There's nobody in the manor who will try to bring harm to Arno," I implored.

"I know *that*, it's just that I'm never *not* working."

He didn't want to be too far from Arno. It was his personality, and trying to force him wouldn't do me any good, so we simply shifted a little farther from the door.

"I heard that you met with Six by coincidence, but where did you meet?"

"On the road. We were in the carriage when we heard a commotion. We poked out our heads to see what was going on and there he was, waving his hands. It took me a little while to recognize him."

"And you simply let him on board?"

"Well, he's under the care of the Rodenwalds, and an associate no less. And besides, I'm fairly certain he called out to us because he intended to hitch a ride all along."

Six had slipped into the carriage before anyone could utter so much as a polite refusal. He had also somehow happened to know exactly where they were going. Achim seemed almost scared to be talking about it.

“He’s a mage, right? He didn’t have a horse with him, and no guards either. He was just walking all on his own.”

“He was alone?!”

“Indeed, he was. Apparently he’s circling the border from east to west.”

“East? But Conrad is in the opposite direction. You’re sure he came from the empire?”

“Wherever it was, it’s not safe, that’s for sure. He’s fearless, I suppose. Mages are mysterious types,” muttered Achim.

Clearly he hadn’t been able to get a good read on Six or his character. Achim crossed his arms and looked somewhat gloomy as he went on.

“In any case, you’ll be coming back for the young master’s ceremony, won’t you?”

“Yes, and the margrave too, I suspect. That’s an event I simply can’t ignore.”

“Wonderful news. But, look, I don’t want to poke my nose into your affairs, but I think it’s best you keep your distance from the Rodenwald boy.”

Achim scratched his head. It wasn’t an easy thing for him to say, and yet he wouldn’t give me a reason when I pushed him. It was strange to see Achim looking at a loss like this.

“But I don’t understand,” I said. “Instead of some ominous warning, why not simply tell me things straight?”

“Because it’s the last thing I want to do. I don’t want to have to say anything more. It makes me sick.”

It wasn’t like Achim to give such a blunt and steadfast refusal. I was stunned because this was so different than what I was used to, though there was more to it that Achim wasn’t letting me in on. In any case, he sighed and changed the topic.

“About your friend,” he said.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I said. “Don’t try to just shrug things off.”

“I’m not telling you, no matter what you say. Or what? Do you not need

information on Ern anymore?”

“I do...” I muttered.

I’d been unable to grasp a hold of anything regarding Ern, let alone her family. And it wasn’t like I could just go searching for her myself. Thinking about it depressed me.

“It sounds like you’ve found something,” I said.

“I don’t know if it’s much to go on. I heard that somebody saw Ern’s parents,” replied Achim. “However, the report is unconfirmed. A merchant who visits the Kirstens happened to hear about them from a couple who run a store in Falkrum. That they’d been spotted.”

“So no information on Ern herself, then?”

“Just her parents, who apparently were seen at the gates into the empire, at the border.”

The empire. Again with the empire.

It was a nation that I was now much more aware of since meeting Reinald. But what could Ern’s parents have been doing there?

“This is going back a while, and I still haven’t talked to either the merchant or the couple myself. No idea where they went from the gates, and if they happened to go through them, then they’re impossible to track.”

“But Ern’s parents don’t have any connections in the empire, I’m sure of it. Ern never said anything of that nature.”

“And they *don’t* have any. Not even any of their relatives have a connection either.”

That was all the information Achim had, and yet all the same it bothered me. Like me, Ern had been reborn here. Her past circumstances had led her to treasure the parents she had now, and so I did not believe that she would abandon them under any circumstances. Achim promised me that he would continue investigating, but if they were no longer in Falkrum then the information would likely be quite old.

“You were really close, weren’t you?” said Achim.

“She’s my closest friend,” I replied.

This was a different world, and a different nation with a different culture. Talk of being reborn in other worlds was something I could only ever talk to Ern about; anybody else would have questioned my sanity. And for Ern, I, too, was the only person she could open up to about everything. Or at least, that’s what I had thought.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was lost in my own thoughts for a moment. Just do the best you can; I won’t ask for anything more.”

“If it’s within my power, I’ll find out for you. But just one thing; you’ve gone back to apologizing all the time. You really should fix that; people will think you’re weird.”

“Oh, right. I’ll be more careful.”

As I was saying, different worlds. I was no longer in Japan, and apologizing excessively was considered a strange habit here. I’d done my best to be mindful of the ingrained habits I brought to this life as a Japanese person, but it wasn’t easy. In my defense, I’d at least brought the frequency of those apologies down considerably.

I had wanted to speak more with Achim, but Mrs. Henrik called, so we brought our discussion to a close. Nico quickly took my place, and she blasted Achim with questions. She was so curious about how Sven was doing that she was red in the face.

“My lady,” said Mrs. Henrik. “I’d like to ask about Master Kirsten.”

It turned out she wanted to confirm his food preferences, and she had me take a look at the day’s menu.

“He doesn’t have any particular dislikes, so this seems fine,” I said, “but given his condition, he might not be able to eat a lot. I think it may be best to avoid anything that is too oily.”

“Whateley said the same thing. He said that the flavors are quite rich so we should use salt in moderation...”

One thing I realized upon my arrival at Conrad was that everyone was always

working so hard that their bodies were constantly lacking in salt. For that reason, their meals were, perhaps inevitably, heavily seasoned.

“By the way, Mrs. Henrik, about my going to the capital to celebrate my brother’s succession...”

“The margrave has informed me,” she replied, “and of course he will be joining you.”

“Er, not that...” I said. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

It seemed that Mrs. Henrik did not understand what I was getting at. She looked so perplexed that I gritted my teeth and just came out with it.

“I mean Doctor Emma,” I said. “I know that I’m the margravine in an official capacity, but won’t it hurt her feelings for me to be out with him at public events and parties and the like?”

Nobody seemed to mind any of it, which to me was strange beyond belief, and Mrs. Henrik remained entirely unfazed.

“Emma won’t mind at all,” said Mrs. Henrik, without a trace of doubt in her voice. “And I’m sure that if you tell her she’ll happily see the two of you off with a smile.”

Doctor Emma had been nothing but good to me since my arrival, but this side of her was truly near impossible for me to understand. Was the connection between man and wife not as deep as I thought? Mrs. Henrik brought a hand to her mouth at the sight of my puzzled features, and after some worrying over the matter, she spoke again.

“If the margrave were to have you attend those events on your own, Emma would scold him for it. I’ve no doubt we’d hear her through the walls telling him that he’s irresponsible for taking on a wife and not seeing his official responsibilities through.”

“I’m glad for how much she cares. It’s because Doctor Emma has been so kind that I can live here as comfortably as I do.”

I felt like I was here as the margrave’s official wife because I had taken advantage of her generosity. And to hear that she was still so kind was

something I felt awful for and worried about.

“Do I simply not understand the way things work?” I asked. “Is the relationship between the margrave and Doctor Emma just another ordinary relationship in these parts?”

As far as I knew, seeing the man you loved with another woman was not a pleasing sight, even if their being together was a farce. A second wife was only officially allowed when a man’s affluence was recognized, but that wasn’t to say that the women themselves always agreed to such arrangements. I felt that Doctor Emma was in a similar situation. When I asked Mrs. Henrik as much, she was quick to reply.

“Oh, no. No, my lady. An arrangement such as this one would have been impossible in any ordinary relationship. I’ve given you completely the wrong idea, haven’t I?”

“Aha, so theirs *isn’t* an ordinary relationship, then?”

“It is not the word I would use to describe it, no,” Mrs. Henrik declared.

She clearly had some other thoughts on the matter, as her face clouded somewhat as she went on.

“While I’m not at liberty to speak in great detail on the topic, Emma herself told the margrave that while she loves him, she did not want to become his wife in an official capacity.”

“Yes, I remember,” I said. “She said something to the extent that the feelings in their hearts were enough. But her decision didn’t seem to be one concerned with matters of rank and social standing.”

“Exactly that. You see, the margrave himself approached Emma with the idea of making her his official wife. She refused him, but it was not because she was worried about the position she would be taking on.”

So he proposed to her.

“Some time ago,” continued Mrs. Henrik, “the margrave lost his wife and child. For Emma, the problem was, it seemed, the fact that she had been an acquaintance of the margrave’s former wife. In any case, she had no intention

of taking the official position, no matter what the margrave said.”

“And yet, the margrave recognizes Sven as his heir, yes?”

“Emma didn’t like that idea very much either, but the margrave talked her around and in the end she agreed to it.”

There was even more drama wrapped up in their relationship than I could have possibly imagined.

“It is true, however,” said Mrs. Henrik, “that Emma worried about her position leaving her unable to support the margrave in his duties. So to be honest, I think your decision to become the margrave’s wife—and I realize how strange this will sound—is actually something Emma is *grateful* for.”

“So she’s not jealous?”

“I’m sure she’ll see the event more like a grandfather attending a child’s party,” replied Mrs. Henrik.

“Which means...it’s okay.”

“Of that I am certain,” she said confidently.

Putting aside all the drama of the past, if Mrs. Henrik could speak so confidently on the matter, then I suspected I really didn’t have to worry about such social events at all. The real worry, I suppose, was that I had put myself between the two of them and, all the same, they had accepted me.

So, Mrs. Henrik and I finished our arrangements, Achim was provided with refreshments, and the sun made its descent as dinner was prepared. Arno looked to be in much better spirits after his nap, and he had nothing but praise for the stewed thigh meat he was served. Six also attended dinner and, as he was a mage, could bring to the table unique conversation topics all of his own. Doctor Emma didn’t have the official authority to join dinner with Arno in attendance, and while this bothered me somewhat, I was not so foolish as to let it show.

“The general public fears magic as mysterious and unknowable,” said Six, “but in reality, it is not all that frightening at all. For us who use it, it is simply a means for talking to those who are a great distance away. Magic is a tool

through which life is made more convenient.”

“So you say, but for those of us without it, magic is nonetheless difficult to comprehend,” said Arno. “Wouldn’t you say so, Karen?”

“I suppose so, yes,” I said, perfunctorily.

According to Six, if magic were to spread and be understood more widely, visiting neighboring countries would take little more than a single leap. His wild statements were enough to draw interest from both my brother and the margrave.

“I must say,” said the margrave, “being able to communicate instantaneously over long distances would be incredibly helpful. It’s like something out of a dream.”

Yes, or a smartphone.

It was strange for me, to be in mind of such knowledge. Not that I *wanted* to act like a know-it-all, but I didn’t want to act completely blown away by Six’s tales either. So I simply smiled politely as I ate.

Still, I can’t help feeling a bit...

Conflicted was the word, I think. I felt conflicted about having knowledge of a world in which science and technology had developed to such an advanced degree. But that was just me. Everyone else seemed to enjoy the discussion, and they all indulged in some wine after dinner too. I’d been worried as to how the margrave and Arno would get along, but everything seemed just fine.

By this time in my life, I was entirely used to living without a computer, and I enjoyed my time on my own. My free time was largely spent reading the books the margrave loaned me, and so that’s what I did as I lay in bed after dinner. At some point I must have fallen asleep, because I woke to extinguished candles and moonlight through the open window. I’d forgotten to close the curtains.

It was a night of full moons. I opened the window and looked up at the glimmering stars, spread across a blanket of dark blue. All I could do was chuckle wryly at the sight before my eyes, for you see, there were *two* moons floating in the night sky. One was a gentle milky white, the other emitting an ominous red light.

These were among the things that marked this world as different from the last. Though the two moons would sometimes cover one another depending on the time of year, they were a unique feature of the night sky here. I had long since grown used to them, but I did sometimes find myself wondering what the story was with gravity here.

I went out onto the terrace and noticed someone upon looking down. I could have just left them to their own business, it being so late in the evening, but my curiosity was piqued. I left my room, went outside, and headed for the person I had seen. For whatever strange reason, I encountered none of the guards who should have been on watch. Eventually, I found who I was looking for in the back garden, happily chatting away by the side of the manor well.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Six, “things got complicated in Conrad. Oh, but surely you misunderstand me; it was my intent to return to you as soon as I was able. You of all people know how diligent and hardworking I am.”

He was entirely alone, talking to the air as he would have talked to an old friend. At a glance, you would have assumed that he had a few screws loose. When our eyes met, however, he showed not even a hint of surprise. He simply smiled and went on with his conversation.

“As much as I’d love to continue with this report, it would appear your little friend has arrived. It’s fine, don’t worry. I don’t take any joy in bullying the weak, so no, I won’t be doing any of that. Yes, so long.”

Was he aware that these mysterious circumstances and his unreserved high spirits made him look completely insane?

Anyone in their right mind would have fled the very moment they saw him. So why didn’t I run, I hear you ask. Well, it was because I had a feeling I knew who Six had been talking to...

“Come on over,” said Six. “Don’t worry, I won’t do anything funny.”

The very words you’d expect from someone you can’t trust.

Six took a seat on the edge of the well and held his left hand out toward me. Under the bright light of the moon, his every gesture looked put-on, like something out of a stage play. His gaze was brimming with confidence. There

was something daring in it. Given that I had questions of my own, I saw no harm in accepting his offer. Still, I kept my distance; I wanted to talk, yes, but I also wanted a head start if I had to flee for any reason.

“What’s a fair maiden like yourself doing out at such a late hour?” Six asked.

“I noticed a guest who looked to be heading out somewhere,” I replied. “I couldn’t help feeling curious. What were *you* doing, Six?”

“I was just out on a stroll. I apologize if it happened to look suspicious, or if my actions appeared questionable, but you shouldn’t be chasing after such things so late in the evening.”

“You didn’t *happen* to look suspicious,” I said. “You were the very definition of it.”

“Your honesty is one of your strong points, and yet it still hurts to be told as much so bluntly. Even if you are right.”

So he agrees, then.

However hurtful he might have *said* my comments were, Six never lost his mischievous grin nor his carefree attitude. The truth of the matter was, I was just an ordinary young girl, and he was a mage; he was the one in the position of power.

“So you admit to looking suspicious?” I asked.

“I may be a guest at the manor, but I left my room in the middle of the night to talk to thin air; what else could it have looked like? I’m not very good at hiding things.”

I sighed.

“And yet, you don’t look particularly bothered either. What in the world were you doing out here? It didn’t look to me like you simply wanted to enjoy the evening breeze.”

“I’m quite certain you already know,” said Six, chuckling. “I was talking.”

“To whom?”

Six raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. His expression was one of someone

playing the fool.

“Oh? *That’s* what you’d choose to ask? Who?”

“*You’re* the one who said you were talking,” I retorted.

“True enough. But let me put it another way: given the circumstances we find ourselves in, I daresay there are not many whose first question would be ‘who.’”

Nope, don’t know what you’re talking about, and I refuse to give you the reaction you are hoping for with that prodding comment of yours.

I didn’t trust Six, and so I ignored his jabs and glared at him.

“You were talking to Sir Reinald?” I asked.

“Oh. You got it.”

Don’t “oh” me. You’re one of his associates. Anybody could have guessed.

Six himself had also uttered the words “your little friend,” which I hadn’t heard since I stayed at Reinald’s villa.

“Perhaps you don’t trust me? Perhaps you think that I am scheming something?” Six asked.

“I can tell you my distrust has nothing to do with *who* you were talking to. You could have *easily* had your conversation in your room, and yet you left it and went outside, then openly admitted to it looking suspicious. Of course, I’m going to ask what you were doing.”

“My young maiden. If you thought I was suspicious, you *never* should have come here alone.”

“Your advice is noted, but it isn’t particularly convincing coming from the person doing the evening wandering.”

“You’re absolutely right, and yet you are a person full of curiosity. Oh, uh... What’s the term for this again? Curiosity... Wait, I know this... Yes. Curiosity killed the cat. I don’t suppose you know what that means, do you?”

His question did not appear to be one of any deep meaning, but I froze at the sound of it. I did not know how to respond. Which was only natural. After all,

the proverb that Six had just uttered did not exist in this world. Six saw my confusion and assumed I did not understand the proverb. He was like a little boy who had just put to use something he had only just learned.

“Ah, so this is a situation in which this term would be appropriate,” he remarked. “A new friend of mine recently used it, you see. It means that when one is too curious, it can lead to their downfall. I think it’s perfect for the situation you’ve put yourself in.”

“Oh...”

New friend?

What did *that* mean? I combed my memory, searching for whether or not I’d ever discussed proverbs with the person I was currently looking for. No memories came to me in the moment, and I had to hold back the urge to grip Six by the collar and scream my question at him.

“Such a strange saying,” I said. “I’m not sure why a cat is involved, but it certainly is an apt descriptor.”

“It’s because animals have sharper instincts than people,” Six said. “Apparently, it arose from the cautious animals we keep by our sides; the idea that even a cat will destroy itself if it indulges too much in its curiosity.”

“You certainly have a most interesting friend.”

“Why, thank you. They certainly are most pleasant. That said, they despise me for some reason. It’s tragic.”

Six jokingly shed a few mock tears, but I was now struggling to keep my calm. I wanted to ask him outright: is your friend Ernesta? It was all because Achim had told me that rumor about her family at the empire’s border. Their disappearance was anything but ordinary; it had me on edge.

“Six, I heard that you traveled here to the Conrad region from the other side of the nation.”

“That’s right. Did you hear that from your brother’s bodyguard?” He sighed. It seemed this was not a topic he wanted to discuss.

“Your work has you assigned to a set location,” I said, “so it strikes me as

strange that you were traveling on your own. Was it something like traversing around the entire country?"

"It wasn't something *like* it, it was *exactly* what I was doing. I took my time; I was thorough."

"A relaxed pace, then. I've never had the opportunity to do such a thing myself. How long does it take?"

"About a month, though like I said, I wasn't in any particular hurry."

"A relaxed journey from the edge of the empire to the Conrad region?"

It was something of a probing question, and the moment I asked it, the air around Six appeared to shift; his playfulness was replaced with a gaze that wanted to better read my intent. It was like a part of his humanity had slipped away, and I wondered if this was the same person I'd been talking to until now. His sudden change was almost overwhelming, but I was not about to stop yet.

"What reason did you have to be at the edge of the empire, opposite Conrad?" I asked.

"I would cease that line of questioning if I were you," replied Six. "I understand that you are friends with Reinald, and I know that Elena, too, has taken a liking to you. At your age, asking unnecessary questions will only result in anguish."

"You don't really expect me to just fold, do you? Were you talking to Reinald about the Conrad region?"

"I was. What of it?"

Until now, Six had been open, but he was clearly more cautious now.

"My travels were part of my work, as a Falkrum citizen, to better understand domestic affairs," said Six. "Nothing more, nothing less. Surely, you don't suspect Reinald of anything nefarious, do you?"

"Of course I don't—" I started, then stopped myself. "Putting Sir Reinald aside for the moment, as one of Conrad's people I... Ugh, fine. Tell me, who *wouldn't* be wary to learn that a person of imperial birth has been touring their homeland?!"

"I understand how you feel, and it was for that reason that I was traveling on my own."

"Then look at things through my eyes. I know where you come from. I can't help but be suspicious."

"And then there were your injuries too."

"You know what I'm trying to say, and yet still you dodge the point!"

If there'd never been any mention of curious cats, then I never would have lost myself to a stray worrying thought like this! We wouldn't even be having this roundabout conversation! And yes, I know it's my fault for having those thoughts in the first place!

I had managed to learn how long it took to travel from the empire, and if that was where Six had come from, it at least lined up with what Achim had told me before. That meant that it was possible that Six knew Ern's parents.

"Six, I want to ask you something," I said.

"Fine, fine."

"Just one 'fine' is enough, thank you. Now, bringing this up isn't easy for me...and yet! When I broach the topic you reply with that scheming, mocking grin of yours! Infuriating!"

"Nika and Elena often say the same thing. And to think I'm always so earnest."

Now I could at least understand why it was that Elena had looked upon Six with such a cold gaze. It wasn't how he spoke, but rather his face, and the grin upon it which seemed to know everything that was coming ahead of time.

"Do you know a girl by the name of Ernesta?" I asked. "She's the same age as me."

"No. Who is she?"

He could have shown a moment of hesitation, but in answering immediately he gave me nothing to work with. If he'd never mentioned that damned proverb, then I could have simply given up and assumed that he was talking about someone else.

“You’re *sure*? You don’t know anyone by that name? Wears her hair in pigtails? Strong-minded type?”

“Here’s what *I* want to know,” replied Six. “On what grounds are you even asking me these questions? Why do you think I’d know this girl?”

Should I bring up the proverb?

I could always shrug him off if he tried to push me on it, and I didn’t want to lose a clue to Ern’s whereabouts if I could help it. A strong gust of wind reminded me suddenly of how cold it was, and I made up my mind to speak. But it was then that I heard voices behind me.

“Slow down a bit. There’s no need to walk so fast.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m *cold*. The sooner we get back, the sooner we can sleep.”

It was two of the manor guards, walking this way with torches in hand. Their eyes swept over the well, and...looked right at me. I was about to call out and tell them that we weren’t a threat, but a cold hand slipped around from behind me to cover my mouth. It was Six’s. I was just about to instinctively break free when Six spoke.

“Don’t speak a word,” he whispered. “They can’t see us.”

The guards soon proved that he was telling the truth. Though I thought the guards had looked *at* me, they had in fact looked straight *through* me. With torches wavering in the wind, they walked away, and Six let me go.

“One would have been bad enough, but to have been seen by two guards would have made things terribly troublesome.”

“Oh, yes, you’re right. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, it’s time for you to return to the manor. They were the only guards out on watch, and those in the manor are sure to be fast asleep still. None will see you.”

“Still? Wait, what did you do to the people in the manor?”

“Do not worry. Nothing wicked. I merely provided them with pleasant dreams.”

Had he made things so we could move without being spotted?

“Well, could you not?!” I replied.

“I cast nothing upon you, and isn’t that enough? You’re Reinald’s friend, after all.”

What difference does that make?

I still hadn’t been able to ask anything about Ern either. With that firmly in mind, I was set to continue with my line of questioning, but then Six vanished. At the same time, I heard a bemused voice drifting away from somewhere.

“So long,” it said.

It took a few moments before I realized that Six had simply run away. Magic was convenient, much like the tools of a certain blue earless cat, but I now knew how utterly vexing it was to have it used on you. I spent some time fuming, but the mage was no longer anywhere in the nearby vicinity. I had no choice but to return to my room, and as expected, I met with nobody on my way back.

Because it was my intent to launch an assault on Six at first light, I did not sleep in. In fact, I was so eager that I woke at sunrise. I made a mad dash for the guest rooms and pounded on Six’s door, but there was no reply. And while under ordinary circumstances I never would have done such a thing, I put a hand to the doorknob and twisted it.

“Oh,” I exclaimed.

The door was unlocked. The room, too, was empty. On the desk was a note to the margrave from Six, thanking him for his hospitality. It mentioned that urgent business had come up and so he had needed to return to the capital immediately. I almost scrunched up the letter right then, but I held back the urge, groaned, then applauded myself for the display of self-control.

At breakfast, I passed the note to the margrave and told my brother the following.

“Please let me know when you decide to return to the capital, as I intend to join you.”

That mage knows something about Ern. I know it!

I was determined to find Six and grill him. If necessary, I would do the same to Reinald. Well, that's what I told myself, but at that particular point in time, I had no idea that upon my return to the capital, I would find myself on the end of an assault from a completely unexpected assailant. After all, she was my cousin, and we'd always gotten along so well. I'd always remembered her as a gentle and kindhearted girl, and so who could have predicted that she would slap me straight across the face?

But there she was, trembling with rage and staring at me as though she were looking at the very definition of filth, tears streaming down her face.

"You... You've got some nerve, showing up like this! Dirty whore!" she cried.

The only thing that ever awaited me in the capital was trouble.

11: An Inauguration Party and Baseless Curses

Things moved quickly once I'd decided to head back to the capital. I needed to get there quickly. Still, I couldn't have Arno return in a weakened state, so I began my assault on him the very same day that Six disappeared from the manor.

"Wh-Why are you clutching that knife?!" Arno cried. "W-Wait! I *do* remember that you had a talent for making sweets, and I'm not doubting your skills, but...!"

"I know what you might think, but I *did* live alone for two years, and I *did* pick up some cooking skills in that time."

As someone who had their food regularly prepared for them, this is not a complaint, but it *was* nonetheless true to say that Japan was a step ahead when it came to matters of food. When it came to food for the sick, the preparation and the ingredients mattered, but I felt hesitant to request such things from our chef. Food was his domain, after all, and I was not going to intrude on it, but now that I had a goal in mind I couldn't simply stand around grumbling. I was worried about my brother, and that was reason enough for me to commandeer a corner of the kitchen to call my own and—with the aim of fattening Arno up—handle all his meals besides dinner.

"This is...delicious," he remarked.

I wasn't particularly happy at the look of disbelief on Arno's face, but his reaction was, at the very least, an honest one. I also sent him on daily walks to cure his sluggish lethargy and had him drinking Doctor Emma's medicinal tea. Within ten days the color had returned to his face. His quick recovery was proof of his youth.

"Great," I remarked. "As long as I make sure you take care of yourself on the way back to the capital, we're good."

"You're not really intending to cook for me on the way back, are you?" asked

Arno.

“Of course! What if you happen to faint for some reason? As long as I’m the one with the knife, you’re making a full recovery.”

“You don’t need to go that far. Surely you can just give the orders, no? You need to consider moderation in this task of yours, or you’ll ruin your beautiful hands.”

“But it’s quite nice having people enjoy the meals you make.”

My cooking was surprisingly well received. All I did was prepare soup from vegetable scraps, stew meat to eliminate its odor and make it easy on the stomach, then flavor it all with a minimal amount of oil and salt. Though Conrad and the capital were on the more bearable side, in mountain villages spice-filled bean soup was very common, and it was a most simple flavoring. I’d tried it back while I was attending school, and there was no real descriptor for it outside of “what the heck?”

Cooking was difficult in that it spurred my desire for rice, but seeing as my efforts had also helped the margrave with his stomach issues, I was happy enough just to see Doctor Emma looking so pleased. So, outside of the manor chef, who suddenly found a portion of his kitchen invaded, and me with my longing for rice balls and miso soup, things were peaceful.

But you see, this was the very reason I’d never wanted to cook in the first place. Let it be known that I would have happily employed a person who could have made me a Japanese meal, and I would have just as happily thrown my savings at them. In any case, I continued steadily with my preparations to return to the capital while I ignored my yearning for the foods of my former home.

“I shall return home first with Nico, and the margrave will depart later with Mrs. Henrik and Whateley, yes?” I said.

“I do so apologize that Mrs. Henrik cannot accompany you,” said the margrave.

Going to the capital meant a chance to visit Sven, so Doctor Emma and Wendel were also coming, though Doctor Emma would of course refrain from

attending any official events. I was a little worried it might put her out of sorts, but quite the contrary; she was practically chomping at the bit to visit all her favorite shops together with Wendel.

“There’s a whole lot we still need to purchase, so don’t feel like you have to wait for us,” said Doctor Emma to Arno. “Really though, given your condition until recently, please don’t overdo it.”

“I promise to do my utmost,” he replied.

“Karen, I’ve already informed Sven, but take care of him, please.”

“But of course. Leave it to me.”

Sven was the official heir to the margrave and also on good terms with Arno, so he was set to attend Arno’s inauguration party. He had been worried about the optics of the situation—that to outsiders it might seem like the margrave and I now had a child—but his worries were of course ridiculous. There was also the matter of the occasion being Sven’s debut on the social stage, so to speak, and so the Conrad family had to be there to support him. Arno’s party was the perfect place for him to make such a debut.

“I can’t believe my own sister is all prepared to support young Sven in his debut, when really she too should be in exactly the same position as him...” muttered Arno.

My brother had felt somewhat conflicted to discover that Doctor Emma and I got along so well, but naturally he did not let any of it show when around the margrave and his people.

“It would have been one thing if I were single, but I’ve no reason to draw attention to myself. Isn’t it more likely that Emil will be approached by parents looking for a husband for their daughter?”

Gerda was handling the making of my dresses for the various events. She was very excited; it was a chance to make up for the debut she would have liked to have seen when I was fourteen or fifteen. It sounded dreadfully exhausting to me, but I had a plan in place that was sure to make things more bearable.

The day after Arno’s inauguration was the evening ball held by the king himself. It was an event I was still hesitant about attending, and surprisingly, the

margrave wasn't particularly overjoyed at the prospect of attending either. That said, he took no issue with me attending the event, which he made clear on the night our trip to the capital was finalized. He called me to see him because he wanted to apologize.

"I know that, as your husband, I should attend the ball with you, but...I do not have many fond memories of the royal castle. I simply cannot bring myself to attend. I would like you to let them know that I cannot attend due to illness."

Though he tried to hide it, the margrave held in his hands a shred of cloth that was once white, but was now speckled with a brownish red I presumed to be blood. I did not push the margrave to explain things any further, and simply nodded my assent.

"I'm sure you are already aware of the many rumors that drift around my person," I said, "and it is more than enough that you are accompanying me to my brother's party. I want only for you to rest afterward and enjoy your time undisturbed together with your family."

"My apologies, Karen..."

I was prepared to ask Arno in the case that a partner was a requirement of entry to the ball. That said, if I was able to get what I wanted from Reinald at the inauguration party—and given their relationship, it was all but a certainty that the Rodenwalds would attend—I could potentially skip the ball altogether.

I didn't exactly hate dressing up, but for Arno's party I was willing to go the extra mile. Though it was easy to get things twisted, I was in fact an indoors type; I liked nothing more than simply staying at home and being by myself. Since arriving in Conrad, I'd been out and about running errands and helping around the place, but I thought of all that more as a job.

I was a hundred percent sure that people would be clamoring to speak to Arno and Gerda, so it was all too clear that I would be left on my own. On top of that...though Arno had completely forgotten, I still had yet to mention something of grave importance with regard to my attending the ball.

"I'd have been able to get away with it were I with the margrave, but on my own..." I muttered to myself.

In any case, with Arno now in good health, we returned to the royal capital. Just as with the last time I had visited, I stayed at the Conrad villa, where we met with Sven upon our arrival. We then took a short break before heading out to Saburova manor. In tow was the trembling and terrified Nico, who had assumed that she would not be accompanying me and was now in a right panic. She was necessary for my plans, however.

Gerda met me with a gigantic hug upon our arrival at her manor, and she quickly saw me to a room full of fabrics and jewelry in all colors, styles, and types. I settled my resolve as we got to talking, then took Nico by the shoulders.

“Gerda, Gerda,” I said, “I want to discuss something with you.”

“Discuss something? Can it wait?”

“No, I don’t mean like that,” I clarified. “It’s more like a request. Could you make up a dress for Nico here too? For the party, I mean. I’d like her dressed up from head to toe.”

I knew instinctively that Nico had swiveled to look at me in shock, but I did not meet her gaze. Basically, I wanted as many people as possible to help keep attention on me to a minimum.

“That girl...she’s a servant, yes? You want her dressed up for Arno’s inauguration? Whatever are you thinking?”

It wasn’t just Gerda who was skeptical, it was the tailoring staff too. I took Gerda out of the room.

“Yes, she’s my personal assistant, but she’s also a wonderful young lady,” I said.

“Yes, I can see you’re very fond of her, but asking me to make her a dress...?”

“But she’s a childhood friend of the margrave’s son, and the two get along so well.”

Gerda’s sudden piqued interest did not escape me. It was exactly as I thought: Gerda *loved* this kind of thing. And yes, this was all a way to make things easier for me and indulge my sister’s interests, but I didn’t think it was all that bad for Sven and Nico either.

Though the two of them had been careful to make sure that very few people noticed, they had grown closer ever since our last visit to the capital. Sven only wrote regularly to Nico, and Nico herself had come to me seeking to improve her penmanship and reply to him. Their relationship had yet to blossom into anything romantic, but I was not about to push either of them about it.

That said, when I had last been made into a doll for the dressmaker, Nico hadn't been able to hide the envious gaze with which she looked upon all the sparkling jewels and dress material. I also knew that she bought ointment from Doctor Emma for her chapped fingers. She was enamored with the lace-woven dresses that decorated the wardrobe, and was doing her best to remember makeup she wasn't familiar with.

"When I invite her to try on my dresses, she refuses," I explained to Gerda. "I know this is something of a selfish request, but it's the social debut of a boy she's very close to. Don't you think it would be just lovely for the two of them to be dressed up together? Think of the memories they'll make."

Given her position, Nico was of course reserved, which was why I brought her for this surprise attack. It was a way to show her how much I cared. I could ask Gerda this request of mine because I knew who Nico was. Her personality could be summed up by the time she politely returned a ring to me, one that she had picked up quite by coincidence. The ring in question was among the dresses and jewelry that Arno and Gerda had sent me, and it was so minor among it all that none of us would have ever noticed it was missing at all. And yet to Nico it was a precious, beautiful thing. It's likely that she felt tempted to keep it, but she didn't. Instead, she brought it back to me with something of a guilty look etched upon her features. I felt then that she was very much the sort of girl I could get along with.

"And look," I said to Gerda, "I also wanted to experience the highs and lows of young love. And so, I suppose I simply thought that it would be a wonderful thing to help the girl. Don't you agree?"

My words hit home, perhaps because both Gerda and myself had wedded in the absence of love. Gerda walked off to consult with the tailors, leaving Nico and me alone. I confirmed her stance and agreement; she was hesitant, naturally, but the temptation of such a dress was far too much for her to resist.

“You don’t need money? Payment?” asked Nico. “Will this be deducted from my salary?”

“Nico,” I said sternly. “Do you really think me so heartless? I would never do such a thing.”

And in any case, money wasn’t even an issue. Not with Gerda footing the bill.

“But if you’re still hesitant about it, then you can repay me the favor upon our return to Conrad. During tea time, for example, perhaps you could get me a larger helping of apple jam? You know how stingy Mrs. Henrik is; she never allows me very much.”

It was well known to all in the manor that I was a big fan of Mrs. Henrik’s jams. For this reason they were very carefully stored out of reach. The only person I could count on to smuggle me the amount I wanted was Nico. I was making her an accomplice, yes, but she knew then that I was earnest in my offer, and so with teary eyes she nodded.

“In that case, I suppose we have ourselves a deal.”

In this way, our negotiations—if you could call them that—were finalized.

And I know I’m repeating myself, but I wasn’t doing this out of the goodness of my heart. Rather, I was doing it to help keep attention away from my own person. So when Gerda and her tailors returned and put their focus on Nico, I put myself in a position to comment, rather than to wear. In other words, mission success.

Makeup was then bought for the occasion, and I received my graduate certificate for passing the school exam. Time passed in the blink of an eye, and we found ourselves at the day of Arno’s inauguration party. Everyone dressed appropriately, and the sight of Sven and Nico brought smiles to everyone’s faces.

“Oh, look! You’re blushing!” I said.

“Knock it off!” shot back Sven.

I wasn’t about to miss my opportunity to tease the boy when he was left flabbergasted in front of a near-unrecognizable Nico. Doctor Emma laughed

along, and Wendel wore a teasing expression not at all unlike my own.

When the margrave and I entered the Kirsten residence in formal dress, we couldn't avoid the attention that came with it, but I met all of it with an unyielding smile. It was the smile of a seasoned salesperson. Perhaps what made it all easier was the fact that I really did have a lot of respect for the man by my side.

"You look stunning, Karen," he said.

"While my sister and her tailors certainly played a hand in things, I daresay it's largely thanks to a joyful and fulfilling lifestyle. You allow me to live every day to its fullest."

"No words could make me happier," he replied. "Even if it's just mere flattery."

He was like a grandfather doting on his granddaughter, but I did not miss the cringe that crossed Sven's face. I did wish he'd just get over things already. And why did all those strangers expecting some kind of rift or friction look so disappointed?

Yes, that means you too, Emil.

"Karen, I'm going to say hello to your parents. What would you like to do?"

"I suppose I'll take a stroll around while you do. This place was once my home, after all, so you don't have to worry about me getting lost."

"We'd be in quite the predicament if that were to happen."

I had no intention of seeing my parents, and so I chose instead to flee. I met my father's gaze as we passed through the front door, but no visible emotion crossed the lines of his face, sapping my will to say anything to him at all.

All the rooms on the first floor of manor were open, as were the gardens. I recognized some familiar faces among the waiters, but everyone was so busy I didn't have the chance to say hello. Sven and Nico were having a good time together, and so I didn't want to disturb them. Arno was nearby too, and he was keeping an eye on Sven to make sure he was safe and comfortable. When I looked more closely, I also noticed Achim in formal dress, and I knew that Sven

would be well looked after. As for Gerda, she was chatting with a man with a head of dark black hair.

“Well, time for me to go into hiding for a spell,” I whispered.

Contrary to my expectations, I was getting quite a bit of attention.

I wonder if blondie is around somewhere?

He should have been easy to spot in the main hall, but was nowhere to be found. I had heard that the Rodenwalds were attending, which meant he had to be somewhere. In any case, I opted to make a break for it before anyone could stop me and chain me down with conversation. I slipped into the high grass walls and toward the back garden to escape the wandering gazes of the party's attendees. It was a good place to take a break; there was a long bench in one corner, and the location wasn't easily visible from the main hall. The route to get to it, too, wasn't something a guest would take; it was known only by those who lived at the manor. Or *once* lived there.

I decided that the back garden was where I would wait until the margrave returned. I was on the move with the hem of my lace knitted dress in my hands, when I heard the sound of a girl weeping. My first instinct was to leave her to her own devices, but I realized that the voice was one I recognized. I trawled through my memories and it hit me: the girl weeping was my cousin, who I had played with often as a young girl.

“Marie?” I uttered.

I peeked around the corner and found the girl sitting on the grass, her shoulders slumped. Our eyes met. She had her chestnut-colored hair styled behind her head, and she wore an orange dress, but her makeup was a mess. Her eyes were swollen and red, and her cheeks were wet with tears. I had always remembered her to be a bright girl, and one who was always smiling. I ran to her immediately.

“How... How dare you...” she uttered.

Marie's expression shifted subtly, and the change in her hit me so hard I froze as I tried to grasp the situation. A moment later she ran over to me, raised her right hand, and then tried to swing it straight at me.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I uttered, taking a step back.

Marie’s hand met with only air, and the momentum of her swing almost sent her to the ground. Then, with a glare, she swung her other hand at me, which met my cheek with a crack. Still, it didn’t seem to be her dominant hand, so it didn’t hurt too badly. Nonetheless, I was taken entirely by surprise. Marie’s usually drooping eyes were twisted into a sharp frown, and she took to pounding my chest and shoulders like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Huh? Uh, what? M-M-Marie?” I uttered.

Marie was still lost to her tears, and her fists lacked power because they didn’t have a clear target. And yet still, the blows stung.

“You! You...you...!” she stammered.

In her eyes was hatred. We hadn’t seen each other in so long, and I couldn’t remember having done anything to her. I tried to soothe her, but every word I spoke only stoked the fires of Marie’s rage.

And then she said this:

“You... You’ve got some nerve, showing up like this! Dirty whore!”

Since the moment I had known the girl, she had never once uttered a line anything like this one. I was left frozen as a number of girls arrived on the scene, taking Marie by the shoulders and leading her away.

“Don’t let it get you down, Marie,” said one.

“It’s not on your shoulders,” said another.

“You mustn’t give such types the time of day,” added a third.

All of them were—for reasons still unclear—glowering at me. I was still standing as still as a statue while it happened. Returning to normal was an act that would require time.

Did they all have me mistaken for somebody else? I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Was there a Karen imposter out there somewhere? Or did I now need to start worrying about the existence of doppelgängers? Before I could think too much more about it, I heard men speaking nearby. I looked around for a place to hide, and spied a thin path by the side of the manor. The word “path”

was generous; it was more like a back alley used only by the gardeners. Nonetheless, I dove into it and listened carefully.

The group that arrived made no effort to keep quiet, and so their voices rang clear. Their words were full of vitriol for the Kirstens, such that it was difficult for me to have to listen to.

“Nouveau riche and nothing more.”

“Dealt a lucky hand, certainly.”

“They’ll fail and they’ll fall, and quickly at that.”

“And those two sisters. Dilettantes leeching off the elderly.”

And on and on it went. None of it was complimentary. I wish I’d never heard any of it at all, and it was then I heard a voice behind me.

“It seems that both our burdens grow heavier.”

It was a voice I recognized, and it sounded very much like it belonged to the person I was looking for. I turned to meet with lustrous blond hair.

“Sir Reinald?” I said.

He stood with his back to the wall, his arms crossed. I had never seen his hair done up behind his head like that before.

“Er... What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I was taking a break away from prying eyes, and then you turned up looking rather panicked. I thought it was rude to simply stand here in silence, so I decided to let you know I was here.”

Well, thank you ever so much for the explanation.

What this meant, however, was that Reinald, too, had been privy to everything I’d heard since I arrived. Still, his expression was as calm as ever, and still just as difficult to read. I would have loved to stay calm myself, but we met unexpectedly so often that it was hard for my heart to keep up.

Why do we always meet under circumstances like this? What is going on?

“I apologize for making use of this particular location,” said Reinald, “but I honestly never expected anyone else to find it.”

“Oh, well, yes, I see,” I replied. “Only the gardeners use this path, and today the other garden is open for the party, so there’s no reason for anyone to pass through here.”

Reinald’s gaze went to the hedges by the entrance, so I stood next to him and placed my back by the wall to his side. There was no getting out of this place anytime soon; not while the men in the back garden were still having a grand old time slandering my family.

Oh, with Marie’s unexpected outburst, I almost completely forgot; this is exactly who I wanted to speak to!

“The men out there are simply envious of what your family has achieved,” said Reinald. “All they can do is look down on others, nothing more. There’s no need for you to waste any time thinking about it.”

Unlike the men in the garden, Reinald spoke with a decidedly calm air, and quiet enough that our voices would not be heard. At first, I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but then I realized. I was surprised.

“Were you worried about me?” I asked.

“What they are saying would not be easy for any to bear.”

And they only seem to be getting more and more enthusiastic about it out there.

“Thank you, but I’m not worried about any of them,” I said. “Ever since I returned to the Kirstens, I’ve known that their type would be around, and I’ve known that there are those who don’t think much of our family.”

“I’m glad you are so strong of heart; people with mouths too big for their brains are everywhere. You’ll run into many more, I bet. That said, you mustn’t rely too heavily on that strength of heart,” Reinald said. “Words spoken with ill intent will always sting, regardless.”

“Yes, you’re right. They certainly don’t brighten your day.”

“I apologize. It was not my intent to lecture you on the matter. I merely wanted you to know that you don’t have to put up a strong front.”

“No, thank you. Your words are like a balm of sorts.”

“I am glad to hear it. My own family has many enemies, so I am aware of how you must feel.”

“Some things never change, no matter where you are,” I said. “It never gets any easier...”

My past feelings, which could be summed up as *“Life in a different world! Woo!”* had not lasted long, because I soon realized that in the end, and no matter where you were, people didn’t change. Oh, how I lamented the fact.

“I overheard some of the commotion, but what did the young Dunst girl say to you?”

“You know Marie?” I asked.

“Until recently the family was hounding me with offers of engagement.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Reinald’s words struck me. I couldn’t make sense of them.

Marie? Reinald? Engagement?

“I know that she was crying,” said Reinald, not looking at me, “but I could not catch what the two of you were talking about. Did she do something to you?”

“Er...just a moment; do you mean to say that the Dunsts were trying to get you and Marie together?”

“Exactly that. Their desire was for us to get engaged. I had no reason to agree, so I refused.”

That was when my hair clip fell from my hair. My hair had been beautifully set for the party, but I didn’t like it when it was set too tight so I had it done in a more relaxed fashion. As a result, when Marie had set herself upon me it had all come loose.

“Let me get that for you,” said Reinald.

There didn’t seem to be any problem with the clip itself, but it was a hairstyle that was not easily fixed. To make matters worse, at an event like this one, walking around with my hair unadorned was only an invitation for derisive snickers from those with their eyes wide for weakness. I had only two options:

either get to the manor without being seen, or call someone over.

I know what you're thinking: *couldn't you have done it yourself?*

If it were just a matter of doing a slapdash, passable job, I could have handled it. Unfortunately, when you matched a hairstyle to a dress, you could not repair it by way of a simple ponytail. It was better to have someone else see to it.

"Sir Reinald," I said hesitantly. "I do apologize for being such a bother, but would you mind informing my brother or sister, or even the margrave, that I am in need of assistance when you return to the party? I don't mind waiting until after you've had your break, of course..."

"You'd like me to call for one of your servants, yes? Ah, I see. Your hair will need a pair of trusty hands."

He put a hand to his jaw as he examined my hair.

"If you're happy for me to handle things, I can fix this arrangement for you," he said.

"You can...what?"

This arrangement... Does he mean my hair?

"While it's not my profession, per se, I have experience when it comes to hairstyling. I can recreate a look similar to the one you had before."

"Huh? Oh? You mean to say...you're going to do my hair?"

"Being that you don't have any curls to worry about, I don't expect it to take very long."

Reinald turned me around with a gesture, all while I remained puzzled and surprised by the reveal of this most unexpected skill. After all, hairdressing was a craft; it was a field to which some devoted their lives. It was not the kind of thing you expected a nobleman or noblewoman to be capable of. Though...I suppose I *could* see it if said nobleman or noblewoman loved putting their hands to a woman's hair.

Reinald lifted my hair lightly. I felt his fingers on my scalp and around my ears. They moved without hesitation, and with a well-practiced grace.

“You said you have experience in hairstyling,” I said. “Why is that?”

“There’s no grand story to it,” replied Reinald. “I merely did such work when I was young, to earn a little money. It’s funny, really, how the things you learn when you are young tend to stick with you.”

Earn a little money...? That’s one heck of an odd reason for a man of Reinald’s standing to reveal such a thing.

“Er, I apologize if I’m being rude, but am I to understand that you enjoyed hairdressing enough to want to earn money from it?”

“No. As a youth, I lived in the care of a merchant family who were nobles in name only. I needed to earn my keep in order to remain fed. I lived with them until I was brought into the Rodenwald family... Miss Karen, please keep still.”

He said this because I was about to turn around to look at him.

“At the time, I thought it would be enough for me to make my living as a hairstylist,” continued Reinald, “and so, in my boyish way, I was very serious about it. As such, I know my way around a head of hair.”

He spoke in a plain tone, and I caught no hint that he might be lying to me. It was likely Reinald was telling the truth, but he was the second son of the Rodenwald family; this made his past that much more inscrutable.

“Did this happen to your hair because of the young Dunst girl?” asked Reinald.

“Oh, yes...unfortunately.”

When he put me on the spot with such a direct question, I found it difficult to lie. I went on to explain how I had bumped into her, and how she had come to flail in an attempt to attack me.

“She was crying,” I said. “I want to think that she had me confused for somebody else, but...”

My voice trailed off. It lacked confidence. Marie’s friends had looked straight at me; none of them looked like they had the wrong person. While I talked to Reinald about everything, he finished working on my hair. It felt like he finished it in an instant. I put a hand to it lightly, and from the touch alone I could tell that it was crafted beautifully and delicately. At the very least, it was leagues

above anything I could have done on my own. And it was all held firmly in place by my hair clip.

“Amazing,” I remarked. “You were able to recreate the look in almost no time at all.”

“I’m confident nobody will notice anything odd about it,” said Reinald, “though you will want to have it properly looked at upon your return to the party.”

“There’s no need,” I said. “You said you did this when you were a boy, but it’s as good as any professional hairdresser.”

“You praise me too highly. I am not up to date on the latest trends.”

Though it wasn’t particularly easy to spot, I *did* see what looked to be the hint of a smile flash across Reinald’s face.

“Miss Karen,” he continued, “when I said I was going to be the source of some trouble for you, I never expected that Marie would try to harm you in a physical manner. I must apologize for my lack of foresight.”

He makes it sound like he’s the reason it happened.

I combed my mind and found myself back at Gerda’s manor, having that conversation with Reinald.

“You mean what you said to me when we last talked at Saburova Manor...” I said.

“Yes. Though I did nothing myself to instigate matters, this is the result of them.”

“Wait. I understand that you refused a marriage proposal with Marie, but what does that have to do with me?”

With my question prodding and pressing, Reinald finally opened up about what he meant back when we spoke on our walk through the garden.

“Let me start at the proposal that was offered between us. I agreed to that because I had reason to. But even if we had gotten married, it would not have been for long.”

Now *this* was an explosive revelation. Reinald sounded apologetic, and I was surprised that he was opening up this much. For a moment, I was hit by a shot of worry and listened closely to make sure that there was no one within earshot. The voices I'd heard earlier, however, were no longer there.

"Which is to say...you had no intention of maintaining our marriage, were it to have gone through, yes?"

"Yes. I have no need for a wife."

"Pardon my rudeness, but may I ask why?"

"My preference is for freedom. I do not want a wife or anything else that might chain me down."

Now I knew, finally, why he did not already have a wife and children of his own. It wasn't anything, in the end; he simply did not want to get married. That much was crystal clear; the man himself seemed completely and utterly uninterested in the idea.

"There were a number of matters at play, but suffice it to say that your refusal of the Rodenwald offer was, for me, very convenient. However, my brother Zakhar was left unsatisfied."

"The lord of the family," I said. "He won't let you have your say?"

"If he would, things would be much simpler. In any case, you'd best be careful around my brother. The family is only open to the Kirstens as marriage partners, which is to say he still hasn't given up."

Well, that's just terrifying.

But if what Reinald was telling me was true, then didn't that mean that if we'd gotten married, we also would have smoothly parted?

"Thanks to you, our marriage never happened, but remember that until then I had refused all offers of marriage. When it looked as though I were finally in search of a wife, noble families pounced. Offers suddenly started coming in from entirely unexpected parties."

I caught the hint of annoyance in Reinald's voice, as though he were reliving memories he wasn't fond of. Now I understood what he had done, though to

put it more accurately, the problem was that he had done nothing at all.

I knew it was bad manners, but I squatted down as I listened to Reinald speak. I looked at the dress that my sister had tailored for me. It was a beautiful but subtle deep red, with transparent sleeves that helped to give the outfit a certain lightness. It was a wonderfully well-balanced dress. And now that Reinald had done my hair for me, I wanted nothing more than to gaze upon my own reflection...

"You didn't accept them," I said.

"I did not, no. And because of that, rumors spread. People began to say that I would not accept any other offers because my heart was for you."

"Exactly the sort of rumor that those starving for gossip so adore."

So that's why. Now it all makes sense. Marie's irate gaze, and the reason so many were looking at me from the moment I arrived at the party. They were all brimming with curiosity, hungry to see the girl for whom the Rodenwald son still pined.

"And you didn't deny the rumor, did you?" I asked.

"With the rumor spreading, I received far fewer proposals. This was convenient for me, so I let it continue on its course."

"And it helped that I so rarely find myself mingling in the realm of noble social circles. You could even say that I almost never interact with any other noble families whatsoever."

The last time I'd been to the capital, I hadn't heard anything of the rumor. But it had spread slowly all the same, then my encounter with Marie had occurred.

"My current home is located so far away that rumors rarely reach us," I said. "And because we're so far apart from each other, there was never any talk of a potential affair; the realm of unrequited love was where it stayed."

"You've quite the imagination," said Reinald.

I got the sense he was smiling, but saw little sign of it on his actual expression. His eyes stayed at his feet.

"It may be just a rumor, but are you sure it's okay to leave it as it is? Wouldn't

it be bad for you if it reached the ears of your brother, or even the margrave?"

"I would welcome such an outcome if it brought with it silence. And besides, rumors are just that: rumors. I haven't done anything, and there's nothing to follow up, not even for my brother or the king."

"As someone who knows your secret, I cannot easily dismiss your reasoning, but even then you remain steadfast."

"The only marriage that we accepted was marriage with the Kirstens, after all."

He said it with such ease that it showed me exactly the sort of person he was. However, there was still something even he hadn't noticed. Marie's behavior was unusual to Reinald, and though he took responsibility for my being attacked, it seemed he still could not fathom why it had happened. Why he couldn't understand something so painfully obvious was beyond me; especially when I could see only one reason for Marie acting as she did.

"The rumor had spread, and the Dunsts knew very well that I was uninterested in marriage. My brother had also informed them that we would not offer them any financial support. So why would Marie involve herself in this way?"

It was incomprehensible to me that he still couldn't see it. His puzzled look was gorgeous. It was like a work of art, and yet...

"I'm aware this question might feel rather sudden, but am I right to think that you've had interactions with Marie in the past?" I asked.

"So you knew? Yes, we met a number of times before any issuing of marriage proposals. She often asked me questions. It seemed she was interested in horses and swordsmanship."

It wasn't that Marie was interested in those things, it was rather that she was looking for something to talk about.

"As far as I remember, Marie has never been a particularly active person. But to hear this from you now... I don't suppose she invited you to tea, did she?"

It was only after I asked the question that a memory seemed to resurface in

Reinald's mind.

"Ah, as a matter of fact she did. However, given that I had no need for a connection with the Dunst family, I refused the offer."

"Sir Reinald, I'm absolutely certain that Marie..."

I paused then and hesitated. I suddenly didn't think it was my place to speak for Marie's feelings.

"No, I don't think I should say anything," I said. "Please forget I said anything at all."

Reinald had received a personal invitation to tea, and he *still* couldn't see that the girl was interested in him. It was perplexing, but...for now I didn't see the harm in leaving things as they were. And yet, I still couldn't help but be surprised. Here was a man so handsome that people looked at him in envy and heaped praise upon his person, and yet he seemed entirely blind to it. I understood why he wanted to remain single, but there was no escaping the fact that the nation's nobles would treat him as something of an outcast.

"You're nothing if not an eccentric character, Sir Reinald," I remarked.

"It must be said that you are quite...unique of character yourself."

"I wouldn't put me next to the likes of you, but I'll take that as a compliment nonetheless."

But yeah, he was probably right. No matter how much I broke from the usual behavior of girls of my rank, it never seemed to bother Reinald. None of what had happened today did either. He never scolded me or bullied me for it, so perhaps he didn't care, wasn't interested, or just figured it was none of his business. But being with him was so easy, and it came with no pressure. We hadn't talked that much, and yet meeting Reinald surprised me. *There really are people in this world with whom you can comfortably share silence*, I thought.

I felt oddly at ease around Reinald. I even wondered if perhaps we could have built a better relationship together had we not started from a point of engagement discussions. Then again, had there been no talk of marriage, the two of us never would have crossed paths.

“Thank you for the trade rights,” I said. “But are you truly sure about giving me that kind of money?”

“The money is also an apology from Moritz for the trouble. Use it as you wish.”

“Can you really just say that? If at any point he requests it, I am prepared to return it.”

“Unnecessary. It is but a trifling amount for the man.”

Putting aside the fact that I was now beyond curious as to exactly who Moritz was, it seemed clear from what Reinald said that the money had not come out of his own pocket. And while I wanted to talk to him much more about the topic, I couldn’t let myself get sidetracked. Ern flashed before my eyes, reminding me of my actual objective today. Unfortunately, however, time was not on my side.

“Master Reinald, are you there?”

The cold, mostly toneless voice was one I remembered: Moritz. His master was in hiding with me, and I knew that getting caught here would be troublesome for both of us. Fortunately, Reinald realized this too and put a finger to his lips as he gestured for me to stay put.

“I’m right here, Moritz,” he called out.

“Oh, there you are. I apologize for interrupting you while you are taking a moment to rest, but Lord Zakhar is looking for you. Something about the security for tomorrow’s ball, I believe.”

“I’m certain I already told him that I won’t be attending the ball tomorrow evening. He still hasn’t given up on forcing my attendance, I see. Very well then, I suppose the task of getting my message past the deaf ears of my brother is just another part of my job.”

“Your Excellency...”

“You will use my name while we are here. You do not know who might be listening.”

In which case, Reinald and I never met here. Clearly that is most convenient for

both of us. However...

I let out a sigh. Reinald had his eccentricities, but he was easy to talk to. That said, he was not particularly easy to be involved with. After all, when it came to our discussion of the rumor that had been spreading, he apologized, but made no mention of denying it.

Marie's mistaken ire toward me is so very depressing...

That, unfortunately, was the nature of rumors—when they spread you could do nothing to stop them. Flying into a panic now would do nothing to help matters. It would be like running around trying to put out a fire and instead simply spreading it further. And in any case, it was Reinald who would have to shoulder the bulk of the fallout. All I could do was simply act as if I had no idea the rumor even existed. And so, because I didn't live in the capital, I would simply wait until the fire went out and everyone tired of that particular piece of gossip. It was enough now that I knew the truth.

With that in mind, I had to make sure I did nothing to give the rumor new life or add fuel to the fire, so to speak. But I needed a chance to ask about Ern, and I had to make sure I didn't bring any harm to the margrave's reputation.

Should I look for another chance to pin Reinald down? He just said he's not going to the ball, and I don't think he'll talk straight with me.

"If I could just get to Six... That would be the quickest way to my answers," I whispered to myself.

If I asked anybody for help finding him, however, they were sure to ask why I was looking for him in the first place. To be honest, I wanted nothing more than to just spill the beans and reveal all. "Well, you see," I'd say, "he was wandering around the Conrad domain and I want to know why." How easy things would be if I could have just done that.

After Reinald left, I waited for a time before finally making a move of my own. I was careful to make sure I did not leave from the same place, and emerged elsewhere, blending with the crowds as though nothing were amiss. All I needed to do now was go to the room where the servants were so I could have Mrs. Henrik take a look at my hair. I looked around the main hall for the margrave, but it seemed he had yet to return.

“Oh, it’s the whore.”

The words were muttered just barely loud enough for me to catch them. It was the second time I’d heard the term, but this time it was spoken by someone else. I turned to the utterance to find a man in his twenties, looking at me with a smile. That smile, however, was a smile in shape only; the man’s gaze was muddled in such a way as to be slightly disturbing.

“Why, hello there, Karen,” he said. “It’s been so long. Have you been well?”

“Dominik...”

Dominik was Marie’s older brother, my cousin, and the current lord of the Dunst family. He walked up to me the way one might approach a friend they haven’t seen in several years. It was decidedly different from Marie’s reaction earlier. For a moment I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to deal with him, but I was admittedly curious regarding his earlier utterance.

“Yes, it has been ages,” I said. “I am so glad to see you looking so well. For all these years I’ve been so very worried.”

“And I likewise. I’ve been so busy with work, however, that I didn’t have a chance to see you. My apologies. The filthy countryside with its stink of livestock doesn’t really suit me.”

I giggled.

“Oh, I’ll bet you completely forgot I existed,” I said playfully. “Could you be any more terrible a cousin?”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be so coldhearted. I never forgot about you, I can promise you that.”

I subtly closed the distance between us, such that those around us would not easily hear what we were discussing. But it was not just I who was careful to note our distance from the other party attendees.

“After all,” said Dominik, “as long as you share our family bloodline, it’s my job to look after you, even if the rest of you hails from a despicable, disgusting peasant.”

He finished his statement with a spiteful wink. I replied with a smile. It was

nostalgic, in a sense; Dominik really hadn't changed at all. I still couldn't stand his view of the world either.

"Yes, I'm nothing but eternally grateful for your deep compassion," I said. "I must thank you for your constant concern for the Kirsten family. Nothing could make me prouder than having such a magnificent cousin."

Dominik's nostrils flared at the compliment. This was just like him. The Dunst family was the family under which the Kirstens and a number of other noble families resided. Dominik, being the lord of that family, was very much like the sterling example of your typical noble.

"It's nothing, really," he replied. "Arno is and always will be something of a spineless coward. Why, he's practically incapable of anything without me."

"The Dunst family lord is nothing if not dependable."

If you're going to shoot off your mouth, how about doing it out in the open instead of whispering your messages in a corner of the room?

I laughed then, much in the manner of Gerda, with charm and flattery my main purpose.

Put simply, Dominik believed in noble supremacy above all else. As such, he looked down on me for one of my parents being a commoner, but believed that, as a noble, he was of sterling, virtuous character, and naturally deserving of any and all praise.

And look, I realize you might feel a certain skepticism that such a person could even possibly exist. I did too. But the proof is in the pudding; Dominik, and others like him, existed. Noble society had educated Dominik in all the worst ways, and so he was the textbook example of such nobility.

All of that aside, I had to wonder what it was he wanted to talk to me about. At first, I thought it had simply been to insult me, but now I was led to think otherwise. Dominik's eyes narrowed as he whispered to me.

"Which is to say you, too, understand how undependable Arno is. Don't you think your father retired too soon?"

"I'm at a loss for how to answer," I replied. "I've since married into the

Conrad family, and even as a Kirsten myself, all I can do is support my brother's decisions."

"Yes, a girl like you shouldn't get involved in things anyway. So it goes. But, tell me, have you heard anything?"

"When you say 'anything,' you mean...?"

"You know...matters such as the direction the family intends to take with regard to their businesses..."

Dominik was practically mumbling, and I could see why; he was anxious about the future of the Kirsten family. I told him once again that, as I had married into another family, I had no way of knowing.

"I hear almost nothing of the matters of the Kirstens," I said. "Regrettably I can tell you nothing. Oh, but I *did* hear that father isn't exactly retiring. He will still work so as to support Arno in his role as lord of the family."

"That's *not* what I'm asking!"

Dominik was working hard to control himself and keep his voice low. His attitude told me everything I needed to know: Dominik was no longer being made a part of any discussions regarding the Kirsten family's businesses.

"Be that as it may, I simply don't know anything else, Dominik."

Feigning ignorance was my card to play. After all, it wasn't like I particularly wanted to be talking to Dominik anyway; though I *was* still curious about the remark he'd made that initially stopped me in my tracks.

I put on my best smile and made sure that as far as anyone else was concerned, we were just two cousins saying hello and catching up after a long absence. Dominik, too, seemed to realize that he had broken character and forced an awkward smile.

"I would have thought that marriage would have made a woman of you, but you're still as ill-mannered as I remember," he said. "Shouldn't you be off playing the trophy for your husband?"

"Say what you will, Dominik. More importantly, it came to my notice that you requested a loan from my husband. And that wasn't all that my ears have been

privy to with regard to the Dunst family.”

“And so what? It has nothing to do with you.”

“Nothing, you say? Dominik, did you forget that the only person capable of coaxing my husband around was me?”

And there it was: a twitch in Dominik’s cheek. I wasn’t a fan of resorting to such measures, but I needed to force the conversation where I wanted it.

“I don’t want to drag our conversation on particularly long, so I’ll get to the point,” I said. “What lies did you whisper into Marie’s ear?”

Unlike Dominik, Marie wasn’t the type to go spitting poison around. I knew that for a certainty. I couldn’t refute that the girl might have changed some over the last couple of years, but it was Dominik’s opening words to me that made me so decisive.

“Won’t you please let me know what it was you told Marie and her friends?” I pressed.

“Huh? Whatever Marie might have said to *you*, it has nothing to do with *me*.”

“She slapped me across the face. That’s enough for me to charge her for damaging my reputation.”

“And whatever she might have *done* to you has nothing to do with me either. If it’s an apology you’re after, you’ll have to go to her.”

“Does your stubbornness know no bounds? Surely you realize it’s in your best interests to come clean.”

Dominik was openly and shamelessly discriminatory, but he was not an idiot. He knew, just as well as I did, that the Dunst family was in no position to be on unfriendly terms with the Conrads. I had no intention of bringing charges against Marie, but Dominik couldn’t trust me. That was why my bluff worked.

“I merely told her of a rumor that I’ve heard in social circles,” said Dominik. “How was I to know it would lead to her attempting to hurt you?”

I wasn’t about to ask for the content of said rumor. I knew I wouldn’t like it.

“I see. Well then, for your sake, I’ll keep this from my husband and brother.

Which means we're done here."

"No, wait. I need you to mediate things between myself and the margrave."

"And how troublesome for you if I don't. However, that is a separate matter from you calling me a *whore*. If you need to arrange a meeting with my husband, do it yourself. I'm going to go ahead and pretend that none of this ever happened."

"You must be joking."

"Such jokes don't exist in my repertoire. And might I suggest, the next time you decide to get together with your friends to slander me and my family, you make a more concerted effort to choose a suitable location? You were all having so much fun you didn't even realize I was there, let alone anybody else."

Dominik was among the men who had arrived after Marie had left, of that I was certain. In response to my knowing grin, Dominik's face went deathly pale. He fumbled for an excuse, but it was then that Achim arrived.

"Lord Dominik, Lady Karen, I apologize for the interruption..."

That was all it took. Dominik took one glance at Achim, then his eyes began to twitch, and so he spun on his heel and walked away. He had never liked Achim very much, and this was perhaps as much as he could take. Achim seemed to not care, and instead turned to me with a look of concern.

"It looked to me like you handled things with a smile, but are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. He didn't have much to say. But thank you for stepping in."

"It was quite the smile. You were so bubbly I just knew that something was up. Still, that Lord Dominik... The young master has already told him that they've nothing to talk about, so I'd prefer him to take his leave, and soon."

"I'll bet he can't stand to see the Kirstens doing so well."

"That's one part of it, but the recent news about him isn't very flattering. I wish he wasn't lurking around here at all."

"What kind of news? And don't worry, nobody is listening."

“It’s not the sort of thing to speak about in a place like this. Can’t I tell you later?”

“Just give me the broad strokes, I beg you.”

Achim glanced around quickly, then lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Well, for starters there’s talk about his little sister, Marie. Dominik has amassed huge debt, and he’s marrying her off to someone in a distant region just to see it paid off. Worst yet, the man is said to be a depraved old man, essentially the exact opposite of what you got in the margrave.”

Oh. I see...

“So that’s what it was,” I remarked. “Well, that puts things into perspective.”

“What? You mean you already knew about Marie?”

“We haven’t seen each other in years, but I met her earlier. In any case, I’d like to enter the manor...”

“Unfortunately, you’re out of luck. Gerda’s waiting for you with one of our guests.”

If Gerda was summoning me, it would not do to make her wait.

“I was wondering where you were earlier, but I see now that you were off getting your hairstyle redone.”

“Oh, uh, yes. Just a little. What do you think? Is it weird?”

“It suits you. Even more than the hairstyle you arrived with.”

“Thank you...”

What is this? What is this bashful excitement?

But alas, I did not have time to listen more carefully to my heart. Achim led me toward Gerda, who was with a man in his thirties, clad in formal wear. It was the man she’d been speaking with earlier. He introduced himself to me thusly:

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Margravine Conrad. I am Zakhar, the current lord of the Rodenwald family.”

At long last, we were meeting in person. Zakhar had noticeably slender eyes, and it was clear he was a man of intelligence. While he seemed much thinner than the ordinary male, he held himself with an air of dignity. He carried a sense of power and authority unique to his person. I held back the urge to do a one-eighty and flee, and instead I took the hem of my dress and offered a polite curtsy.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lord Zakhar,” I said. “I am Karen, the wife of the Margrave of Conrad.”

“I’m overjoyed to finally meet the so-called apple of Lady Saburova’s eye.”

Though they shared a parent, Zakhar and Reinald were anything but alike. Zakhar looked upon me with a friendly gaze, and his entire being made one think of a noble lineage, though in a very different manner to the likes of Dominik.

“I have heard much about you from both Lady Saburova and my younger brother. You have been very kind to Reinald, though I’m sure it caused you some inconvenience. You are exactly the sort of young lady one would expect of Lady Saburova’s sister.”

“It was nothing, really. Sir Reinald has been nothing but kind to me in our meetings.”

I couldn’t help but think back to the warning Reinald left me. This did not seem like it was the sort of conversation I could simply smile and nod my way through, and so I quietly steeled myself.

“Lady Saburova, I must say, the Kirsten siblings are all so very good-looking. How could you not dote over a sister of such intelligence?”

“Well, she *is* my sister. It’s only natural I find her completely and utterly adorable. But you’re going to leave me sulking should you continue to praise her in front of me like that.”

“My apologies. But it must also be said that the king’s rose is as stunning as ever. Why, I feel on the verge of being crushed under your blinding beauty. While I lack the poetry of words for it, in truth I can barely stand the elegance.”

Zakhar’s smooth talking was impressive, of this there was no doubt. He knew

exactly the sort of compliments that Gerda liked, and Gerda herself looked pleased. Perhaps communication skills were a necessity when one became the lord of their family.

I waited patiently and politely, smiling and laughing until I was called upon to speak. The fact that Reinald was nearby did not escape my notice. He was talking to my younger brother Emil.

“I talked to the margrave earlier,” said Zakhar. “He’s talking with your father now, so I called you over, thinking you might be bored. I hope I didn’t cause you any trouble in doing so.”

“Not in the least!” I replied. “To have one such as Lord Zakhar show concern for me is like something out of a dream.”

“Today is your brother’s inauguration. A grand day that is to be celebrated, and rightfully so. I brought my young brother, hoping to share in some of this joy with my own family. I assume you haven’t had the chance to see him yet. Reinald!”

I knew he was going to do that! I knew it!

This was the entire reason that I had been called here. When Reinald arrived, it was with the expression of a man who was seeing me for the first time today.

“Sir Reinald,” I said. “How long has it been since I saw you at Saburova Villa? I am so happy to see you again.”

“You are as beautiful as ever,” he replied. “Congratulations on your wedding.”

“Thank you.”

The...incident I’d been caught up in was never made public, so for all intents and purposes it had never happened.

“I know you’re already acquaintances, but one must admit that it feels different to meet on a day as vibrant as this one. Reinald, we are fortunate to be in the Kirstens’ good graces. As such, wouldn’t you agree that we should also make an effort to deepen our ties with the Conrads?”

“While I understand what you are saying, brother, thrusting me upon them will only make Lady Karen uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable? There’s no need to be so shy. You are my brother, and I am nothing but proud of you!”

Zakhar then burst into laughter. His intent had been all too easy to read, and so I was grateful for Reinald doing what he could in terms of evasive tactics. As someone who was presently married, I felt that minding my words had been the correct choice.

“And how unfortunate that the two of you look so good together,” added Greta.

I was in front of the king’s concubine and a marquis. My only option was to smile awkwardly. Reinald offered only the hint of a shrug.

Ugh, what is this hellscape I’m being put through?

Arno was busy with all the guests he had to speak to, and though Achim was on standby, he was in no position to interrupt such a conversation. Emil, meanwhile, was gazing up at Reinald as though he were awestruck.

“Oh, speaking of which,” said Zakhar, “is it true that you are attending tomorrow’s ball, Margravine Conrad?”

“Yes,” I replied. “It seemed a wonderful opportunity, seeing as we aren’t in the capital very often, and so my older siblings invited me. My husband also encouraged the idea... We’re both looking forward to it.”

“Ah, how wonderful. Though, I daresay the margrave hasn’t been to the castle for quite some time. Are you saying that he intends to join you?”

“That is what he has told me, yes.”

“Well, then...” remarked Zakhar. “He was made aware of the king’s ball quite some time ago, that much is true. But to think he’ll really be there. The king will be thrilled.”

He was made aware of it quite some time ago?

I had not heard anything of this particular fact. It was my understanding that the margrave had learned of it by way of Arno and Gerda’s invitation. And yet, now it seemed that was not actually the case. I thought back to the night before we left for the capital and the margrave telling me he could not attend, his

hands trembling as he spoke. I did not let any of this show on my face, however.

“That said, I have heard that the margrave has not been in particularly fine health of late,” continued Zakhar. “Lady Conrad, should it so happen that the margrave falls ill, I insist that you call upon Reinald. Should he be of use to you, I am sure he would be more than happy to attend in the margrave’s place.”

“Your kindness is very much appreciated,” I said. “But should the margrave fall ill, then as his wife, I too would...”

“If you are attending in his place, then I don’t see any problem,” said Zakhar, cutting me off. “Our family has strong ties with the Kirstens, and I want for you to be able to rely on us in times of need. In fact, I insist on it. Won’t you do Reinald the honor of nominating him as your partner for the ball?”

I had let myself feel some relief when the margrave was made the topic of conversation, only for the tables to be suddenly turned on me. I was also certain that the glimmer of bold confidence I saw in Zakhar’s eyes was not just a product of my imagination.

“Brother, I have no intention of attending the ball given my duties,” said Reinald. “And besides, it is rude to both the margrave and Lady Karen to discuss such a thing.”

“We are discussing nothing more than a potential outcome. What issue is there in you potentially acting as the margravine’s chaperone? And besides, your aides are all exceptional at their work; surely they can cover for you.”

Reinald had done his utmost, but now that Zakhar had said this much, it was impossible to say “I refuse” in a public setting such as this one.

“And what of you, Lady Conrad?” asked Reinald.

“I am nothing but grateful for Lord Zakhar’s kindness. In the case of an emergency, it would be my pleasure to have your company for the ball.”

Ugh, what is this? I’m walking straight into a trap, aren’t I?

By the satisfied grin on Gerda’s face, it was clear that she still hadn’t given up either. I was just starting to mentally fade away, when who should arrive but my (according to Gerda, temporary) husband, the margrave. His appearance

was a godsend, and I went over to him immediately. He looked very tired.

“You look so pale,” I said. “Did something happen with my father?”

“Things went much smoother than I had expected,” he replied. “I’ll be fine, it’s nothing for you to worry about. I see you were speaking with your family and the young master of the Rodenwald family.”

“You must mean the current lord of the family.”

“Ah, yes. In which case, I must say hello.”

Zakhar himself went and got a chair, then gestured for the margrave to join everyone.

“It has been such a long time, margrave,” he said. “You were always a tremendous support for my father before me...but you look rather pale. Shall we call for a doctor?”

“No thank you, that won’t be necessary.”

Zakhar was respectful and polite, which was appropriate when you considered the age difference, but Zakhar was higher in terms of rank. In his behavior were hints of deference and respect to an elder, a sight quite rare for one of Zakhar’s standing.

“It has been quite a few years since we met in person, yes,” said the margrave. “Though I have heard much of what the Rodenwalds have been doing. You are doing a most respectable job, Zakhar, and I’m certain your parents are proud of your achievements as they watch from the heavens.”

“Thank you. I am not half the man my father was, but I am striving always to become more. But to be praised as such by a man formerly known as the king’s right hand is a tremendous honor...”

“There is no need for such talk, Zakhar, for now is the time for the young, like yourself, to shine. The old tales of the elderly are no longer very interesting.”

The margrave then turned to Gerda with a kind smile.

“I hope you will forgive this old man for being so rude as to address you while seated,” he said. “I am Kamil, Margrave of Conrad, and I have been tasked with protecting the western border. I believe we have yet to be formally

introduced.”

At events like this one, the margrave carried a dignified air about him, but there was a kindness in it. He carried authority not unlike Zakhar, but it was different; the margrave was warm like the soft fluffiness of freshly baked bread. Gerda was taken aback by such an attitude, and so she offered a respectful reply of her own. The margrave then turned his gaze on Reinald, at which point something in him changed slightly.

“And you must be Reinald. Meeting you here...”

“Yes, it is a pleasure to meet you,” said Reinald, speaking as though to cut the margrave off. “I have heard much about you.”

For a brief instant, something seemed to strike the margrave as odd, but then he laughed.

“I’m sure it was nothing worth sharing. And while you might not remember, I recall seeing you when you were a tiny thing being held in your mother’s arms. You have certainly come a long way since then.”

If you didn’t know any better, the two men were having an ordinary conversation. I alone, however, could tell that the margrave was not quite himself. It was his eyes—there was something sad about them, as though he were recalling a painful memory. There was no time for anyone to say anything more, however, for that was when Arno and Emil came over, and suddenly the conversation returned to its brighter tone. Arno was the star of the show, after all, so praise and congratulations were heaped upon him, and the gloom from earlier slipped away into the shadows.

In the end, we left the inauguration party early as the margrave wasn’t feeling well. Given that we had greeted and chatted with all the people we were expected to at such an event, there were no issues with our early exit. That said, Marquis Rodenwald’s words as we were leaving left me nothing if not curious.

“My younger brother is quite the troublemaker. Do take care of him.”

With the margrave heading home, Sven and Nico also opted to follow suit. Sven had done the rounds and made his best efforts to talk to relatives and

family associates, and he looked decidedly relieved that it was all over.

“We talk around in such circles at these parties that I thought I was going to bite off my own tongue,” he said.

“But what a marvelous job you did of speaking without tripping over yourself,” remarked Nico. “I couldn’t understand half of what you were saying, but you appeared to do your duty with great diligence!”

“You had it easy...”

“And that’s fine, isn’t it?” I said. “From what I saw, you were covering for her.”

“Because she’d have been in a world of trouble if I hadn’t.”

Sven had essentially been Nico’s shield. Nico was overjoyed at the gesture, and the margrave watched the two of them with a gentle smile. Though I hadn’t actually heard him say anything about it, I got the feeling he was supportive of the feelings blooming between the two. If he’d felt any other way about it, he likely would have said as much the moment I’d brought up the idea of dressing Nico up to attend as Sven’s plus-one. And being that the two were all dressed up, the margrave had a suggestion.

“Given how early it is, why don’t the two of you go out for tea?” he said. “Opportunities like this one come few and far between, after all. Karen, do make sure to keep an eye on their manners and teach them whatever they’re lacking.”

“Very well,” I replied. “What a wonderful idea. Yes. It’s time that Nico learned the pain of good etiquette.”

“I didn’t get a chance to eat any of the Kirsten-made dishes, and they looked amazing. I’ll be right mad if I don’t at least get to indulge in one of Mrs. Henrik’s baked sweets.”

“It’s always food with you,” I said. “Why do you insist on being such a glutton?”

“But did you see it? The food on display was all so delectable. So many dishes! So many desserts! So much that I guarantee they won’t finish all of it... I

suppose they'll all just live on leftovers for a few days following the party..."

"Nico, you might want to sit down for this," I said, "but they'll throw out the leftovers..."

"What?!"

Believe me, girl, I get it. Talk about a tragic waste of food.

"Back in Conrad we'd have sent it home discreetly with the staff, and kept the guests none the wiser..." muttered Sven.

"Sven," I said. "I'm sure you're aware you shouldn't mention that to anyone, yes?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't want to be called stingy, would we?"

And we couldn't really tell others it was a matter of dignity either.

"By the way, my lady," said Nico, "your hair looks different. Did you have someone touch it up for you? Mrs. Henrik was most curious."

"Oh, uh...quite coincidentally, a very kind person happened along and did it for me..." I muttered.

"They've a deft set of hands, that much is certain. It looks wonderful on you."

"Oh. Thank...you...?" I murmured.

"Why have you gone all red?" asked Sven. "Was it something you ate?"

Sven was perhaps not particularly adept at reading the subtleties of a female face except when it came to Nico. As for Mrs. Henrik, she was already thinking about preparations for the following day. The ball. That was now the most important thing on the horizon. And now that I'd been unable to decline Marquis Rodenwald's offer, I had to officially appoint Reinald as my escort.

I consulted the margrave about the matter, but in the end he agreed that I had no choice but to attend the ball with Reinald. He was surprised by Zakhar's persistence but said that if the man was going to be so pushy, then I had no choice but to go with Reinald.

"Why would he be so insistent on the two of you?" he mused. "Half of it likely comes from Lady Saburova, who wishes only for your happiness, but for Zakhar

it's likely that there's more to it."

"The party was the first time I'd ever made his acquaintance," I admitted apologetically. "I do not know the nature of his person."

"There's no need for you to apologize for such a thing. This all came about because of my inability to attend the ball myself. I have not been to the castle in a long time, and it's likely that Zakhar was well aware of that fact."

"Which is to say...he might not have made the offer out of the goodness of his heart?"

"He may be compelled by the desire to see his brother married... Well, I would like to say as much, but I am not entirely sure. The inner workings of the family are beyond our control," said the margrave, sipping from a cup of medicinal tea that Doctor Emma had prepared. "I don't know the particulars, being that I only speak to him on matters of the business he now does on his parents' behalf. It's possible there is a specific reason he would like to see a link formed between your families."

"But in terms of what the Kirstens have to offer, there is only my sister."

"And that might be of decisive importance. It is a wise move to have pieces in place for various potential futures, and no more so than the present time, in which it feels that anything could happen at any time."

"I apologize for being so blunt, but do you mean in the case that something might happen to the two princes?"

I was making a very big leap, but if my sister were to become pregnant, it would mean yet another potential heir to the throne. And while such a question would result in reproach were I to ask it to an ordinary noble, the margrave was my teacher; our relationship was one of a different nature.

"It is a tragedy that princes David and Demyan do not get along. Perhaps things would be different were Prince David willing to mend his conduct to a degree, but then again, Prince Demyan is also far too sensitive in certain matters."

"And so they despise the very sight of one another."

“My darling, must you speak to Karen about such things?” said Doctor Emma.

“The two princes have far too much pride, and neither is willing to budge,” said the margrave. “Even if we’re being generous, Prince David is—”

Before he could finish, Doctor Emma cut the margrave off with a sharp, one-word rebuke.

“Darling!”

Clearly she believed that I was too young to be getting into the mud of such a filthy topic. She was worried, in other words.

“Doctor Emma, it’s fine,” I said. “The margrave is always teaching me about all manner of different things. All the time, in fact. I’m most grateful. I enjoy having the chance to think about such topics.”

“All...the...time?” uttered Doctor Emma, incredulous.

“There’s more to my studies than simply sales and bookkeeping,” I said. “Recently, we discussed some of the more terrifying moments of the war, and how to bring a castle down from the inside during a siege...”

“Karen,” said Doctor Emma.

I noticed the change in her tone immediately. I knew then that my attempt at an explanation had backfired.

“The margrave and I have a matter to discuss,” continued the doctor. “Would you mind leaving us for a moment? I’m sure you have preparations to see to for the ball anyway, and you wouldn’t want to keep Mrs. Henrik waiting, would you?”

“Oh, yes, quite right,” I said. “I suppose I’ll take my leave, then...”

There were, it must be said, times in which one could defy Doctor Emma. This was *not* one such time. As I left, I saw the distant gaze of the margrave, now resigned to his fate.

“Emma, please, you must listen,” he said. “As you know, I am no longer a young man, and in my advanced years I thought it best to share my experiences with the young. But how few there are who will listen to the ramblings of an old man, you see...”

“Enough excuses,” replied Doctor Emma.

She then closed the door. Whatever they spoke of next, I was not privy to. But internally I placed my hands together and bowed deeply in apology for having been the very reason the margrave now found himself in his current predicament.

12: A Lady's War is One of Preparation

Preparations for the ball were upon me, and they were anything but leisurely. With Mrs. Henrik in charge and Nico back in her usual uniform, I was dragged off by the housemaids in order to get ready. I thought three maids was excessive, but there were even more than I expected.

“Lady Saburova has asked that you visit her as you are, so that you can be dressed at her villa. But we are not so uncouth as to see you delivered in your present condition. Now, strip down to your undergarments and lie face down, please.”

“Huh...?” was all I could muster in response.

On the night before the ball, I was first subjected to a most careful full body aromatic oil massage. In this world they had no idea what lymph nodes even were, but judging by what I was put through they nonetheless knew how lymphatic massages worked. Perhaps it would have been a wonderfully refreshing experience were I older, but in my case it was all I could do just to keep myself from bursting into laughter at how ticklish the whole thing was.

While the massage was going on, I was put through a full body shave, after which I was summarily tossed into a bathtub filled with rose petals. Once my hair was thoroughly washed and treated with something or other, the rest of me was washed with a vigor that told me not even a single speck of dirt or grime was to be tolerated.

“I can wash my own body!” I cried.

“Oh, do be quiet, would you? You’re unsightly.”

“I am no such thing! Mrs. Henrik! Don’t you think you’re being too harsh on me as of late? Mrs. Henrik!”

“I do believe I asked you to keep quiet!”

They were even sure to scrub behind my ears. I knew then that struggling was futile, and so I let the maids have their way. Once the bath was over, my body

was covered in lotion, and a small amount of oil was rubbed into my hair.

Ugh... Must this go on forever?!

It would have been one thing were I allowed a moment to rest, but during it all Mrs. Henrik made me rehearse with her the way in which I was to speak to the king and all the people who had long-standing relationships with the Conrad region.

“The margrave has not attended any events in the castle for a very long time, and so it is a certainty that the king will speak with you,” explained Mrs. Henrik. “I am sure you understand fully well that you are not to make *any* mistakes.”

“Yes ma’am...” I droned.

“And that tone is unacceptable!”

Everything I’d gone through—since noon, I might add—was new to me, and it left me completely and utterly exhausted. Once the day was through, I was in bed and asleep almost immediately, but even then the struggles were far from over; the war was waiting for me as soon as I woke the following morning.

On the breakfast table was freshly baked bread, omelets made with exorbitant amounts of butter, slices of ham, and an abundance of cheese along with apples, oranges, and a host of other fruits. Then, of course, there was the soup filled with potato, corn, and onion. It was the very definition of a hearty breakfast, and yet I was only allowed a single plate. A single plate upon which I was given a small amount of dried fruit, some apple jam, and a smattering of cheese. Outside of that, there was only a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Huh? Look at the difference in the amounts on these plates,” I said. “Why do I have so little?!”

“One can’t eat too much when they have a ball to attend,” said Mrs. Henrik. “A mostly empty stomach is exactly what you want.”

This would have been fine were I still living alone or with the Kirstens, but since moving to Conrad I had begun living a healthier life, and that meant healthier helpings of food. Now that I was living such a life, the meager amount of food put before me was like a kind of torture. While Mrs. Henrik knew nothing of calorie counting, she had still thought very carefully about what to

serve me; everything on my plate provided necessary nutrition.

Which still did little to quell the suffering!

“You can pull whatever disgruntled faces you like,” said Mrs. Henrik. “Lady Saburova is sure to serve refreshments when you arrive at her villa, so you shan’t eat any more than this for breakfast.”

“Talk about a light breakfast...” muttered Wendel.

I made a point of ignoring Wendel’s comment on how little I was allowed to eat and finished my miserable breakfast. After that, it was straight into another massage. A little before noon, I left the Conrad villa with Nico in tow.

The margrave had been unwell since the morning—well, not really, but that was the cover for his absence—and so messengers had been sent to inform Reinald that his services would indeed be required. It was all too easy for me to imagine the smug, triumphant look on Zakhar’s face.

I could finally take a break, but the sheer amount of preparations—both already passed and still coming—had me completely exhausted.

“Thanks to you and all of the servants there’s no swelling in my legs whatsoever,” I remarked, “but there’s no way I could keep up such a lifestyle.”

“Mrs. Henrik is especially enthusiastic,” commented Nico. “Ever since your attendance was confirmed, she’s been nothing if not committed to learning all the most recent and most popular beauty treatments.”

“And I appreciate it. I really do, but...”

“I will do what I can to support you, of course.”

“You won’t be there with me?”

“I was allowed my fun yesterday, and besides, my heart couldn’t take it!”

Nico and Mrs. Henrik would be attending the ball, but they would remain on standby in a waiting room specifically for servants and maids.

“I wonder why my sister wanted me to come at noon?” I pondered. “If I’d come in the afternoon, we’d still have ample time to prepare for the ball... I have a bad feeling about this.”

And so it was that my ominous gut instinct proved true. Upon our arrival at Saburova villa, Gerda was out to meet us in a heartbeat. First, she served me tea along with a tiny portion of meat and fruit. No carbohydrates. Those were not allowed.

“You’re not attending the ball on a full stomach,” said Gerda. “There’s no way I’ll let you turn up with your stomach poking out for all to see.”

My sister was like an unyielding wall in her determination. After my (unfulfilling) meal, an oil was rubbed on my lips, apparently to stop them from chapping. By this point, I had essentially given up on having my way and let Gerda do as she wished.

I was then thrown into a bath that was easily large enough for three people, and I was once again subjected to aromatic oils. Following that, a big fan was waved to keep me from breaking into a sweat while the rest of my preparations were seen to: my scalp, my fingernails, my undergarments, my makeup, and my hair. It was a very long, drawn out process complete with short breaks, and it was nothing if not time-consuming.

“Sister,” I said, “do you always go to such lengths to prepare for an event?”

I asked this with a certain respect for the process, but my expectations were summarily shattered by Gerda’s flat refusal.

“Of course not,” she said. “Ordinarily I would start in the late afternoon, but given that you’re coming, I wanted to handle your preparations myself.”

She was doing this out of the kindness of her heart. What more could I say? I had to admit, it also felt like a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and it wasn’t like I didn’t *like* being made beautiful...I just wished they didn’t need to do a full-body scrub down.

With preparations at about eighty percent complete and the time reaching late afternoon, I was given a pill. It had the effect of giving my breath the scent of flowers. Oral hygiene, essentially. The smell was rather powerful before I swallowed the pill in question, and the feeling of a scent meant for the nose filling the entirety of your mouth is...difficult to describe. I had nothing but a healthy respect for the thorough preparation that went into such balls, but I was now worried as to whether it was healthy or not.

And while I was utterly exhausted by the end of it, the preparations were not all for nothing. When put in front of a mirror, I was the very definition of a stunning young lady from every conceivable angle. So at the very least, in terms of appearances I was perfect. I can tell you this: if *I'd* seen me walking down the street, I know I'd have taken a second glance. And while it might have just been my imagination, I got the sense that Mrs. Henrik, Nico, and Gerda's servants all took some pride in my transformation.

"While you're not quite up to my level, you're as adorable as you should be given your age, and you emanate an aura of purity and cleanliness. What gentleman could resist? You look wonderful, Karen."

"Why, thank you. As do you, sister."

My dress for the ball was not what I wore to the inauguration party. For starters, the material was entirely different. It definitely looked to make more of an impact in terms of womanly charms, which is to say it showed more skin. Then again, I suppose that was the whole point anyway.

"Reinald will be coming for you," said Gerda, "so head to the castle with him."

"And what of you, sister?" I asked.

"I have to see the king, which means I'll leave a touch earlier. I would have *loved* to see Reinald's reaction when he sees you, but alas."

"Oh, in which case, off you go. You don't want to be late."

"It's not just about teasing you, Karen. Reinald is always so cool and composed. Wouldn't it be fun to see him taken off guard? Surprised? Surely you see where I'm coming from, yes?"

"I will admit to a certain creeping curiosity, yes..."

And so Gerda left, and I waited. Not long after, I was informed that my escort had arrived, and I left the villa to find a man so handsome it almost made me dizzy. Behind him was a black carriage polished to a sheen, chestnut horses with stunning manes, and a number of guards positioned around it standing at attention.

The situation was, in every way, perfect. It was the very definition of the word

“dreamlike.” Had I not been at the center of it, I might have looked at it all in awe and wonder; but alas, I *was*, and so I could only stand there, lost and confused, and unsure of how best to respond. My flustered feelings, however, were less obvious outside of my head, and when the man in front of the carriage noticed me, he looked for a moment astonished. Then, with the hint of a smile on his lips, he reached a hand out to me.

“Your hand, Miss Karen,” he said. “Though it may be for a fleeting period, I am at your service, completely and utterly. It is my pleasure to be your escort this evening.”

“The pleasure...is all...mine,” I muttered.

I put my hand over his, and with a gentle grip he brought my fingertips to his lips—as was now seemingly tradition—and placed upon them a kiss. But it seemed to me that Reinald had yet another surprise in store for me.

“You are always stunning, Miss Karen, but today I must admit to being astonished. It was as if a princess had appeared from the villa. The look suits you very much.”

The comfortable lilt of his voice, the destructive power of his words; both were nearly overwhelming. That particular attack wasn’t fatal, however; I knew it was his job to play the compliment game. The real damage lay elsewhere. Let me put it this way: it was as if looks (read: his face) could kill. Until now, I had not been aware of this particular method of murder.

“Sir Reinald, you too are always very dashing, and yet tonight you look practically radiant.”

“I am merely wearing a different outfit,” he replied. “This amounts to nothing in comparison to a woman’s efforts to display her beauty.”

That this was the effect when the man merely changed outfits was enough to make a woman cry. Still, we could not stand around in front of the villa talking for the rest of the evening, so Reinald saw me aboard his carriage, then sat by my side. As the carriage slowly rocked from side to side and we left for the castle, I let the smile on my face drop. And though I did not look to see, I suspected that the same was true of Reinald too.

“I apologize for all the trouble I am causing you,” I said.

“It is I who should apologize for my brother’s behavior,” replied Reinald. “Given the difference in your positions, you had no choice but to accept his offer.”

“Indeed, all I could do was say yes. But more importantly, it is my understanding that under ordinary circumstances you would be working. I worry that the ball will cause you problems.”

“I have entrusted the work to my officers. They are perfectly capable of handling things even without me. I brought the topic up with my brother in the hopes it would make for an adequate excuse; I have never much enjoyed balls and similar such events.”

“No? You do not like how bustling they are?”

“I just feel very out of place, no matter what I do. While I have nothing against the affluent and the opulent, there are times at which it is far too much for me to bear.”

Reinald looked somewhat irritated, as though he were thinking back to an old memory. I could not comment either way, having never seen the castle myself. I wondered if it really was as opulent as he suggested.

“I am sure a great many ladies are looking forward to seeing you,” I said. “They’d be so disappointed to hear you say as such. Are you quite sure it’s okay to say such things in my company?”

“Does it bother you?”

“No. I quite enjoy the fact you trust me with your thoughts. That said, I am a little surprised you would be so open.”

I had admittedly expected something more in the way of, to put it bluntly, generally meaningless conversation.

“Why would I try to put on airs now? You and I both tried to avoid the party yesterday, did we not? We are partners in crime.”

“Now that you mention it, yes, we did. We are. It only makes sense that balls aren’t quite your cup of tea, now that I think of it.”

To hear him say the words “partners in crime” was so unexpected it left me giggling.

“If I had told my sister that I didn’t want to attend the ball, it’s all too easy for me to imagine the scolding I’d be in for,” I said. “But what of you, Sir Reinald? Do you have friends who would do likewise?”

“My brother would have his complaints, but my friends are all cut from the same cloth. Escape would be something they’d welcome.”

“Horrible company you keep,” I remarked, “and yet, I can’t help but envy you.”

Our quiet chuckles reverberated through the carriage, and then Reinald surprised me by saying the following:

“You did not wish for marriage with me, Miss Karen, and for that I am grateful.”

Is that really something to be grateful for?

“It has been a while since I met someone who does not fear the empire,” Reinald continued, resting his elbow on the edge of the window. “I felt that my brother had stepped out of line when he had made his move, but I am grateful at least for our having met. There is potential in our relationship.”

“I am years younger than you,” I said. “I fear I am not worthy of such kind words.”

“Age has nothing to do with it. And besides, you are of such calm demeanor it is sometimes difficult to believe your age.”

“Now *that* I must protest.”

“It is a compliment, and I want you to take it as such. Your sister is not the only one who believes you to be a stunning and adorable young maiden. To that fact I, too, will attest.”

He said such things in such a straightforward, confident manner. Why was it that it made me feel like he was a practiced hand at these matters? Though it should have left me blushing, Reinald’s manners and gestures were the very portrait of casual repose, which seemed to put me at ease too.

“My sister is a little excessive in her doting,” I said, “and I believe her overprotective nature is one reason we’re here, but...why is it that Marquis Rodenwald wants to see you with a family of your own?”

It was something of a bold question, but I felt that with Reinald being so open with me, he was likely to answer it.

“Are you curious?” he asked in return.

“To be honest, very,” I said. “You are already entirely independent. Now, I understand that the marquis may want to use his relatives to secure stronger ties for the family, and yet...”

I was unsure if I should have said that, but Reinald made no move to stop me.

“Wasn’t this all something you could have brushed aside?” I asked. “You are still single, after all, and you told me there were other circumstances when it came to our potential marriage.”

“Straight to the point, I see.”

“Our time is limited. That and, yes... I’ve realized something through our various conversations.”

“Oh?”

“We’re not like everyone else. We’re a little odd. Conversation of a more direct nature is something that puts the both of us at ease, no?”

Reinald crossed his legs and smiled as he let out a thoughtful “Hmm.” He looked so good it was almost vexing.

“Yes, it’s true. I do feel more at ease.”

“As do I. In which case, a more casual manner means neither of us have to suffer such pains, yes.”

This intrigued Reinald, and he nodded in agreement.

“Given that I spent so much time away from noble society,” I went on, “I am not the sort of person who speaks in circles, like the others. Whenever I have to attend an event, I’m always uncertain of how to respond to people. It’s very much an ordeal for me.”

“How surprising,” replied Reinald. “You hold yourself in a manner far beyond that of a teenager.”

“I must admit, that doesn’t feel very much like a compliment.”

So he would not give me the answer I wanted. It seemed he did not want to talk about it. He and his brother held conflicting points of view.

“It would seem we both have our ordeals to work through,” he said.

A strange sense of empathy rose between us, and I couldn’t help but wonder for a moment, “*What if Reinald and I...?*” And yet, I could not forget what it was I really wanted: a place in which I could gulp down beer at will and spend the entire day lazing around in my underwear. And no, I won’t have anyone calling such a person a deadbeat. In a sense, it is a truly splendid manner of living.

Though it was true that I enjoyed my days in Conrad, my life there was built on the premise that some day I was going to leave. From the very start, marrying into a noble family was never really an option.

“Your goals remain unclear to me,” said Reinald, “but are you looking to join forces?”

“Oh, I never meant anything so deep in what I said,” I replied. “There is no need for us to do such a thing. There is nothing for us in the event that we try.”

What battle was there for us to fight? Reinald looked at me, unable to make a judgment.

“Please do not misunderstand me,” I said. “Didn’t you just say there is potential in our relationship? I merely want to avoid creating a reason for us to quarrel between ourselves.”

With things going so well between us, I didn’t want our siblings to be the reason our relationship soured.

“I don’t want our conversation getting too complicated. I’m quite fond of Nika and Elena, and I don’t want to hate you, the person to whom they’ve sworn their loyalty. Oh, which is to say I’m quite fond of you too, Sir Reinald.”

Hmm? Why does he look so surprised all of a sudden?

“In any case, I live far from the capital, which leaves me lacking in

information,” I continued. “My thought was that if I could just ask you a little about the circumstances, I might better understand how Marquis Rodenwald thinks, which might in turn make him easier to avoid.”

And of course, I was also kind of curious anyway.

“If you want to laugh at me because I’m just some girl entertaining foolish ideas, then go ahead. Or is the idea of such a relationship off-limits?”

“I never said that...”

I was aware that I had been talking too much, but I got the sense that trying to play Reinald for the fool was unwise. That, and I really did want us to get along. I felt that if I opened my heart to him a little, then perhaps he might respond in kind.

“I apologize,” said Reinald. “I was not aware that you were so fond of my officers.”

Perhaps it made him happy that his own officers were well-liked; I sensed a softness in his smile.

“If you were simply approaching me with thoughts of using me for some purpose, I would have approached you in very much the same way,” he continued. “But you have spoken in such an open and honest way that I couldn’t refuse, even if I wanted to.”

I had not intended to say anything so strange, and so I was surprised. I hadn’t expected a conversation like this to bring out a smile in him.

“As for your previous question, it’s nothing, really. They merely want to tie me down and keep me connected to Falkrum.”

I followed Reinald’s gaze out the window. The carriage was in no hurry, and it would be some time before we reached the castle.

“They...?” I asked.

“At some point, I will return to the place I belong, and they fear that. They cannot help but think about what might happen.”

“The place you belong... Do you mean the empire?”

For a time, Reinald simply smiled.

“Much of the influence of the Rodenwald family is built on the authority of a particular nation,” he said finally. “But should they lose that... Well, my brother can barely handle the thought. And so, he wants for me to have a wife and a family in this nation. As long as there remains some kind of anchor, so to speak, my brother believes that I will leave some of my heart here with them.”

I had never thought much about the Rodenwald family before, but Reinald put things into perspective. The considerable military force at the family’s disposal was thanks to Reinald, and many believed it could be put to work if such a thing was necessary.

Reinald sighed; it was at once both sad and sympathetic.

“He does not make things easy for himself. He needs only to believe in himself, and march forward; what good will come of him scrambling to hold on to an authority that is not even his to begin with?”

His expression was one that would melt a lady’s heart, but something of what he said tugged at me.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. “The circumstances are indeed clearer to me. But, uh...when you say...what might happen, do you mean that Marquis Rodenwald will be left with nothing?”

“Indeed. And my brother’s fears are only heightened by the idea that I have no attachment to this nation.”

This comment, too, was rather shocking. Reinald saw my eyes go wide.

“Do you like this country, Miss Karen?” he asked suddenly.

“Wha... Uh, yes. I was born and raised here. And while it isn’t always the *easiest* place to live, if faced with a simple choice between like or not, I choose the former.”

“It is a good thing that you can answer as such. I feel some might envy that you can answer so honestly.”

“Envy? Sir Reinald...do you hate Falkrum?”

“I am not fond of it,” he answered. “However, I don’t want you to

misunderstand me. I do not hate any of the ordinary people that call the place home. And I am glad to have found someone to talk to like yourself.”

The melancholy which had hovered over him when he spoke of his brother was gone. I was taken by surprise at the sudden topic and felt unsure how to respond, but it seemed that Reinald was not looking for a response.

“I have said too much,” he said finally. “I seem to lose some control of my tongue whenever I am in your company.”

He chuckled wryly. It was an expression I was seeing for the first time.

“O...”

Oh.

Was what I was going to say, but then the carriage came to a halt. I tumbled forward and almost straight into the opposite wall, but I was saved by Reinald’s hand.

“What was that?” he muttered.

He was just about to ask those outside when there was a knock at the carriage door.

“Lord Reinald, my apologies, but would you mind stepping outside for a moment?” said Moritz, whose voice I recognized.

“Very well,” he replied, and then turning to me, he added, “I will be back soon.”

Reinald made sure I was comfortably back in my seat and left. As the door was closing behind him, I caught a glimpse of a man on his knees. With all the people who would have been around, you may be wondering why this man in particular caught my eye. The answer was in his appearance. Though he was covered in an old and dirty hooded cloak, beneath I caught a hint of much higher-quality garb. As for the man himself, all I could make out was that he was around forty, with stubble growing freely around his jaw.

I can’t see anything with the door closed. Perhaps I could lean over and take a peek... No, actually, I think I’ll hold off.

There was already much to consider with regard to the story I had just been

told. For one, the relationship between Reinald and Marquis Rodenwald. They'd looked like the very portrait of amicable brothers, but I suppose it was true enough to say that all families were more complicated than they appeared. That said, even the concept of "family" itself wasn't so simple where those two were concerned.

"To believe in oneself and march forward..." I muttered.

I didn't not think there were many who could march to the beat of their own drum without fear of the potential consequences. Anyone who made such a statement definitively was either an idiot of epic proportions, or one who held themselves to an unyielding set of standards. In other words, someone who actually *did* believe in themselves and march forward. I thought of Reinald as the latter. The reasons were simple; first, there was his response to the incident at the guardhouse, then there was the fact that he had people of Moritz and Nika's caliber under his command. Even just those two facts alone made me confident in my appraisal.

As far as impressions went, Moritz in particular did not strike me as the type of person to simply pledge loyalty to his lord. He was more the type to bow his head for more selfish, self-involved reasons. I was biased, of course, and so my take on things might have been off, but in my head, this was the only way to make the puzzle pieces fit.

The truth of the matter was, I very rarely—if ever—considered in any great depth the movements and actions of other people. This was perhaps because I had lived a rather solitary life, but it might also have been because I had zero interest in other people. In any case, as I mused over the thought, Reinald returned.

"My apologies," he said. "Simply a case of the wrong person. We'd best hurry."

I did not pry; I got the sense it was something I was not to poke my nose into. Not even if the gaze of the man I'd seen looked trapped, as if he were cornered and at his wit's end.

The carriage once again got to moving, but the comfortable air of earlier had all but evaporated, and Reinald was lost in thought.

“I wanted to ask you, Sir Reinald, if you know a girl about the same age as me by the name of Ernesta?”

“Ernesta...” replied Reinald. “No, the name is unfamiliar to me.”

“I believe she may have a connection with Sixtus.”

“I see. He is a man with his fingers in a great many pies in a great many places. It is likely some of what he does has slipped my notice. This Ernesta is an associate of yours?”

“A friend. I can’t speak of it in detail as it would take too much time, but...”

I went on to describe the broad strokes of the situation. Reinald did not give me much in the way of a response at first, but when I mentioned her aptitude for magic something seemed to click for him.

“I do recall hearing that Sixtus recently recruited a new officer,” he said. “She was not named Ernesta, but she was indeed around the same age as you.”

“Would it be possible to meet her?” I asked.

“I will check with Sixtus. I am set to meet with him later.”

“Thank you ever so much.”

Though it had taken some time, speaking to Reinald had indeed been the right decision. And while I wanted this to put an end to our talk of important business, the unfortunate truth was that there was yet one secret I had to divulge. I also had to tell Reinald posthaste, as our carriage had now joined the queue of others at the castle, and it would not be long before we were due to alight.

I gathered my wits about me and sat up straight. Reinald noticed the change in my carriage immediately.

“Miss Karen,” he said. “Is there something else on your mind?”

“What I am about to tell you is something I have never told anyone else,” I said. “But it is imperative that I tell you now. It is a matter of grave importance, and it involves the very ball we are attending.”

Intrigue flashed across Reinald’s eyes. I took a breath. The time had come to

confess. Had it been Arno, I would have had him cover for me, or otherwise have fled, but neither were options with Reinald. As such, I had to man up, as it were. Arno and Gerda had simply forgotten the truth, and everyone at Conrad simply didn't believe that it was possible in the first place. It was for that reason I hadn't said a word about it to any of them.

But here, now, in our carriage, I looked Reinald in the eyes and I came clean.

"I cannot dance," I said.

Clearly, this was not the confession that Reinald had been expecting. As our carriage neared the castle entrance, he was taken completely by surprise and summarily dropped into thought.

"When you say 'cannot,' to exactly what extent do you mean?" he asked.

"'Cannot,' as in, 'at all,'" I replied.

That was why the ball never appealed to me in the first place.

"To be more exact, I know how to start, but the first thirty seconds is about as much as I can remember," I confessed. "After that, it's best to simply assume that I know nothing at all."

"And this is not a joke, is it? You're serious?"

I let out a wry chuckle.

"Oh, how wonderful it would be if all of this were just some joke," I replied.

As for you, dear reader, I'd like a moment to defend myself.

Why couldn't I dance? Naturally, I will raise the point that I never practiced. And why not? The answer is, of course, the Kirsten kerfuffle that occurred when I was fourteen. Though the exact timing differs from family to family, the Kirstens made their official social debuts between the ages of fifteen and sixteen. Dancing practice with members of the opposite sex starts at around fourteen. However, due to the chaos that hit the Kirsten household and my subsequent expulsion, not only was there nobody to teach me how to dance, the need for it vanished completely.

As for the Conrads, they simply never threw these kinds of formal parties; when there was cause for celebration, everybody simply gathered to have a

good time. As you might expect, there were no fancy dresses or formal dances at such gatherings. My lessons while at Conrad were all practical; they were the skills and techniques necessary to make a living. I did not spend my time there thinking about the social circles of the nobility.

As for why nobody brought my dancing up when the idea of my going to the ball was raised, I think Arno and Gerda simply forgot, or otherwise assumed that I had learned to dance while at Conrad. Nobody in Conrad raised the issue because none of them had any idea that I had never learned.

It bears repeating, but the exact timing for dance practice varies greatly from house to house. Some start as early as ten, and because one's official debut also varies, it's no wonder I couldn't dance.

All of that said, yes, I admit that I should have said something earlier...

"And mimicking my movements is out of the question? Even if I were to give you support, or lift you so that you didn't have to worry about the steps?"

Reinald did seem considerably strong. If I had the basics down, my dress would hide the movements of my feet, which made this idea somewhat feasible. However, for this to work, it was still necessary that I be able to move in time with the music. I would also need a base level of physical coordination. And while I was somewhat confident in my endurance, I want you to understand that this was all too much to ask of someone who had no real aptitude for physical activity.

Posture, footwork, a sense of rhythm; *all* of this was hammered into the body over a year of practice. Had I been able to master it all in just a few weeks, then I wouldn't be here giving up before it all began. And in my case, if you included travel time, a few weeks wasn't even a few weeks at all.

"While I appreciate the offer, my musical sensibility, which is to say, my ability to move in time to music, is nonexistent."

To put it bluntly, I simply could not understand classical music. I'd have had a better chance if they played hip-hop. I had lived in a world of pop music, both domestic and from abroad; the classical music people enjoyed in Falkrum was far too highbrow for the likes of me.

“If I were to accept your physical assistance, so to speak, I may be able to dance in such a way that will inevitably cause you some degree of physical pain. However, to anybody who knows anything about dancing, my failures will be clear as day. It will not be a pretty sight.”

I knew full well that any attempt at dancing would result in my slipping, losing balance, and tripping over myself. I was not so reckless as to attempt to win a losing battle.

“And when you say you can dance up to the first thirty seconds...?”

“For a time, I watched my sister when she was practicing dance,” I explained. “That’s why I remember a little of the opening steps. My memories are not particularly clear, however.”

“And anything more would be...challenging?”

“Far worse, I fear. I doubt I would even be able to maintain proper posture.”

As we talked through the matter, our carriage reached the castle doors. We were almost out of time. We could not stop in front of the doors for long. Reinald alighted, then offered me his hand.

“Let us form a plan of action while we walk,” he said. “We are not out of time yet.”

I stepped out of the carriage and was met by the sight of near-blinding, opulent luxury. We were still only at the castle entrance, and already two statues on either side of the doors loomed over us, exerting a unique sense of presence. We passed through a set of double doors that would have required a group to fully open, and into a corridor filled with a light different to that of lamps. It was enough to take your breath away, and it hit me with an odd sense of nostalgia; the lights reminded me of fluorescent lamps.

“It’s magical illumination, isn’t it?” I whispered. “Even just one of these lights is quite expensive on its own. This is a most lavish way to make use of them...”

“I’d say it’s on account of the occasion,” replied Reinald, smiling. “But even then, yes. I daresay they’re overdoing it.”

It was etiquette at these events for the lady to take the man’s hand, and for

the two to slowly and quietly enter. Given that I wasn't particularly used to the shoes I was wearing, I was grateful for Reinald's help.

The entrance we had arrived at was reserved for the invited guests. All of the servants had arrived earlier and entered the castle through a different entrance. The moment Reinald and I were together, I felt gazes fall upon us, as I had expected.

"Is there a meaning to such a long corridor?" I asked.

"It is a necessity for the arrival of strangers," said Reinald. "It may not be easy to notice, but we are being watched."

It was quite a distance to the ballroom, and so we walked along the corridor with the other guests, gazing at the portraits and antiques that decorated the walls. We gazed upon paintings of past kings and the royal family, and marveled at the art on display. Reinald and I were careful to maintain a distance from the other guests that would allow us to speak without being overheard.

"I'm sure you can surmise exactly *why* I can't dance on your own," I said. "In any case, I would very much appreciate it if you could help me work out a way to avoid dancing entirely."

"Miss Karen, I am unusually stressed by this conundrum. It was most unexpected."

"Oh dear. You always look so calm and in control. I was almost ready to convince myself that you had come up with a solution."

"You must be joking. Regardless, it is my duty to ensure that your evening goes well."

Reinald remained as cool and calm as always, but his tone of voice told me that he was indeed trying to come up with a solution to my problem.

"I am ashamed to think that once again all I can do is rely on your help..." I muttered.

I really should have brought this up well before we got here, huh?

"Sir Reinald," I said. "Your hairband and your collar decoration. They match the color of my eyes, don't they?"

“They do. I was wondering when you might bring that up.”

“They’re the same color as what my sister dressed me up in. Having such a coordinated look will only draw us more attention.”

Reinald’s hair was tied in a ponytail, and he wore a decorative scarf held in place by a pale blue jewel. Those two items alone weren’t really the issue; the issue was that they were the *exact* color of my dress, which my sister had a craftsman make specifically to match the color of my eyes.

In other words, Reinald and I wore complimentary outfits.

“Let me guess, Sir Reinald,” I said. “You wore such an outfit so as to lead people to believe that the rumors are, in fact, true.”

“These matching colors of ours are a coincidence, I can assure you,” he replied.

“Then, I will choose to believe you. It’s not like I’ll do something so rash as to demand you remove the items in question.”

The moment Reinald arrived to pick me up at Saburova villa, I was convinced it was his intent to use the ball to his advantage. As such, I had decided that I would make use of the situation to mine also.

“Seeing as we’re dressed like this, I’ll help ward off any unwanted advances from interested young ladies. Let’s just get through this, shall we?”

I glanced at Reinald. A certain amusement flashed across his eyes.

“They’re going to get entirely the wrong idea.”

“They already *had* the wrong idea because you yourself never denied the rumors. And now you dress up like this. What am I to do?”

“It’s only a few hours, and I trust that you’ll be fine.”

“Then I’ll put my faith in that trust. So...”

“Yes, let’s do our best. If you’ve put such trust in me, then I, too, will do my utmost.”

People were always stronger when they had an objective in front of them. And while I felt I’d already embarrassed myself a good number of times already,

all of that was far better than screwing things up so gravely that recovery became impossible.

“The hardest time for us will be after the king has given his speech and seen to his personal greetings. That said, we still have time to think of a plan. If we can’t think of anything, we’ll just have to hide you.”

“Is that even possible?” I asked.

“It seems you have forgotten my line of work, Miss Karen. A number of my officers are in attendance today as security. Hiding you will be a simple thing.”

“That seems like the simplest option, so why don’t we just do that?”

“Because it may result in rumors most unfavorable. Should you go missing during the ball along with the man who was a former potential marriage partner...well, I’m sure you can imagine what people will say.”

“Then we’ll make it our last resort. I don’t want to cause the margrave any trouble.”

I had hoped I might be able to come up with an idea myself, but I had never been to an evening ball, or any party like one. I didn’t have a clear understanding of the event and could only work from what I’d been told. As such, the only ideas I’d come up with were to either hide or feign an illness.

Soon we began to near the main hall, and my heart began to race. I wasn’t used to such locations, and the world opening up before me was of the type I’d only ever heard about in the fairy tales I’d been told as a girl. It was around here that my dress no longer felt like such a burden.

We walked into the main hall, and I was met by something out of a dream. The high ceiling was filled from corner to corner with painted art, and every single one of the room’s pillars was carved with the same geometric patterns. The oval glass windows on the walls were several times larger than ordinary windows, and so clean as to be almost transparent. Lavish chandeliers filled with candles hung from the ceilings, but upon closer inspection, they were lit not by flame but some other light source.

It was a sight you only ever saw in movies and while on tours, and it was so overwhelming I felt sure that it would swallow me whole until the gentle tug of

Reinald's hand pulled me along.



“Let’s keep moving,” he said. “We are about to enter a battlefield of a sort, and it is imperative that we keep our wits about us.”

I was so very grateful to have someone with me so accustomed to this “battlefield.” Had I been alone, I would almost certainly have been glued to the spot, staring up and around me in dumbstruck awe. If I’d had a smartphone, it’s a given that I would have taken photos.

“If we have some spare time, we can take a walk around the hall,” said Reinald. “We won’t be able to see everything, but getting a general feel for the place may come in handy.”

“I would like that very much,” I replied.

“Let’s wait for our moment, then move to the front of the crowd. There’s no doubt that the king will look to say a few words to you this evening. Once he’s done, we’ll move in accordance with the circumstances.”

I was the representative for the Margrave of Conrad, and was prepared to see out my duties as such. When Reinald said “move in accordance with the circumstances,” what he meant was making sure to greet relatives and acquaintances, including of course Marquis Rodenwald.

“By the way, Miss Karen, I simply must ask about your hair ornament this evening. Was it something selected by Lady Saburova? The two of you seem to have vastly different tastes.”

“You noticed? My sister prepared everything for me, but I selected the ornament myself. My sister’s tastes are a little... Well, no, they’re the complete opposite of my own...”

“I see. I suppose that’s why it suits you so. Unlike the sorts of accessories that are popular with women here in Falkrum, you look far better in those made by craftsmen elsewhere.”

Elsewhere.

I had to think on this a moment before it came to me. Reinald was not direct in his wording. *Here. Elsewhere.* He was talking about the empire. One of the ornaments in question was the hair piece Reinald had mentioned—crafted to

look like a flower with five petals—but there was also a silver necklace decorated with small jewels, and a matching set of earrings. These were far from the norm, however; the vast majority of women around us wore thick bracelets and accessories designed around big gemstones and jewels.

“Are these kinds of accessories more common...over there?” I asked.

“A difference of national culture. A matter of what’s in vogue, I suppose. While accessories made in the Falkrum style are popular, many prefer the sort of thing you are currently wearing...myself among them.”

“In which case, the jewelry stores must be quite the sight. I am beyond envious.”

I had never really considered the idea of such cultural differences. And if tastes in jewelry differed, then it was likely that tastes in clothing differed also. At Falkrum’s balls, a woman’s lavish opulence was a chance to display her position. *Simple* was the last word you’d choose to describe it. And perhaps this all came from Falkrum’s plentiful natural resources and the raw gemstones that were a part of that. The nation’s wealth was exhibited in the giant pieces of expensive rock on display.

“It is incredibly rare to find raw gemstones of considerable size over there,” said Reinald. “Craftsmen thus compete through their abilities; how good they are at such skills as weaving, meshwork, carving, and engraving.”

Even larger gemstones, it seemed, were cut into smaller pieces.

As we walked through the main hall, many a passionate gaze was thrown in our direction. All of them came from women staring at Reinald, but not a one had the courage to approach.

“I know of the place only through textbooks and what I have been taught,” I said, “but I have heard it is a country that recognizes independence and an individual’s ability.”

“Independence and ability, you say?”

“Don’t you find that wonderful? The idea that you can grasp an opportunity with your own hands, through your actions and abilities, without the prerequisite that you come from a family of ‘good stock,’ so to speak? It is a

place where one can dream of more.”

“And indeed, many do. The reality, however, is that you can also say the weak are used as stepping stones for the successful.”

“I understand that there’s an element of wishful thinking to my words, but we’re talking about being able to dream of something more, or never having access to such dreams at all. The difference between those two things is considerable, wouldn’t you say?”

Falkrum was, of course, a good country. It scored points for the fact that it was accommodating of women who wanted to work. But I had also learned from the margrave that the empire had its good points as well. Naturally, the constant internal strife and war didn’t do it any favors, but due to the constant and intense power struggles among its leadership, the marketplace wasn’t locked into the viselike grip of powerful nobles, which was exactly the case in Falkrum.

Put in simple terms, in the empire, buildings and land were owned by the state, but could be purchased. Both men and women could establish companies easily, and given the opportunity, one could rise through the ranks to success. The empire, too, had its nobility, but according to the margrave, opportunities existed there that did not here in Falkrum.

It bears mentioning that I had seen none of this myself, and so I was likely off about some facts. All nations had their problems, and their strengths and weaknesses, but it was also perhaps true to say that the grass always looked greener elsewhere.

“You do not think of the nation as evil?” asked Reinald.

“Evil is a rather simplistic descriptor.”

It was true to say that, during the war, the empire had been the very definition of evil as far as Falkrum was concerned. And perhaps many of the elderly here still believed that very thing, and I just didn’t know about it. But the margrave himself had said something otherwise.

“I’m paraphrasing someone else here,” I said, “but in terms of good and evil, is there really such a thing as an evil country? If there is evil, it resides in those

who... Er, no, actually, sorry. I'll stop right there."

It was not a good idea to say aloud that evil was something that came from those in power. Falkrum was ruled by a royal government. If I said something that sounded like a critique or an insult, it could be seen as *lèse-majesté*. Reinald and I were keeping our voices low and we were unlikely to be overheard, but all the same I saw the blunder I had almost made and kept my mouth shut.

I wondered if I had offended Reinald, and so I looked over at him. He wore a soft, gentle expression. This surprised me; I had not meant to say anything particularly special.

"Oh...I hope I didn't...offend you in any way," I muttered.

"Think nothing of it," he said. "Let's move farther into the hall."

There was nothing more for me to say if he was indeed fine, and a natural smile was far better than something put on. Though that said, I would have been far calmer were it not for all the feverish intense gazes I continued to feel all around us...

"It would seem you are drawing just as much attention as your sister would have," said Reinald. "Be careful not to stray too far from me."

You're the one drawing all the attention!

...was what I wanted to say, but I controlled myself.

An announcement echoed through the room—the king had arrived. Quiet murmurs ran through the crowd while traditional music began to play from behind us. Then, a man positioned in one corner of the main hall began to shout an introduction in a high-pitched voice.

"Please welcome our father and wise, venerable sovereign! The defender of fair and just order in our realms. I present to you all His Majesty, the king of Falkrum!"

Everybody in the room bowed their heads. From where I was standing in the front row, I saw out of the corner of my eye royal attendants pass by. When all sounds of footsteps had ceased, everyone in attendance waited a few seconds

before once more raising their heads.

In front of us, occupying a circular space, was an older-looking couple, and behind them stood another woman. It was the king and his wife, and following them was my sister Gerda. Gerda was usually the type who loudly made her opinions known, no matter the company, and yet here her mouth was clamped shut in the shape of a refined, charming smile. Her usual strong-willed aura was hidden, and the graceful, elegant air that replaced it was, at least for me, a strange sight.

The king and queen did not waver for even an instant under the gaze of the entire room. The king was a man in his fifties, of average height and build, and his eyes brought to mind his son, David. He had no defining features to speak of, so it was his beard that left the strongest impression. Nearby I saw Prince David, his chest bulging with confidence, and with him a man as thin as a willow; Prince Demyan. The king took a moment to look over all his guests with a most satisfied gaze, then he began to speak.

“My beloved subjects, I am glad to have you here this evening.”

His voice echoed powerfully through the hall. This was a man who was used to addressing the public. There was a majesty even in the way he held himself. As everyone listened carefully to the king’s opening address, from somewhere there came a cry.

“Long live the Kingdom of Falkrum!”

Applause followed. With that one cry, others followed, and I did my utmost to hide my awkwardness among it all.

When the king finished his address, everyone took to enjoying the ball. Some mingled with friends and others went looking for new people to talk to, but those standing at the front of the gathered crowd stayed in place. For those the king might greet personally, and for those who wanted to catch his eye, this was what had to be done.

And yet, it was not the king’s wife who accompanied him as he greeted his guests, but his concubine, Lady Saburova. The queen left his side and the two separated to see to their own friends and guests. They did not acknowledge one another, not even with a glance.

The king reached Reinald and me just as we were sipping at the wine that had been brought to us. He arrived just as Reinald had grinned at the sight of me scrunching my face. The flavor of the wine was most unfamiliar to me.

“You must be Gerda’s younger sister,” said the king.

“Your Majesty,” I said, “it is the greatest honor to meet you. I have been so looking forward to this moment, and to finally making your acquaintance.”

I spoke in the exact tone, with the exact words, that Mrs. Henrik had drilled into me. The king, however, waved me off with a hand. He looked both Reinald and me in the eyes, then gave a relaxed nod.

“I have heard much about you from Gerda. You are young, but you have already lived a life of much hardship.”

“Your Majesty,” said Gerda, her eyes daggers pointed at the king, “at least let my sister finish her introductions.”

The king grinned.

“Would you think of *me* for a moment, Gerda, and all the constant flattery I have to subject my ears to?” replied the king. “Your younger sister is very much like you; utterly adorable. I much prefer natural smiles on such faces than tense, nervous expressions. Such things put me at ease.”

My first impression was that he had taken a liking to me.

“And you have married the Margrave of Conrad, yes? A good man.”

“Yes, he and his people have been nothing but excellent to me.”

“It is a strange link that binds us; Gerda’s younger sister becoming the wife of my own brother. And how is he? Is he doing well? I worry about him as he gets older. He hasn’t taken any bad falls yet, has he?”

Brother?

But the king doesn’t have any siblings.

“He is doing quite well,” I replied. “And thanks to your support, the Conrad region has seen a most plentiful harvest. This allows all of Conrad’s people to live happily and peacefully.”

“Hmm. And yet, he once again chooses not to attend my party, I see.”

“He did his utmost so as to make it here this evening, but unfortunately he came down with a fever this morning. I fear it is his age. He was most downhearted.”

“I see. In which case, it is what it is.”

There was little emotion in the king’s utterance, probably because the margrave had not attended any event at the castle for many long years. That the king did not ask me any more about it suggested there were circumstances at play that only he and the margrave were privy to.

“Your Majesty,” said Gerda. “Earlier you referred to the margrave as your brother. For what reason would you call him by such a name?”

“Oh, I haven’t told you? Though the two of us are not related by blood, he was nonetheless like a brother to me. Kamil taught me swordsmanship when I was but a boy, and it was from him that I learned the art of war. He is a friend who, on a number of occasions, has risked his life to ensure the safety of my own.”

The margrave had taught me much over our time together, but not *this*. His hiding it from me was intentional, of that I was sure. Still, I could not let the king know that I was hearing this for the first time, and so I wore a knowing smile.

“You are Gerda’s sister and Kamil’s wife, which makes you family as far as I am concerned,” continued the king. “Should you need anything at all, simply say the word, and I will do all in my power to help.”

“Such words are wasted on the likes of me, but I am beyond grateful,” I replied.

“I should send Kamil a letter, a gift of some kind... Would you tell him to write to me when he has the chance?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’m sure he will be grateful for your kindness.”

The king nodded, pleased with himself, before he turned to Reinald.

“Reinald, I have heard from Zakhar that you have also been through hardships.”

He spoke casually, without any excess grandeur. The two were already associates.

“I appreciate your concern. I do not know what you have heard, but I can assure you it was nothing.”

“It was a pity about the wedding,” continued the king. “You are a smart man. Gerda’s sister is like a delicate bud, destined to bloom into a beautiful flower, but she is now a married woman, and even pitted against a man of your stature, her husband is a man most deserving. Do not go making any mistakes you will regret.”

“You jest, Your Majesty. I am here merely at the request of my brother. It is my duty to ensure the Margravine is well protected this evening. And more importantly, I notice that your kind words have drawn that very brother’s reproachful gaze.”

“Hmm? Ah, that Zakhar. As always, his ears miss nothing. Karen, Reinald, do enjoy yourselves. This ball, after all, is in celebration of the kingdom’s youth.”

It was a potentially dangerous conversation the two men were having, depending on how you listened to it, but the smiles on their faces showed that it was all in jest.

The king left with Gerda to greet Zakhar and Arno, who was with him. Gerda’s eyes met my own as she left. “*Have fun!*” they said. It was a sign that our brief audience with the king had come to an end, and my heart filled with relief. It was thanks to Reinald, after all, that things had wrapped up so quickly.

“Thank you for bringing that to a close so smoothly, Sir Reinald,” I said, speaking softly now that we were free from all the attention that came with being in the king’s presence. “And, er...”

“That isn’t the first time His Majesty has done such a thing. He likes to make people uncomfortable. He enjoys watching them squirm.”

“Which is to say that meeting him for the first time is something of a harrowing experience.”

“Yes, and on that note, I doubt you’ll make it to his list of favorite playthings.”

“Should I be disappointed?”

“No, personally I think it’s delightful.”

As someone meeting the king for the first time, I had little idea what kind of an impression I’d left. To Reinald, however, it seemed perfectly clear. In any case, he wasn’t someone I wanted to get any closer to, and so I was nothing but glad to be off his radar, so to speak.

Just as the tension in my shoulders loosened and I began to relax, a noblewoman appeared before me, stunning me into silence as she stopped us with a word. Reinald smiled.

“Your Majesty,” he said politely. “My humblest apologies for not noticing you sooner.”

I lowered my head into a bow.

“It’s fine. The girl with you. Is she Lady Saburova’s younger sister?”

The queen was about the same age as the king. Some white could be seen here and there in her hair, but she was in good shape and boasted a youthful complexion. Her back was as straight as a steel rod, and one could feel the energy drifting from her. I opened my mouth to speak, but the queen silenced me with a wave of her closed fan.

“No,” she said. “I don’t want to hear even a word from a girl of such standing.”

I promptly shut my mouth. They were harsh words, spoken with a bold confidence. And while yes, I was shocked by them, the truth is that I understood them completely. Given the emotions likely swirling in her person, the queen’s behavior was only natural, all things considered.

Think about it: the king had entered the room with his wife by his side, but he made his rounds and greeted his guests with his younger concubine. It would have been a crushing blow to the woman’s dignity. She had been his partner for years, after all. And then I appeared, attending the ball for no other reason than that I was the younger sister of the king’s new concubine. How could the queen bear it? Who *wouldn’t* have been outraged?

The air immediately around us froze in an instant, but was quickly filled with hushed whispers. The area around the king and Gerda, however, was still bright and jovial, so excluding our small group the hall remained unchanged. In other words, the queen—and only the queen—was now no longer a part of the king's inner circle.

“The margrave was invited due to long-standing relations, but...to think such a dignified man could marry such a... Ugh, it makes me ill. I'm leaving.”

The chamberlain attempted to stop her but to no avail; the queen refused to listen to anyone. Though many watched her leave with sympathy in their eyes, not a single person called out in an attempt to stop her. The king himself made absolutely no attempt to go looking for her. Still, as I watched her stride away, her every gesture filled with rage and loneliness, I couldn't help feeling a touch of sorrow.

The king had eyes only for Gerda now. I had no reason to feel enraged myself, and yet as a member of the Kirsten family, sympathy wasn't quite the order of the day either. In the end, I could only sigh.

“Fortunately, there weren't many around to hear that,” said Reinald.

“It's okay,” I replied. “I'm not hurt, it's just...”

“Just what?”

“No, forget it. I'd only be scolded for my lack of modesty for saying anything.”

If the king had decided that his heart was with his concubine now, then that was that. However, I couldn't help wishing that he would have at least done so in such a way that was more considerate of his queen. But I couldn't say this aloud, no matter how indirectly I tried to put it. Any comment hinting as such would only be considered disrespectful.

“Er... There are a number of people I'd best greet while we're here,” I said. “I imagine that goes for you too, yes?”

“Given our similar circumstances, I was just about to suggest we get to that right away.”

“Then let's do exactly that. We'll discuss...my two left feet and what to do

about them afterward.”

We had decided to attend the ball, and so at the very least we had to do the noble thing of meeting and greeting related nobles before considering any kind of getaway. In other words, it was time to do the rounds. I didn’t actually know what the margrave’s associates and relatives looked like, but they knew me; as such, just by wandering around they stopped me to say hello. It was wonderfully easy.

The ball was also all the more easy to navigate thanks to Reinald’s presence, which helped me avoid the approaches of other attending gentlemen. It goes without saying, but many who attended such balls did so in the hopes of meeting a young woman and lighting the sparks of romance. In fact, it could be said that the vast majority attended specifically for this reason, which often made it impossible to avoid their approaches. Simply attending the ball was itself a marker of status, and many a man wanted to put this to good use.

Whenever I was taken by surprise, Reinald was there to swoop in and scoop me out of trouble. I, too, did likewise. The ball was full of women who had their eye on Reinald, and many made their enmity toward me as clear as day. Let’s just say there were more than I could count on a single hand.

“I believe it may well be time to make our move,” said Reinald eventually. “We’re being stopped by more people than I had expected.”

“Where should we go?”

“Let’s head to the gardens for now. I know a place that isn’t easy to get to for most.”

Out the one open window in the hall was the adjoining garden. In direct contrast to the lively noise of the hall, the gardens were quiet and relaxed, and those who wanted a little peace and quiet walked out there under the dim lamps. The path Reinald took me down, however, was in the opposite direction of these people. From the entrance, we proceeded around a hidden corner to a stone bench, where I could finally give my feet a chance to rest. I wasn’t used to the shoes I was wearing at all.

“This place isn’t easy to see from the main hall,” explained Reinald, “and so very few come out here. This makes it the perfect hiding place.”

“I’m surprised. It seems like the perfect spot to relax.”

“The dim lighting keeps most away. Take a wrong turn and suddenly you’ll be too far to know what’s going on in the main hall. People who don’t know the castle very well won’t come out this way.”

The moonlight provided more than ample illumination now that we were here, but the path to the bench had admittedly been rather dim and unclear.

“Do you mind if I excuse myself for a moment?” Reinald asked, his gaze elsewhere. “I’d like to check on something with my people here.”

“Oh, by all means, don’t mind me,” I replied. “I’ll be right here relaxing.”

“I’m certain that Nika is somewhere nearby. I won’t be long.”

Once Reinald was gone, I relaxed into a stretch. My throat was parched. I’d been talking almost nonstop from my first sip of wine. I’d thought it would be a cakewalk as long as I wasn’t talking to the king himself, but I’d been far more tense than I expected.

I looked up at the sky as the distant music of the main hall drifted to my ears. The ball was far from over. From here, things would naturally swell to peak levels of excitement, at which point people would take their partner’s hands and begin dancing. And for the briefest of moments, I found myself wishing that I had taken dancing lessons.

That moment, however, was interrupted by the nearby rustling of leaves. I leaned closer to the noise to listen more carefully, and I heard the sounds of a man and a young woman in some kind of scuffle. With each second their voices grew nearer.

“Please stop, I beg of you. Please don’t do such a thing...” said the woman.

“Playing hard to get, huh? Which family are you with, hmm? Are you quite sure you want to see what happens when someone refuses *my* advances?”

The woman’s voice was faint, but panicked. Clearly the man was attempting to make a move on her. I wanted nothing more than to simply roll my eyes at how close it was happening to the hall, but by the sounds of things the advances were entirely one-sided. A part of me wanted to help the young

woman immediately, but unfortunately, I knew the man's voice.

It was Prince David. After putting his hands on my sister, it seemed he was still not done, and was now attempting to put those same grimy fingers all over a young woman whose acquaintance he'd barely even made. That said, we knew each other; if I jumped in on my own, he might simply pull rank on me. In which case, I wondered if perhaps it was better to wait for Reinald's return, in case David turned violent. For a moment, memories of Lang's blows flashed through my mind. I felt lost as my gaze wandered, looking for where the prince might be.

"Stop! Somebody! Somebody, please! Help!"

The woman's faint whispers were now cries, and hearing them steeled my resolve. I *had* to do something, even if it simply meant buying time for Reinald to return.

Hang on. Don't I know that voice?

The realization had come slow, because I'd never imagined hearing it here.

"Ern!" I cried, throwing caution to the wind as I dove into the fray.

Before me was a man's back, and past it a girl being undressed.

"What are you doing?!" I cried out.

I was scared. Terrified, in fact. I knew who I was dealing with, and what it meant to oppose his wishes. For this reason I put as much into my voice as I could. The man spun around at the sound of the sudden intrusion, and even in the dim light I could clearly make out his features; it was indeed Prince David.

Knowing I had the element of surprise on my side, I sprung into action, grabbing David by the shoulders and pulling him backward with everything I had. The move succeeded because he hadn't been expecting me, and before another word could be uttered I thrust myself between him and his target and took the girl by the arms. Her two braids were a mess, but it was her. It was Ern! She looked up at me, dazed and teary-eyed.

"Karen...?" she uttered.

We would have to talk later. I spun to glare at David, who had fallen on his

butt when I'd pulled him off of Ern.

"I don't want to believe it, but is that you, Your Highness?"

"Lady Saburova's younger sister?"

David was beginning to grasp the circumstances now, and his brow furrowed slowly. His face was anything but pleased as he stood to his feet.

"For what reason did you think it appropriate to hand me such a disgrace?" he spat.

"Let me answer your question with one of my own: for what reason did *you* think it appropriate to attempt something so unthinkable?"

"That's between us, but if you must know, we were merely having a little fun..."

"Fun, you say? This girl is a friend of mine, and she is not of a standing anywhere near your own."

"Well, *she* approached me..."

"Then why did she scream for help?"

I chose not to take Ern away, and instead took a step forward. I was the younger sister of Lady Saburova, which made it difficult for David to lay a hand on me. As long as Ern and I stuck together, we'd be fine. David glared at me, his eyes twitching.

"Tch," spat David. "You're nothing more than a commoner."

He strode forward and took a hold of my wrist with such strength it hurt. My back filled with goose bumps in revulsion; it was a grip that brought back memories of the guardhouse. It was then that a voice spoke from behind the prince. It was Reinald, his officers by his side.

"Your Highness," he said, the hint of an ominous smile on his face. "I heard a commotion and came running. What is going on here?"

"Ugh," uttered David. "You too? What do you want?"

"My date for the evening is here. I merely came to see her. More importantly, your aides are looking for you. I'm sure you realize that it would not be good for

your reputation to be involved in a disturbance at an event like this.”

I was so focused on Reinald and David that I didn’t notice the person approaching me. It wasn’t until they tapped me on the shoulder that I noticed Elena.

“But this woman, she...” started the prince.

“I would like it very much if you could release the Margravine,” said Reinald. “It is not just the margravine or Marquis Rodenwald, but also the king who wishes to see no harm come to her person.”

It was Reinald’s mention of the king that finally loosened the prince’s grip. Elena took a defensive position in front of Ern and me. As David walked past Reinald to leave, Reinald offered him a slight bow.

“I promise you that the matter of the Margravine of Conrad and my officer will be kept entirely silent. So I ask only that you, too, forget that this incident happened at all.”

“Hmph. You would protect a mangy stray cat?” muttered David. “It is a fitting plaything for you, the very symbol of betrayal.”

“Stray cats have their charms.”

Neither man looked back at the other. Prince David disappeared into the garden, and finally the tension in the air lifted. Elena grinned.

“Well then,” she said, “nothing to fear anymore, you two. You can come out now, cap.”

Elena spun round as she talked, and Nika revealed herself. She released her grip on the sword at her waist, and shot an icy glare in the direction the prince had left.

“*You can come out now, cap...?* Would you remember what you’re here for, you idiot?”

“Does it even matter?”

“Of course, it matters. Don’t forget your position.”

“Miss Karen, your wrist. Are you hurt?” Reinald asked.

“Oh, Sir Reinald. Thank you. My wrist...it’s fine, he simply grabbed it.”

Elena gently pried my hand loose from Ern’s and looked to take her away.

“Huh? W-Wait j-just a minute!” I stammered.

I lashed out and grabbed a hold of Ern’s clothes. The moment was about to slip away from me, but if I let it do so, how would I ever find out what happened to my best friend? I would not stand for anybody taking her away from me.

“Karen...” uttered Ern.

“Don’t ‘Karen’ me! What are you doing here?! Do you have any idea how worried I was when you just vanished like that?! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“Wha? Huh? You idiot,” replied Ern. “Don’t make such a fuss. Not here. Now let go of me...”

“Idiot? Did you just call me an idiot?! You think I’m going to let a bigger idiot than me, who did an idiotic disappearing act, call *me* an idiot?! I don’t believe this!”

“Calm down! Look around, would you?”

“I *am* calm!”

“Liar!”

I did not let go of Ern. I refused. She was a precious friend, a dedicated member of what I called our grievances gang; she was someone I could go to with any and every grumble and moan, and I was not going to let her slip away from me. And if I let her go this time, I would truly be carrying it all on my own shoulders. When I’d been expelled from the Kirstens, I’d lost all the relationships that came with my position. I’d been unable to make friends in my new school life because it was a whirlwind made up of equal parts pity and curiosity. I’d never been very good at making friends anyway, and so finally discovering Ern was no small feat for me.

In the end, it was Ern who folded; she seemed to understand that no matter what she did, I was not going to give up.

“Fine,” she said. “Fine. You can let go. I’m sorry. But no crying.”

“I’m not crying!”

Ern sighed, then turned to Reinald and bowed her head apologetically.

“Prince David called out to me while I was running an errand,” she said. “I was trying to be cautious, but I’m sorry that I caused such an incident.”

“There was little else you could have done, knowing him. If he sees a woman, he pounces, like a dog with a bone. Consider it a minor bite and forget about it. I’ll make sure the loose ends are tied. It won’t be an issue.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Reinald’s gaze drifted to me, and I shook my head in objection.

No. No, no, no! I won’t let her go! I can’t! I don’t care one bit if you want to call me childish! I did my duties and I talked to the people I had to! I don’t care about what rumors might arise! I care about Ern!

At that point, the man by Reinald’s side chuckled.

“You Excellency, let’s ensure that Prince David shoulders his portion of the responsibility. I’m sure Moritz can explain the circumstances to the king and handle the matter.”

“It won’t be an issue? Fine. See it done, Haring.”

“Understood. Kokoska, you’re with me.”

“Seriously...?”

“Don’t ‘seriously’ me. You know that having Saganov handle things here is the best option.”

With a pout, Elena did as she was told. The kindly-looking Haring then gave a salute and left with Elena following behind him. Reinald, meanwhile, seemed to have an idea.

“Miss Karen, do you mind leaving from a different part of the castle? I will of course see you home.”

“As long as the Conrad servants are told they can leave before we go, I don’t see any problems. I’ll leave the preparations to you.”

“Very good. Let’s start by moving elsewhere.”

“And the ball? It’s not an issue for us to leave?”

“Leave that in the trustworthy hands of Moritz and Haring. One option was always for us to slip away, and I assume you’ve no objections?”

“Seeing as you have everything covered, I’ve no complaints. You are of course okay with me bringing my friend along, yes?”

“Of course. It would seem you’ve found the person you were looking for, and you won’t release her until you get the answers you’re seeking.”

Of that you can be certain.

“Indeed,” I said.

The circumstances were a complete and utter mess, but for me it was a total victory: we’d driven the prince away, and I’d found Ern.

“I’m not going anywhere, Karen, so let go of my hand,” said Ern.

She looked a bit awkward, but she gave every impression that she was willing to go along with things. So, with the distant music of the ball and its chatter as our backdrop, we began walking a path I’d not yet seen. Unlike those others, it was lit only by torchlight; I guessed it was only used by those who knew the castle well.

“It’s not an easy walk in those shoes of yours. Here, take my hand,” said Reinald.

The dress I wore was, it must be said, much heavier than it looked. And, as I’ve mentioned before, the shoes were rather foreign to me. I was the slowest of all of us as we walked, and while I felt some hesitation at the idea of taking Reinald’s hand, he had me take a hold of his arm.

“Oh, er...thank you,” I uttered.

“For all intents and purposes, we are still attending the ball. It is my responsibility this evening to ensure that you are returned home safely.”

There’s no way I am turning around now. I can’t look Ern in the eyes.

We walked for a short time until we reached a small room, complete with the barest of furniture: a low table and a sofa upholstered in red fabric. Ern and I

were ushered inside.

“I’m sure the two of you have a lot of catching up to do,” said Reinald. “We’ll give you a little time to do exactly that.”

The door to the room was shut, leaving Ern and me alone. She wouldn’t meet my gaze. I was practically bursting at the seams, I had so much to say, but before anything else I had to do what was most important. And so I wrapped Ern in the strongest hug I was capable of. This was me we’re talking about here, a person born in a country where, culturally speaking, hugging wasn’t the done thing. But that didn’t matter; I wanted Ern to know just how worried I’d been about her.

“Karen,” she said. “If you hug me too hard, you’re going to ruin all the work that went into your hair...”

“I don’t care about that.”

Ern seemed to be at a loss, stuck within my grasp, but eventually (and with a sigh) her hands crept up to hug me back.

“I had no idea,” she said. “I didn’t know you cared so much. They say that Japanese people are hard to read, and boy, are they right. When you don’t say it and you don’t show it, it’s so easy to assume the wrong thing.”

“But I’m not Japanese anymore, so how does that work? And more to the point...you didn’t know? But you’re a dedicated member of the grievances gang...”

“Karen...”

“My dearest friend just *vanished*; don’t you know how worrying that was? And look, I know that my move all the way to the countryside was a sudden thing too, but I *wrote* you! I *told* you I was coming to *see* you! And then I go to your house and it’s empty and you and your family are just *gone*? I thought I was going out of my mind.”

“I read your letter. I did, it’s just...”

Ern looked troubled as she pulled herself out of my grip. She looked at me from head to toe before speaking again.

“When you said you got married, I thought that was it. I thought we’d never see each other again.”

“That’s a bit cruel, isn’t it?”

“I’m happy to see you, Karen, I really am. And I forgot to say it earlier, but you saved me. Thank you. I really thought there was no way out, but you saved me.”

“Yes, not a position anyone wants to be in. And I’m sorry I didn’t ask earlier, but are you hurt?”

“I just got pushed around a bit. I’m fine. Much better than fists, let me assure you.”

Fists.

Ern was talking about her life before this one. And while she said it quite casually, I knew the fear that such memories brought with them.

“More importantly, Karen, I’m sure there’s a question on your mind that you’re just dying to ask me, no?”

Her tears from the garden had all but vanished. With a cheeky grin, Ern plonked herself on the sofa and puffed out her chest with a self-impressed air. She hadn’t lied either; there was one thing in particular that I had been very, very curious about since the moment I saw her.

“Then I’ll come straight out with it,” I said. “What are you doing in a military uniform, Ern?”

This had been bothering me for a while. First was the fact that Ern and Elena wore the same uniforms, then there was Reinald referring to Ern as “my officer.” I’d wanted to pounce on him with questions right then and there. Ern giggled as a somewhat pompous smile crept at the edges of her mouth.

I’m sorry, Ern, but that attitude of yours is causing me some rage...

“Prepare to be astonished,” she declared, “for upon being headhunted, I have joined Reinald’s corps as an officer.”

“You mean to say you work for the empire now?” I asked.

Ern’s pompous air lasted barely a few seconds.

“How do you know about the empire?” she shot back.

Right then, there was a knock at the door, but before either of us could say anything it opened.

“Well well, good evening,” came a voice. “I heard that a certain little friend was here and I had to say hello...”

It was Six. Why he had even come, I didn’t know. Before I could ask, however, Ern stood to her feet and reached into her uniform.

“Die,” she uttered.

Her voice was so low it shocked me. Her gaze, too, had turned merciless. All emotion had drained from her expression. The pen she’d taken from her uniform flew through the air and collided with Six’s face.

“M-Miss Ern?!” Six cried.

Let me state, right here and now so there are no misunderstandings: Ern was *not* the sort of person who resorted to violence. She’d even said herself that she abhorred it. I had never seen her do anything even remotely aggressive, and that included throwing things around. But here she was, glaring at Six as though he were a detestable insect. She ran over to him and launched a kick straight between his legs, which he miraculously avoided.

“Whoa!” Six screamed. “Ern! Where is this rage coming from?!”

“Don’t go calling me Ern like we’re friends, scum!” she shot back.

“But think about Karen! She needs to know why you’re here, doesn’t she? She needs an explanation! And as the person who both discovered you and recommended your recruitment—”

“I don’t need you. Go away.”

“But I’m your superior! I’m sure of it!”

“Nobody told me that. Now disappear. I don’t even want to see you.”

The Ern whom I thought I knew so well was suddenly kicking a grown man in the leg. She forcibly pushed Six out the door and slammed it shut before returning to the sofa.

“Ern, um...are you sure it was okay to kick him like that? He’s a mage!”

“Don’t worry about it. I do it all the time.”

All the time?

“The way I’ve heard it, Kokoska actually sliced him with a blade, like for real. But even then he was back on his feet in no time. Me kicking him is practically nothing.”

I couldn’t keep up. I didn’t know what to say.

Sliced? With a blade? Elena did that to Six?

“Whatever did he do to you?” I asked.

“To explain *that*,” said Ern, “I have to start with why my family and I suddenly disappeared.”

“Then, by all means, start. I’m all ears.”

Ern looked up at the ceiling with a defeated gaze.

“I want to, but you know, I was actually going to just gloss it over. Like I asked you earlier, how do you know about the empire?”

“That’s not a question with a simple answer. It’s complicated. But earlier, before Haring left, he called Sir Reinald ‘Your Excellency’ in front of me, yes?”

“So everyone at the top is already aware that you know, huh?”

Ern’s reaction told me that she had no idea about the incident at the guardhouse. She was under Reinald’s command, but not privy to all intelligence.

“Let me put it simply,” said Ern. “That piece of shit put my family in debt.”

Debt. Does she mean like...bad debt?

And when she says “piece of shit,” clearly there’s only one person she could be referring to.

“Achim...er, a relative of mine, was looking into your whereabouts for me, and he informed me that your parents both essentially disappeared from Falkrum. Was that part of it all?”

“Yep, that and all of it. All his fault.”

I still couldn't follow. Couldn't understand what it meant. It was in this confusion that Ern revealed to me exactly what Six had done.

"You remember that I had decided to pursue a career in the House of Magic, right?" said Ern.

Of course I did. I knew Ern, and so I'd felt certain her future had been all but assured as part of the House of Magic. And then suddenly she was gone.

"Well, yeah, about that. So because I was a high achieving student, before my position at the House of Magic was official, I received a number of invitations from other places and people, that scummy mage among them. Back then, however, I had no idea that the empire was involved."

Six had introduced himself as a mage of renown and offered Ern a position at a certain location he claimed would pay her much better than the House of Magic. He didn't tell her where she would be working, but he claimed that the salary was much higher and promised that Ern's skills would earn her a private research lab and funding.

Ern turned him down.

"I have received a great many gifts from the Lord, and more than most," continued Ern. "And not to brag, but if I'm well prepared, I'm more powerful than a gang of mountain bandits. I'm talented, and I can understand someone wanting to recruit skilled individuals, but when someone I don't even know starts offering me a deal that's too good to be true, I'm not just going to take it at face value and jump on it like an idiot."

Ern's perspective on things was influenced by her devout faith, which she had brought with her from our past world to this one. She maintained even now that her magical powers were a gift from God.

But it wasn't just Six; Ern turned down all the other offers she received too. But just when she'd decided to walk the slow and steady path to success through the House of Magic, the family business encountered sudden trouble: they were betrayed by a merchant they trusted. Unable to secure further capital, the family business quickly found itself under insurmountable debt. They asked for help from people with healthier finances, but were turned down everywhere.

“If only you’d asked the Kirstens, or Conrad,” I said.

“Are you for real?” Ern said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t think it through properly.”

Even among close relatives, the loaning and repaying of money put a strain on relationships. Ern already knew what it meant to have money troubles, and so she knew this well. That she didn’t come to me to ask for a loan was, for her, out of her feelings of friendship.

So, her family discussed what to do about their problem. Ern suggested the following: first, they would pack up shop and pay back what they could, then Ern would support the family on her income. As mentioned, their debt was overwhelming, so paying it off in its entirety was going to be a real challenge, but Ern wanted to think that if they continued to pay what they could, they’d eventually work something out. But just as they had settled on this course of action, a demon appeared.

It was Six, who came with a whole lot of money and an equally big grin.

“If you agree to work for me,” he’d said, “then I can have your debt wiped clean. No strings attached. I simply need your skills. The work is challenging, and you will have to move house, but I can assure you it is better than where you are now: at the very lowest you can possibly get, and staring into a life of hell itself.”

That was Six’s offer. He also promised to take care of Ern’s parents. So, to pay the family’s debt, Ern signed a magical contract. That was when she learned that Six was an imperial. Her parents, too, knew what it meant in Falkrum to side with the empire, and so to protect against a worst-case scenario, they moved.

“Sounds a bit like a hostage situation to me,” I muttered.

“And it was, honestly, but excluding *him* there are lots of good people in the empire, and I’ve no complaints about the work environment. Well, one day I want to crush that dirty insect into the ground, but still...”

“You really are merciless, aren’t you?” I remarked.

“After what he did to my family, yes.”

In this way, Six shouldered the family debt and Ern came to work under his command. Ern was brought in as a mage, but she didn't need to go with her family. There were more than adequate facilities in Falkrum, and Ern worked as a civil service official.

I couldn't hide my surprise. Achim had dug and dug for information, and Ern had been in Falkrum all along.

“I never had any acquaintances among the nobility in the first place,” explained Ern, “and I largely kept to myself. I sometimes came here to the castle for errands, but that was only to report to people internally. I didn't go out of my way to make myself known, so there was no way your relative could have known.”

Ern was apparently so tense and nervous about her new position that everyone was very kind to her. Elena in particular took care of her, even though she was in a different division entirely. She was an officer through and through, and while there shouldn't have been any common ground between the two young women, one day the truth became clear. It happened when Ern had delivered papers to one Moritz Abelein, who happened to be sympathetic to Ern's circumstances.

“It is bad luck that you came to Six's attention,” he said, “but we all see much in your potential and abilities. I do hope you will do your best for our nation.”

Ern could not believe that someone as high-ranking as Moritz would say such a thing. And when she thought more deeply on what he had said, she realized that those around her felt similarly.

As for why, it was because upon further examination, all of what had happened to put Ern here had been a ruse. Six had asserted some authority on the merchant who started it all so as to put Ern's parents in debt. To make matters worse, when she confronted him about it, the mage showed not even the slightest hint of guilt.

“Ah, yes, your debt,” he said. “I did that. What of it?”

My head ached just listening to it.

“You mean he went *that* far just to recruit you?” I asked. “Are you serious?”

“No jokes. None. All of it was his doing,” replied Ern.

Well, the enraged Ern thus chased Six around and, to be clear, it was the first time in her life that she had ever raised her fist at another human being. Her parents, who had been petrified of their ever-mounting debts, had been pushed so far past their limits that they had even considered suicide as an option. It was, unsurprisingly, their own daughter who talked them out of it, and until they left for the empire they had apologized profusely to Ern for all the suffering they had placed on her shoulders and showered Six in gratitude for his “kindness.”

With her rampage at an end and things having calmed slightly, Ern asked around about what had happened. She discovered that Six was apparently prone to such behavior on occasion.

“The guy has a unique network of contacts, and he’s always wandering around scheming something. He’ll drop by Falkrum when he’s supposed to be in the empire, then just like that he’s over in some desert country, but even then, he’ll pop up where he’s needed right when he’s needed. I don’t get it.”

According to Elena, Sixtus was the very definition of a free spirit, and he could not be contained. However, he also never caused *too* much trouble for Reinald. Being appointed a national mage was a big deal, and so much of what he did was broadly accepted, or otherwise swept under the rug. Rumor had it that Six had much bigger, more devious schemes in the works, but grasping them in their totality was near impossible.

“I asked Reinald if he knew you, but...”

“But he didn’t, did he? Six recruited me of his own volition, and besides, I’m just a low-ranking official anyway.”

“Six has so much more freedom than I thought.”

“He and he alone is pretty much free to do what he wants. I mean, he has plenty of victims; enough that it’s hard to keep track of everything he gets up to.”

“But how did Reinald know that you were one of his people earlier?”

At a mere glance, Reinald had been able to determine that Ern was one of his officers.

“Oh, I see,” said Ern. “I guess you don’t know the color differences in the uniforms, do you? Our uniforms come in black and...almost black, basically. The other guards and soldiers also wear uniforms that make it easy to tell who they serve.”

When Ern mentioned it, I thought back to Prince David’s guards and their gaudy, largely decorative uniforms. In any case, Ern’s rage at Six seemed to have ignited once more, and she took me by the shoulders to say the following:

“It looks like you and Six are already acquainted, so use him if you have to, but whatever you do, *don’t* trust him.”

“Got it,” I said. “But Ern, I really have to ask you something... Are you doing well?”

She seemed to be satisfied in her new working environment, and though she’d been tricked, I thought of her as the sort of person who would run if she really couldn’t handle her circumstances. Six was really the only person around her she had any issues with, but still...

“I’m okay. I’m doing well, and I finally got to see you.”

We hadn’t patched things up entirely, but we hugged again, and I explained to her what had been happening with me. That said, given where we were, I had to give her the short version.

“And you’re serious about someday leaving Conrad?” Ern asked. “That’s why you turned Reinald down...? Are you...? Well, anyway, by the time you leave, I’ll be over the border. If anything happens, come to the empire. I’m sure we’ll be able to find a place for you to work.”

Ern had been able to read into my circumstances and understood my feelings. I couldn’t have been happier. We exchanged details regarding how to contact one another, and not long afterward, Reinald and Nika reappeared.

“It looks like you’ve had a chance to talk things through. You’re finished, I presume?” said Reinald.

“Thank you,” I said. “It was because of you that I could reunite with my friend.”

“Perhaps you were merely looking to help a friend, but in doing so you aided one of my soldiers. For that, you have *my* thanks.”

“In the end, I only made it so we *both* needed rescuing...” I muttered.

“Your actions were nonetheless admirable. It was reckless, yes, but you showed great courage.”

Reinald heaped praise upon me, but nobody knew how powerless I had been more than I myself. I was thankful he thought as much, but the fact that I hadn’t been able to do anything still irked me.

“The ball ended not so long ago,” said Reinald. “The restless are gathering in smaller groups elsewhere, but that has little to do with us. As for the Conrad staff members, they have already left.”

“Thank you for handling that. I will explain the circumstances to them later.”

“As for you disappearing midway through the ball, the official word is that you fell ill. A very select few, however, have been told that the prince was rather impolite to you, and so you needed to take some time to mentally recover from the tirade. Please keep this in mind in case it is brought up. However, I’d like you to also be aware that the chances of this news spreading are very high.”

“Compared to news spreading that I am incapable of dancing, this is more than acceptable,” I said. “I am so grateful for your consideration in the handling of this matter. That said, are you sure it’s okay to speak of the prince in such a way?”

“I didn’t do a thing. Unfortunately, someone simply overheard Prince David berating the Margravine of Conrad, and when that person was talking about it later, one of Lady Saburova’s own maids happened to overhear them.”

But you still... Hm, nope, not going to say it.

“Lady Saburova will likely hear of this from her maids, and if I am asked, then as a loyal subject of the king I will of course tell the truth. As for how Lady Saburova chooses to take the news that you fainted as a result of your ordeal,

well, that is a separate matter.”

“Knowing my sister...” I muttered.

“The prince has always been rather negligent and indiscreet in his dealings with women, and it causes the king great suffering. This much won’t make a huge difference.”

Perhaps Reinald thought it was just the medicine he needed.

“It truly was such an unfortunate turn of events,” I said.

“A truly saddening turn of events, yes. Perhaps it was a punishment of sorts; the Falkrum royal family’s long-dead ancestors bringing judgment upon the prince’s behavior.”

“Oh? Are you the type that believes in ghosts?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter to me; I don’t see the harm even if such spirits existed. Though, if evil spirits and their curses truly existed, I would have died a long time ago.”

Perhaps Reinald’s comment was supposed to be a joke, but I’m not going to lie; it was low-key terrifying. As we were preparing to leave, I turned to Ern. I wanted to be absolutely certain we could stay in touch.

“So if I write you a letter, I address it to the Quach family, yes?” I asked.

“Yes, that way it will definitely get to me. You won’t lose contact with me again.”

“Well, I’m definitely going to write you, so please make sure to reply.”

When Ern had moved, she also changed her family name to Quach. The pronunciation of it was foreign to me, and it turned out that it was also her family name back in our old world.

Finally, it was time for Ern and I to once again part. Reinald, Nika, and a few others were set to join us on the trip home. Boarding a carriage in the complete silence of the castle’s back entrance was a new experience for me, and my heart raced. So when Haring arrived without so much as a sound, I was startled.

“Margravine,” he said, “perhaps you might like to ride together with Saganov

and Kokoska?”

“Though I would very much love to do exactly that, are you quite sure?”

“The ball is long over, and given that there’s nobody around to see things, there’s no reason to hold to formalities either. Your Excellency,” Haring said, addressing Reinald, “Saganov and Kokoska have requested a chance to thank the margravine for her kindness. Do you mind?”

“Given that it was decided earlier, I’ve no reason to object,” replied Reinald.

“Very well, in which case please board this carriage here,” said Haring.

And so it was that, with a helping hand from Nika, I boarded my carriage home.

“Thank you,” I said as she helped me. “I’m not used to dressing like this, and I feared I might topple over.”

“I understand that your dress is much heavier than it looks. Take your time.”

I couldn’t help wondering if the two women were really okay with the idea of sharing the same carriage, but neither of them raised an objection. Ern waved goodbye as our carriage departed, and when it was on its way, Elena let out a relieved breath. Her formal posture crumbled away.

“It’s hard to even breathe with Haring around,” she said. “When he’s on duty, he just never shuts up.”

“Elena, you realize that *we* are still on duty too, yes? Fix that posture of yours.”

“Don’t sweat it, it’s fine,” said Elena casually. “My girl Karen here doesn’t mind, right?”

“My girl...?!” uttered Nika in disbelief.

Nika was struck near speechless. This was all very new to me.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” I said. “Be at ease, by all means.”

“You see,” said Elena, “I just *knew* she’d get it. So what’s the big deal?”

“You i—”

Nika was going to say “idiot.” Judging by her tone of voice, she was going to say it harshly too. Instead, she simply clenched her fists; she didn’t want to say it while I was present.

“I expect at least basic manners and discipline,” said Nika. “Now sit up straight.”

“Yes, ma’am...” replied Elena, stretching both words out.

“Elena...” growled Nika.

This time around, Elena’s reply was much quicker and sharper.

“Yes ma’am!”

I’d originally thought of Elena as a more conscientious young woman, but seeing her now gave me an entirely different impression.

“Really,” I said, “I meant it when I said not to mind me.”

“I appreciate your consideration,” said Nika, “but Elena needs to understand that as soldiers it is our duty to serve.”

“O-Oh, but, er...speaking of which, you two were working all throughout the ball, weren’t you? While we were in the garden, I heard from Sir Reinald that you were posted nearby.”

“We were there as part of the security detail, to protect those attending and to act as Lord Reinald’s bodyguards.”

“Which is to say you were there right from the start, then. You have to be very alert and observant for such work, I’m sure. You’re certainly hardworking, aren’t you!”

“It’s nothing, really.”

Ugh, my opening question was the very definition of a boring conversation starter! But I don’t have many friends! I don’t know how to talk to people! What do I do?!

“That gentleman Haring, he said that the two of you wanted to thank me for something?”

Elena’s face lit up.

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” she said, leaning forward to take my hand. “Nika’s not good at this stuff, so let me handle it. Thank you so much for sending us all those sweets and gifts! You sent them as a token of your gratitude, but you sent more than enough for all of us. Some of it came in very handy, and cap here got plastered on that wine. It really helped ease those daily woes, you know?”

“Elena, I think that’s enough,” said Nika.

“It’s not like we don’t have consumables of our own,” continued Elena, “but they’re all provisions, so we’re hesitant to use them. Having so much we can use freely makes us so happy, you know? The girls who care more about their appearances just love everything you sent! And all those delightful sweets! They were delicious!”

“I’m so happy to hear that you enjoyed it all,” I said.

“Falkrum’s sweets are so sugary, so most of us don’t like them. There’s enough sugar in them to melt your teeth off. Some are convinced that even dogs wouldn’t touch them!”

Once Elena had started speaking, she was off and running. She just let the flow take her wherever it wanted, and I could see the vein at Nika’s temple pulsing with simmering frustration. I knew then that when we parted, Elena would bear the brunt of the eruption that followed.

“But anything that isn’t so overly sweet simply doesn’t last, and so it doesn’t sell,” continued Elena, “and when you *do* find something just right, it’s usually too expensive anyway. I mean, yeah, maybe we’re just talking treats, but they’re an important way to unwind and relax... Though that said, cap here is more of a boozehound than a sweet tooth.”

“I do enjoy a glass of wine from time to time. Lady Karen, on behalf of all of us, including Elena, thank you for your generosity.”

“No, no,” I replied. “It is I who should be giving thanks. While it may have been Sir Reinald’s order, it was you who wielded the blade that saved my life, Nika. And you were there to support me too, Elena. I was nothing but grateful to have the two of you there when things were so hard for me.”

I had not been able to properly thank either of them, and particularly Nika, in

person. When I told them how glad I was to see her again, it was not Nika, but instead Elena who grew teary-eyed. Nika, for her part, shot Elena an exasperated glare.

“Elena,” she said. “Come now, there’s no need for...”

“That’s so wonderful, isn’t it?” Elena uttered, nodding as she wiped her eyes with her sleeves. “Thank you, Karen. Nika is a wonderfully sweet and kind woman, but she’s terrifying when she’s on duty and always barking some abuse or another. It’s been a while since she was thanked for her efforts by the citizenry. Isn’t it just so wonderful, cap?”

Elena was a far more open person than I had expected. I know I had given her express permission to be herself, but even then I hadn’t expected what I got. All the same, I was all for it, though I also got a sense of the hardships she placed upon Nika. That said, Elena’s words could not be ignored.

“That’s such a shame to hear,” I remarked. “Nika is so very dashing.”

“I know!” cried Elena. “I saw the way you looked at her and I just *knew* that you and I were comrades! The cap is so gallant, isn’t she?”

“That she is. And so pretty it takes your breath away.”

It looked as though Elena and I were now, officially, on a first-name basis. No “Lady Karen” for her. She was as excited and gushing as a young girl, and I decided to ask about something that I’d been curious about for a while now.

“You keep calling Nika ‘cap,’ but I was of the understanding that you were members of the same unit. Did you two perhaps graduate from the same school or something like that?” I asked.

“We did!” replied Elena. “As you can guess, Nika was my senior. I adored her and looked up to her, and so, like her, I chose to pursue swordsmanship.”

She explained things quite casually, but Elena had followed Nika’s path all the way through to the same career; no small feat, it must be said.

“Usually I call her captain,” continued Elena, “but when things are more relaxed I just call her cap for short.”

“You really do look up to her, don’t you?” I said.

“Of course. Like I said, I adore her, and even now I still look up to her.”

Elena broke into a broad grin. It was clear now that she suffered none of my own communication issues. And thanks to that, the ride home was filled with conversation. It was only when the Conrad villa came into view that I realized how little we’d talked with Nika.

“My apologies,” I said. “I never meant to ignore you; I simply got wrapped up in the conversation.”

“Oh?” replied Nika, startled. “Uh, I...”

“It’s fine,” said Elena. “Cap here had a great time; she just never knows what to say, that’s all.”

Oh, I see where this leads. I see it all too clearly.

Elena had meant to be something of an encouragement for her idol, but it was the very last thing that Nika wanted. All I could do was avert my gaze. I ignored the merciless smile on Nika’s face, and I pretended not to hear the squeal that came from Elena when she noticed it also.

When we arrived at the Conrad villa, Nico and the others were there to greet us. Sven and Wendel were there too, as was Mrs. Henrik, who could not hide her worry. What shocked me, however, was the sight of Arno and Achim. Arno came running as soon as I alighted.

“Karen, when you disappeared so suddenly we all wondered what had happened to you...” he said.

“What are you doing here? Don’t you have other more important people to be spending this time with?” I asked.

“I left that in Gerda’s care. She couldn’t join us because she needed to stay by the king’s side, but she’s terribly worried about you.”

We hadn’t been able to catch one another at the ball with all the different people we both had to talk to, but seeing him here, he was the very picture of the nobility, even as flustered as he was.

“Lord Kirsten,” said Reinald, stepping forward. “I must apologize for what happened.”

“There’s no need for that,” said Arno. “It came to my attention that you protected my sister from the prince’s thoughtless abuse. Lady Saburova, too, is nothing but grateful.”

“It is nonetheless unfortunately true that I could not fulfill my duties this evening. By the way, I know it’s rather late, but would it be possible to meet with the margrave? I was hoping I might report the details of the incident in person.”

The margrave and Doctor Emma, however, weren’t here to greet us with the others, which struck me as odd.

“The margrave’s feet are giving him some trouble,” explained Whateley, “but he is on the upper floors, waiting for you. He wanted me to let you know that he’d be glad to see you there if necessary.”

“I see. Then I will take him up on his offer.”

Reinald and Arno were all set to discuss the incident with the margrave, which essentially meant it was time to say goodbye. I had to get changed, which meant I might not be able to see Reinald or his people off when they left.

“Thank you ever so much for your kindness and consideration,” I said. “It was perhaps good fortune that you were my escort for the ball this evening.”

“Ah, but thanks to you I too had a most interesting time,” replied Reinald. “The evenings are still cold, so please don’t feel obliged to see us off when we leave. You wouldn’t want to catch a cold.”

This was perhaps the first and last time I would ever wear such a lavish dress, and so I bowed as was expected given the way I was dressed, and Reinald replied with a warm smile.

“You looked truly breathtaking this evening,” he said, “and I mean that from the bottom of my heart.”

Coming from one such as Reinald, this was perhaps the highest compliment. And while they might have simply been polite words for him, I decided to take them at face value. Reinald thus went upstairs to speak with the margrave, I said goodbye to Nika and Elena, and when I was safely surrounded by the usual faces, I took out my hair accessories. Then I stretched. Oh, how I *stretched*. I’d

been putting on a strong front for so long it was like my whole body had gone stiff with all the tension.

“My lady, while I heard the broad details of what happened,” said Nico, “I hope you’ll tell me the particulars tomorrow. Achim, you don’t have to go with Lord Kirsten?”

“I’d only get in the way,” he replied.

Achim looked calm and collected, but there was a searching look in his eyes. Arno had clearly been in a panic, and Achim knew the rumors surrounding Prince David as well as anyone; he was probably much more worried than he was letting on.

“There’s no need for such worry,” I said. “There’s something else I want to talk to you about, however. Do you have some time tomorrow?”

“For you, of course. Gerda was so beside herself with worry that the young master and I are staying here this evening.”

“Excellent. To be completely honest with you, my feet are killing me, and I doubt I’ll be moving around much tomorrow. Sven, Wendel; thank you for coming out to see me.”

“I thought you were going to be way more—hngh!”

Before Sven could finish, Wendel had pushed him aside. The young boy, so much smarter than his older brother, walked up and held out his hand. When my eyes went wide with confusion, his nostrils flared as a look of disapproval spread across his face.

“I can see that it’s difficult for you to walk, and it would seem my brother doesn’t have his wits about him,” said Wendel quite curtly, “so I will lend you a hand instead.”

“Oh my, why thank you,” I said.

I took the young gentleman’s hand and finally began the walk to my room, and to rest. But first I had to get changed, and then explain things. On top of that, there was something I needed to ask the margrave. A part of me entertained the idea of taking a short nap, but I knew better; if I allowed myself

the luxury of sleep, I wouldn't wake until the following morning.

However, given that I was covered in makeup and had sweat profusely under my heavy dress, I decided that today I would allow myself a proper bath.

"It's been a long day," said Nico. "My lady, you looked wonderful this evening."

"Thank you. And while it's quite nice to get dressed up for such events, can I ask you something? Do people who attend such events every evening not get stiff shoulders?"

"I don't know any such people myself, so I can't say for certain...but I'd guess they do it because they enjoy it, no?"

"But is it *really* so enjoyable? Don't you think getting too accustomed to luxury is a frightening prospect?"

"You are concerned with the oddest things, my lady. Isn't it only natural for the nobility to live a life of luxury?"

It felt so nice to have Nico's gentle hands washing my hair and washing away the soapsuds with warm water. As of late, I'd been allowing Nico to help me in the bath, and I felt no aversion to it whatsoever. I'd grown completely used to it.

"Are you sure you want to spend so much time relaxing like this?" Nico asked. "Sir Reinald might leave early, you know."

"And if he does, let him," I replied. "My first priority is refreshing myself right here in the bath."

"My lady, keep that up and the good ones will slip away from you."

"It's far too reckless to think of that man as a potential partner. He barely has the time of day for a girl like me."

"I don't think so. He looks upon you with a most kindly gaze. Now, hold on a moment while I dry your hair."

Nico sounded most indignant, and in fact it took me a moment to realize how strange her words were. When I looked up at her, she was standing there with a towel outstretched and a most infuriated look on her face.

“I heard *everything* from Sven,” she said. “But I wanted to hear it all from *you*.”

“But a good opportunity to do so kept slipping away from me... Ah! You’re being rough! This is very aggressive, Nico!”

“And yes, I know I like to talk, so I’m sure that if you’d told me much earlier, I would have told someone about it.”

So she would have let it slip, then.

“But I’m not like that anymore,” Nico continued, “so there’s absolutely no need to be worried.”

So she said, but she clearly still wasn’t satisfied. Her aggressive hair drying was proof enough that she was still sulking about it, and so I took her silent protest like a good girl. By the time the bath was over, Nico was back in good spirits, and as she came toward me with my dress in her arms, I told her to get some rest.

“I can handle the rest myself,” I said. “You can have an early night.”

“But your pajamas...”

“I’m not a child, Nico, I can do that much myself. And don’t act like you’re not tired either; you were with me all day today, working.”

“Hmph. Mrs. Henrik has already retired for the evening, so if you need anything later nobody’s going to be around to help you.”

“And that’s just fine. But wait; Mrs. Henrik has gone to bed *already*?” I asked.

It wasn’t a jab at the woman or anything like that. I asked because it was most curious. For events like the one I’d attended, Mrs. Henrik was almost always the last one up. Nico thought the same, and she informed me that Mrs. Henrik had indeed retired early.

“Ever since we arrived at the castle today, she’s been unwell,” said Nico. “And did you notice that, even upon your return, she didn’t have much to say?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. You’re right.”

Ordinarily, Mrs. Henrik would have come to check on me before I took my

bath.

I'm going to have to check in on her tomorrow.

"My lady, I'm going to bed now," said Nico. "You're sure you don't need anything?"

"Not a thing, Nico. So please, get yourself some rest. And thank you for all your help today."

Even putting away the dress was something I thought could be saved for tomorrow. Still, it was Nico's job, and so I wasn't going to force her not to do it. By now, I assumed that Reinald had left, but even if he hadn't, I planned to take him at his word and not worry about seeing him off.

Once I was sure that Nico was gone, I jumped into bed. I made all the neatly tucked-in sheets all messy, and I'll admit it; lazing around felt glorious.

"I think I'm done with uncomfortable clothing for a while..." I murmured.

It was already annoying enough simply getting into my pajamas. I was in lingerie, yes, but the sleeves were long and so I didn't see the problem sleeping in it. About five minutes after I was in bed, it happened. I was starting to doze off, my hair still damp, when I woke to a knock at the door.

I should have been sleepy, but with a start I was wide awake. And once again, there was a soft series of knocks on the door that connected mine to the one next to it.

"Nico?" I asked.

Perhaps she forgot something, I thought. But when I checked the room next door, it was empty. The jewelry and accessories I'd worn were still right there on the table where I'd left them. I walked over to the candle stand to blow out the candles, but felt suddenly hesitant at the idea of shrouding the room in darkness.

The room was empty. The only door to my bedroom was this one. Fear crept up on me as I looked around the room, and then I noticed the strange shape on the sofa.

"Hey there."

I was shocked into silence. The doors and windows were all closed, and there'd been nobody on the sofa when I'd passed it earlier.

"This would be the second time we've met like this."

It was Six. He leaned back into the sofa, his legs crossed. He looked completely unfazed by my shock.

"To be honest, I wanted to talk to you while we were at the castle," he said, smiling, "but that girl, well...she's terrifying. That and...she's quite clever. She put a strange protection over you, perhaps to make sure you couldn't be toyed with."

Protection? Toyed with? What?

I couldn't understand what Six was saying. While I tried to parse some meaning from his words, the mage went on muttering to himself.

"Then again, there's no making it in the empire if you don't have some guts, so it's not entirely a bad thing. But Ern, Elena... I wonder why they despise me? Do you have any idea, Miss Karen?"

"Wha? How would I...?"

"Well, it's all just humans, isn't it? It doesn't really matter. In any case, I am here to talk to you."

Huh? The heck? Just how self-centered is this guy?

I don't know why, but even though Six seemed to like me, and even though he wore an amiable smile, I was *very* creeped out by him being here. Maybe it was Ern's warning, but I just had a really bad feeling about it. That's probably why alarm bells were ringing instinctively in my head, screaming at me to look for a way out.

"I happened to be observing you for a time today..." Six started.

Then, the tiniest of sounds escaped from my lips, causing him to pause.

"Yip...?" Six asked curiously, repeating after me.

That was when the rest of it came.

"Yeeeeeeeeaaaaaaarrrrgh!" I screamed.

My voice was so high-pitched it surprised even me. Six's jaw dropped in utter shock, but I couldn't have cared less.

"Huh?" Six uttered. "Oh, come now, Miss Karen. There's a time and a place for jokes, and you're not the sort of person to—"

I screamed again.

"Don't come near me!" I cried. "Ahhh! No!"

Whatever was in reach that wasn't nailed down, I threw at Six. I did try to be careful, but the ink bottle hit a picture frame which fell upon an antique pot, which summarily shattered. It was like something out of a poor comedy routine.

Still, this was no time to be worrying about the state of an antique pot.

I didn't give Sixtus a chance to utter even one more word. When he tried to approach me, I ran and screamed all the way to the door.

"Somebody help me!"

I wasn't really Six's victim, *per se*, but I understood that in meeting with him now, *something* wasn't right. The peak of his confusion was my chance, and just as I was about to leave the room entirely, a voice came from the other side of the door.

"Karen! Karen, what's going on?!"

It was Achim. My heart danced as I did an internal victory lap.

The fates are on my side!

The door swung open. Achim took me in his arms but quickly realized he wouldn't be able to reach his sword, and so he passed me over to Arno and leaped into the room.

"So this is what it comes to, then..."

Six muttered the words in a low tone, but it seemed to echo in my ears. Achim's blade swung through the air but met with no target.

"Damn it! He got away!" Achim spat. "What the heck was that magic?"

It was clear to me then that Six had escaped. This was also around the time that others began to show up, including Reinald, who apparently had yet to go

home.

“Karen, are you okay?” asked Arno.

“I’m fine, it’s just...”

“Young master!” cried Achim. “Your jacket! Give her your jacket!”

Arno panicked to take off his jacket and cover me with it. I wasn’t all that worried because it was essentially a long camisole that went down to my knees, but evidently it left the men flustered. Whateley came running with a blanket in hand, which he quickly wrapped me in.

“What in the world happened here?” he asked.

“It was an intruder,” said Arno, “in Karen’s room...”

Before he could finish, Whateley had already sprung into action. He started running around barking orders to ensure that the margrave was protected, but Arno stopped him before he could get very far.

“It’s fine now...I think. But can you look after Karen, please? I need to talk with Sir Reinald...”

“But we must ensure the margrave’s safety!”

“I’ll explain everything momentarily, but I don’t think we need to make such a big fuss of this.”

Whateley seemed to pick up on the underlying message. I was the one who had done the screaming and I was the victim. He remained silent. Achim searched the room from pillar to post, and when he was absolutely certain it was empty, he sheathed his sword.

“Achim, I’m going to talk to Reinald about the intruder, then I’ll report to the margrave. You’re to look after Karen.”

“Understood,” said Achim. “You don’t mind if I cut the guy down if he comes back again, right?”

“If I said I did, I doubt that would stop you.”

More and more people were gathering. Achim moved me along, and we entered a different room, together with Mrs. Henrik and Nico, who had arrived

a little later. I didn't know what Arno talked about with Reinald, but at some point, Reinald left. The following day, Arno left but Achim stayed at the villa. As my brother was leaving, Haring and Nika arrived, both of them practically on their knees as they apologized profusely for what had happened the previous evening.

"To think he would enter a woman's room like that!" said Haring. "As a man...no, just as an honest-to-goodness person, it's unbelievable!"

Haring, in particular, was especially apologetic, to the extent that I found myself flinching away from him slightly.

"Oh, but...I *did* perhaps raise far more noise than I should have..." I said.

"We simply weren't vigilant enough. I assure you that Lord Reinald, too, is deeply sorry for what happened. I can promise you that we *will* take responsibility for this, and I do hope that you can forget this happened at all..."

By this time, Moritz had already apologized to the margrave. The margrave, however, hadn't been feeling well, and their meeting had wrapped up rather promptly.

"I understand your feelings on the matter, but if you are going to apologize, I ask that you apologize to my wife. I believe that is the best thing for both of our families moving forward."

That's what he'd said before leaving for his quarters, and so I'd found myself dealing with Haring's unrestrained apologies.

"As long as it never happens again, really, it's fine..." I said.

"Of course!" replied Haring. "Never again! I won't stand for it!"

"I know that the heart of the problem is the nature of Six's character," I said. "None of you did anything wrong, so please raise your heads, I beg of you."

"No, Lady Karen. Though he may be a reckless, unpredictable fool, he is nonetheless a member of our military, and as such we shoulder some responsibility for his actions."

"I know what you're trying to say, I do, but in the end, nothing happened..."

"Once it has happened, it's already too late," declared Nika.

I really didn't want to put her in the position of apologizing to me. And yet, when I looked at their faces and read into the way they were apologizing, I could tell this was not the first time such a thing had happened. Ern had said as much already; Six was often causing trouble.

In any case, I had no intention of charging Reinald with anything. The Kirstens also had no desire to get involved in the matter. This allowed Haring and Nika to leave with some relief on their faces. Elena had come with them, and she found a moment to whisper in my ear.

"I am so, so sorry. Next time I will kill him. Driving him away like you did was the right call."

Her expression remained calm as she spoke, but her voice revealed the rage simmering within. The culprit, Six, was still at large, however, and Reinald's people were looking for him.

It was a hectic morning, but by noon I finally had a chance to get to what I'd planned. Which was when Achim visited me looking like he had something on his mind, and I could finally pull it out of him.

"What is it, Achim?" I asked.

"You're far too generous with them," he said.

He was the man my brother trusted more than anyone else in the world, and while I was glad for how concerned he was, Achim himself looked far from satisfied with how things had gone.

"Oh, what is it?" I asked. "It was a mage we were dealing with. None of the people who came today were at fault for his actions."

"Assigning blame isn't the problem. That mage is employed by the military, and as long as he is, Reinald should be the one taking responsibility for his actions."

"I'm aware of that."

"I don't think you are."

"I'm not a soldier, and I'm not involved in politics either. Just think of this as the Rodenwalds now owing me a favor."

“You literally thought of that right now, didn’t you?”

“I can’t hear you...” I sang.

Achim was worried about me getting so close to the Rodenwald family. He was making his opinion very clear, which was rare for him, and it left Nico and Wendel shocked.

“Look at what you’ve done,” I said. “It’s not just us in this room, you know.”

“Don’t try to use those two as an excuse to brush things off. You have *always* been too lenient in this regard. And I can’t even remember how many times I’ve had to see you suffer for it.”

“It was just a lost bag, Achim.”

“It was a servant *stealing* your birthday present! And you let them go without so much as a word.”

“I just figured I would have them return it later, quietly.”

“A conversation, was it? It’s because you tried to do it that way they got away.”

The tone of reverence he usually reserved for me was gone now. We were speaking on casual terms. Which was to say, he was genuinely irate. As for the old incident he referred to, I didn’t need it dredged up again to know where I’d erred. I’d moved too slowly, and things had gotten away from me.

But there I was, being made to revisit an episode that didn’t even need revisiting. So I sipped at my cup of tea and let the shame wash over me. It was then that Sven came racing into the room.

“Mrs. Henrik has collapsed!” he announced.

Well, this shocked everyone. We were on our feet immediately. As far as the Conrad residence was concerned, the true lady of the house was not Doctor Emma or me, but Mrs. Henrik. Doctor Emma was taking care of her but was worried about her condition. But as I made a move to see to her, Sven put a hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll go check on Mrs. Henrik. Father called for you, so go to him first.”

I was worried about Mrs. Henrik, and I still wanted to talk to Achim about Ern, but both of those things would have to wait; when the margrave called, you answered. I hadn't seen the margrave since the day prior, and I found him relaxing on a sofa. I was shocked, however; it had only been a day, but he looked incredibly gaunt and haggard. I felt sure it was because the previous night had caused him excess worry, and I bowed apologetically.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "I never meant to cause such a commotion, but...no, I've no excuses. You have my sincerest apologies."

"Hmm?"

The margrave's response was somewhat slow. Perhaps it was not the incidents with the prince and Six that were the cause of the margrave's condition. Whateley cottoned on to my worries immediately, however.

"Margrave, my lady is simply worried about how pale you are," he said.

"Oh... I'm sorry. I appear to have given her completely the wrong idea."

"So it would seem. Lady Karen, please take a seat. The margrave is not at all mad about the events of last night."

"But you're so pale," I said. "Perhaps we can put this off until..."

"I'd like to talk this through now that I've made up my mind to do so," said the margrave. "And I'd like to apologize for not being present yesterday."

"But I'm sure it was because you were exhausted...and the pain in your legs..."

"Ah yes, an old scar of sorts. It should have completely healed, and yet sometimes it still hurts."

The margrave let out a sigh and sank into the sofa. The air in the room was just like that before we left the Conrad domain.

"I heard that Mrs. Henrik fainted, and I don't think it's good to place any more of a burden upon her shoulders," said the margrave.

"If you don't mind me saying, that should go for you too," said Whateley.

"What is this? You're awfully talkative today, Whateley."

“Because if I wasn’t, you would likely only cause yourself more harm.”

It was rare for Whateley to get so involved in conversation. And not only that, he was also talking to the margrave with a tone that suggested the two were old friends.

“Regarding yesterday,” said the margrave, getting down to business. “We have received an official apology from the Rodenwalds. I don’t want to make a particularly big fuss of things with them. That said, you were the victim in all of this, so I’m only happy to let this slide so long as you are. What do you say?”

“So long as they are given sufficient warning about such happenings, I don’t think anything more needs to be done. The whole incident raises questions about Conrad’s security, and we don’t want to stir up any further trouble by making a big fuss.”

“Understood. Let’s look at it less like forgiving them, and more like them now owing us a favor. And quite the favor at that. Such a thing may prove beneficial later down the line.”

“Indeed...though that said, are we being too generous?”

“I suppose we are, yes. Even so, it was my order that the decision be left in your hands.”

I was curious about this because of what Achim had said. And while I knew where both men were coming from, I couldn’t bring myself to berate Reinald and his officers either.

“However, we are dealing with the Rodenwald family. If they were to turn on us with enmity I could not simply remain silent, but fortunately I am at least acquainted with Zakhar. He is very ambitious, and I don’t mind the idea of having him in our pocket, so to speak.”

“I recall you saying something similar in the past...”

“Nobles who have their sights set high usually end up getting their hands dirty in some way or another, myself included. As you get older, you’ll likely come to understand such people.”

“You don’t seem like such a noble at all, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Thank you, Karen. I’m trying to be better, and if those efforts have borne fruit, then I am glad for it.”

The margrave spoke as if he, too, had in some way gotten his own hands dirty. But the way he could so easily speak of Zakhar as a potential card to play told me that he was a man worthy of his political position.

“Now, I heard that the prince had some rather harsh words for you. Reinald tells me that it wasn’t especially harsh, however.”

“Yes, the damage was rather light, you could say. However, the truth has become a little mixed up, and I’d like a chance to explain what happened.”

I had received the help of the margrave in looking for Ern—through Whateley—and I informed them that I found her with the prince and jumped in to help her. Upon hearing this, the margrave nodded as if something had clicked into place for him.

“Aha,” he said. “I heard that the prince’s verbal assault had caused you to faint, and yet I know you to have a tough skin compared to other girls of your age. At least tough enough to endure and ignore a few insults, anyway. I said as much to Emma and she was furious at me, but it nonetheless struck me as very strange.”

It seemed that they rated my strength of spirit excessively high.

“However,” the margrave sighed, “it would seem that the prince’s womanizing ways are only getting worse. Even his mother can’t reach him anymore.”

There was far more concern in the man’s words than that of someone who was simply worried about the prince’s future. And in fact, it was only upon noticing my gaze and hearing Whateley clear his throat that the margrave roused himself from his thoughts.

“In any case,” he said, “I only wanted to ascertain what had happened, so I won’t ask you any more on the topic. Given that we’ve little in the way of time, let’s get to why I called you here.”

I had expected him to ask me about the events of the previous evening, but as it turned out, I was wrong.

"I assume the king said something about me last night, yes?" he said.

"Indeed. He said you are like a brother to him."

"I'm sure he did. That's very much like him."

"You didn't know?"

"I don't know exactly what you talked about, but if the king were to mention me to you, I assumed he would tell you that I was like an older brother to him."

I had been waiting for a time to ask him about this, but he'd decided to talk about it himself. I couldn't have asked for more.

"I know I should have told you earlier. I'm sure you handled it all with grace, but I apologize."

"I was surprised, yes, but it's nothing to apologize for, surely."

"No, I should have warned you. Knowing him, it would have delighted him to learn that we were alike in having married younger women. He would have been overjoyed, there's no doubt."

"Yes...that *is* true. He was very happy to talk about it."

"It's because he wants my forgiveness. He likely thinks he's at least received my understanding."

The margrave stared down as his hands came together. His gaze was the very definition of seriousness, but I noticed a slight trembling in his fingers.

"Allow me to take things from here," offered Whateley.

"No, she should have known earlier and she should have been told. That she wasn't was because I was weak. Had things gone poorly, she may well have left a bad impression on the king himself."

"You can't do this to yourself. Liz *fainted*. You know that. Do you think I don't know how hard this has all been on the two of you?"

The two men locked eyes in silence. In the end, it was the margrave who broke first.

"I'll let you handle it, then," he said. "My apologies."

“Think nothing of it. Please, be at ease.”

The door to the next room opened, and behind it was Doctor Emma. She took her husband by the shoulder, a deep sorrow in her eyes. As they left, Whateley took the seat the margrave had occupied until then and let out a deep sigh.

“I know I’m no margrave, but I hope you’ll forgive my filling in for him,” he said. “His old wounds refuse to heal... No, that’s not quite right. They *should* be fully healed, but even now the pain of them continues to linger.”

“Is that true of Mrs. Henrik also?” I asked.

Whateley’s silence was his confirmation.

“A long time ago, the margrave and Liz suffered a shared tragedy. I had convinced her she shouldn’t go to the ball, but she was worried about you. That, and she said she wanted to see the castle again...”

“Nico told me that she isn’t well at present.”

“It was too much for her. You see, though Liz’s daughter didn’t die at the castle itself, the place is nonetheless connected to her passing.”

“Daughter? Mrs. Henrik? She had a daughter?” I asked.

Given the way she held herself, I had of course assumed she was married to one of reasonably high standing, but I’d never heard anything about children. All I’d heard was that her husband passed away not long after they were married.

“She did,” replied Whateley, his gaze going distant as he drifted into the past. “But she was adopted. When Mrs. Henrik’s older sister passed away, she began raising her niece as her own. She was a bright child, a bundle of joy. And perhaps because she had lost her own husband so soon after their marriage, Liz cared for the girl as she might her own child. They were certainly as close as any biological mother and daughter, and that meant sometimes they fought tooth and nail. They certainly gave me the runaround, that’s for sure.”

“But she...passed away.”

Whateley answered without hesitation.

“Yes,” he said. “It was a suicide.”

The words took me by surprise.

“But how does that relate to the margrave?” I asked.

“A little before Liz’s daughter took her own life, the margrave’s only son, Christian, died. I hope it is enough to simply tell you that the two were in love.”

I felt dizzy. In other words, the margrave’s son died, and not long after, Mrs. Henrik’s daughter followed after him. And yet, according to Whateley, her death had not occurred in the castle proper.

“The margrave’s... No, Sven’s older brother, surely he didn’t...”

“Christian was the epitome of courage. Even as a youth, he had a strong sense of morals. He knew the value of human life.”

Even now, the memories of the young man were all too clear to him.

“He looked up to his father,” Whateley continued, “and as the family heir, he did his duty honorably and strode into battle. He was praised and admired for his efforts, and was promoted to a position within the royal palace. It was then that he gave his own life when he protected the king from an unknown assailant.”

Gloom settled across the features of Whateley’s face. He explained that Christian was a treasure to the young margrave, who saw in his son the memory of his beloved wife. He was kind to Conrad’s residents, and he carried out his work with great diligence. All the while, he continued his martial training. His decision to take up a position in the royal palace was part of his preparation to inherit the position of margrave; he knew that he would need more than just knowledge of the battlefield. His father, then revered as the king’s right hand, encouraged him in his endeavors. Word of his benevolence and his storied reputation as a knight spread across the lands.

“At that time, the margrave served at the king’s side,” said Whateley. “But at the time of Christian’s passing, he was still recovering from wounds suffered in battle. Christian thus left on that fateful day in his father’s place, as the king’s bodyguard.”

It didn’t matter what assassin appeared before the king, the son of Kamil was sure to strike them down, the people said. They laughed, saying that any would-

be attacker would simply flee in terror at the sight of such a warrior. The reality was that Christian did indeed kill the king's attacker. But in return, he gave his own life.

"The margrave was overwhelmed with regret," Whateley continued. "He believed that even with his injuries, it should have been him by the king's side. But when Christian was gone, we feared that the margrave might, in the depths of his sorrows, follow after his son."

"But it was Liz's daughter, wasn't it?"

"Yes. We did not know that she and Christian were romantically involved."

The only person who did know was the margrave. Mrs. Henrik's daughter kept their relationship a secret, even from her own mother. At the time, however, the Margrave of Conrad did not approve of his son's relationship with Mrs. Henrik's daughter. Though Mrs. Henrik was once the wife of a nobleman, the family had fallen into ruin since the passing of her husband. Entirely alone, Mrs. Henrik had begun working at the Conrad region through her connections with the margravine. This was why she was also referred to by the title of "Mrs."

"When I think back on it all now, it is all too clear that Christian's efforts to prove himself in battle were all to convince his father to accept Liz's daughter as a worthy partner."

With his son gone, the margrave fell into depression. Gone was the strength he was lauded for, and in its place was a mere husk of a man. But even then, he managed. Though his heart ached as a father, as a margrave he held the highest praise for his son, an honorable young man who had fallen to protect his king. The king, too, was heartbroken at Christian's death and held him in the highest regard. He even issued a monetary reward, when such a thing was quite uncommon.

Holding the memory of his son in his heart, the margrave found it in himself to go on. He served the castle, and he looked after Mrs. Henrik following the loss of her daughter. Between them were conversations that even Whateley was not present for.

A year later, with the anniversary of Christian's passing soon to arrive, the margrave approached the king with a question.

“The anniversary of my son’s passing will soon be at hand. Your Highness, is there not something you would like to say to my son? It would be an honor for you to say something to him, through me.”

The king’s eyes went wide as the memory resurfaced.

“Ah, that...” he replied, and then moved on to handle his other duties.

That was all the man said. Nothing else. To any other person, it might have been just an ordinary slice of conversation. Nothing out of the ordinary. And yet, to a father who had lost his son, the king’s reply had enough destructive force that it shattered his heart.

Just as the king saw the margrave as an older brother, so too had the margrave seen the king as his younger sibling. He had lost his own son in the service of one he respected and admired, and now that same person had simply dismissed that son as if he were merely an entry in a history book.

“That, unfortunately, was as much as the margrave could take,” said Whateley.

And so Kamil, the Margrave of Conrad, threw away his sword in favor of the pen and left the castle. When he returned to his home, he had changed. The former roughness that had always been a part of his personality had vanished, replaced with something far gentler. Many who were well acquainted with the man were confused by the change. And while the margrave had always offered support to many, he became much more concerned with the importance of the links between individuals. All of these changes in his person had been advice, given to him by his own son.

“The margrave has done his best to avoid visiting the castle ever since. And since entering old age, he has not been at all.”

“And that is why he and the king are on such terms?”

“Yes. There has been nothing in the way of an actual quarrel, however; the last they saw of one another was when the margrave left. Though it is likely the king still harbors his own feelings about how things went, as he has sent letters on a number of occasions. Alas, the tangled rope that binds them cannot be undone so easily...”

And all the more so when the person at the heart of it was the margrave's son, whom he adored. An easy solution was impossible. As such, the margrave had gone on essentially refusing any attempt the king made to talk about it.

"It appears that the margrave isn't opposed to the idea of Sven and Nico being together... Is that because of his past?"

"It is likely, yes. There is also the matter of his age. He often says he is simply happy to have an heir to take on his responsibilities when he is gone."

"Thank you, Whateley, for telling me all of that. I understand the bigger picture now. But I do have to ask: is Mrs. Henrik okay?"

"She will be back to her usual self in a couple of days. That's how it's always been."

I could hear the assurance and confidence in his voice.

"She has you to look after, after all. She can't stay downhearted forever. She will most certainly be back on her feet."

"Oh, while that makes me happy to hear, she needn't worry about me..."

"No, Karen. You see, she is driven to ensure you are well looked after. When her daughter left us, she was around the same age that you are now."

Whateley shook his head and chuckled to himself. There was something lonely in the sound of it.

"You've probably noticed now that when it comes to you, Liz has trouble keeping herself under control. I must apologize if it's causing you any grief, but at least now you know why."

And at that, the man let out a long, deep sigh. I couldn't help feeling that he had told me far more than he originally intended. At the very least, there was no need for him to tell me anything about Mrs. Henrik at all. It wasn't just the people at Conrad manor either; even the domain's residents said nothing about the existence of Mrs. Henrik's daughter.

"Why would you tell me so much?" I asked.

"I don't know. However, both the margrave and Liz have accepted you as family of late. Though my work often saw me elsewhere and kept me rather

distant, in matters such as these my hunches are usually right.”

“A hunch, you say?”

“I mean in regard to opening up to you about the past. That said, if Liz were to find out, an open-handed slap would likely be the very least of my worries. She does not like mixing her private life with her work.”

“But as far as this household is concerned, I’m little more than a freeloader. I can’t do anything for her, let alone anyone else.”

“Maybe at present, yes, and that’s just fine. I suppose I just wanted you to know and understand something of the fates that weave throughout this domain. You occupy a position that would usually belong to Lady Emma. And while it pains me to say as much, given that she insists on remaining in the shadows, so to speak, should anything happen to the margrave, it will be you who has to bear the consequences.”

“It is beyond the doctor, then?”

“She’s already made it clear that the position is not one she wants, and besides, she’s not well suited to the role. She is a wonderful mother and an exceptional herbalist, but skills of governance and leadership are another thing entirely.”

“As long as I live in the care of the margrave, I will of course do whatever I can to support you all. You will always be able to count on me. But given the way you’re speaking, I must ask...is the margrave unwell?”

“He is not the picture of fine health. His body is often failing him of late. He hides it as best he can, but Lady Emma is always telling him that he needs to take things easier.”

In which case, it was not simply a matter of stress. Doctor Emma had made it a priority to keep a closer watch on the margrave recently. She’d also asked Sven to take some time off school, which made sense; I had just been thinking that he’d been at the manor longer than usual.

“Forgive me for my rambling,” said Whateley. “Suffice it to say, the relationship between Conrad and the royal family is a complicated one. The royal capital is a place that dredges up old memories for many; I hope you’ll

bear that in mind.”

“Understood. But...do Sven and Wendel know all of this?”

“They know of their eldest brother, yes, but not about Liz’s daughter.”

“Then I, too, will keep that a secret. As for Mrs. Henrik, I’ll treat her as I always have.”

In my past life, I had died before my parents. While I could not know how it felt for a parent to lose a child, I hoped that at some point their hearts found peace with the matter.

I decided it was time to check in on Mrs. Henrik. As I stood from my chair, however, I remembered something that had been playing on my mind.

“Whateley, you mentioned that your work often saw you elsewhere. Is the work of the margrave’s secretary really so busy a job?”

It was an odd way for the man to refer to his own work, and so the words had lingered with me. At my question, Whateley revealed the hint of a smile unlike any expression I had seen on the man until now.

“Before I was the steward and secretary here, I worked as a diplomatic aide.”

“You *what?!?*” I cried.

A career in diplomacy was like the highway of the elite.

“Perhaps it was the reckless company I kept, but I always found myself keeping watch over places of little importance. Truly embarrassing.”

“Wait just a moment. How would you go from such a high-ranking position to that of manor steward...? Oh, er, which is not to say there’s anything *wrong* with that, it’s just...wouldn’t you usually have a manor of your own in the city?”

“Life in the city did not suit me,” Whateley replied.

“Really?”

“Well, actually it was talking to all the other diplomats. It caused me to break out in hives.”

“What?!?”

“I jest, lady Karen.”

This playfulness in the steward was new to me.

“My leaving the field of diplomacy is not particularly interesting. I was a touch thoughtless in my work, and thoroughly lambasted for it.”

Lambasted? I’d believe it if it were someone else, perhaps, but Whateley?

“I was relocated, which is the nicer way of saying I was demoted. A tale as old as time, I suppose. I had not a coin to my name, and it was then that the margrave, with whom I had dealt with in the past, helped me back to my feet.”

Wait. So a demotion that left you totally broke? How did you have no money whatsoever?

Whateley’s past was a mystery to me. He talked about Christian’s past as if he had seen it play out himself... Just who was this man? Unfortunately, though my head still spun with questions, Whateley was not going to answer them.

“I must return to my work,” he said, standing and clearing tea cups. “I’m filling in for Liz until she’s feeling better.”

“Huh? Diplo...matic...aide...?” I uttered.

Didn’t the margrave tell me a story about diplomats not so long ago?

No, wait. Is it possible? Was Whateley...

Though it wasn’t just because of what we’d discussed, the fact of the matter was that I would be taking on some of the margrave’s work as of the following day.

I had so much to do before we returned to Conrad. Once I had checked in on Mrs. Henrik, I prepared letters of gratitude for all the people I’d met and talked to at the previous night’s ball. A number of guests had arranged meetings with the margrave, and so I also made sure to meet and greet them when they arrived. I couldn’t believe that the margrave did this much work behind the scenes.

As it turned out, the king really did send the margrave gifts, in the form of huge amounts of fruit, fabrics, and other valuables. Under Whateley’s watchful eye, anything that could be considered a monetary asset was returned. I was

somewhat worried that doing such a thing would hurt the king's feelings, but given that the margrave stated he wouldn't accept the majority of the gifts, I made his feelings my priority.

Once the day of our return to Conrad was confirmed, I gave Sven a kick in the butt and saw him back to his studies. I also gave Wendel some lessons because he kept pestering me about it. Basically, life as usual.

I informed Achim of what I knew about Ern. His face scrunched up with concern at the moment I mentioned the empire, but he said nothing of it. He called me a fool at the end of my explanation, which felt rather unnecessary.

On the day before we left for Conrad, our last guests appeared: Elena and Ern, both in plain clothes. Ern wore a hood that covered her eyes, as though she wanted to remain hidden from prying eyes, but she looked to be in good health. The two had come on behalf of Reinald, and upon finishing their business with the margrave, we sat down to tea. Just to be on the safe side, I had Nico and Mrs. Henrik keep their distance so we'd be free to talk about anything.

"Ordinarily it'd be Nika or Haring handling something like this," explained Elena, "but they've both got their plates full at the moment. Uh, firstly, I absolutely *must* apologize for Six's unconscionable conduct."

"No, no," I replied, "please think nothing of it."

"But look, by the time something happens, it's already too late," said Ern. "I mean, it's good for us that things settled rather quietly, but I never would have thought that possible—being that Six sneaked into your room."

Ern munched on a cookie. Even now, it seemed she simply couldn't believe it had happened.

"But Elena, really, there's no need to lower your head like that," I said.

"You really *are* too generous. Too merciful. And I don't mean kind, you realize?"

"I think so. So hit Six for me, would you? A good, solid punch. The best I've got in me is a few slaps."

Six, it seemed, was still incommunicado. He'd been assigned work, but all that

showed up when it was due was a neatly written report. Elena was devouring cookies at an alarming rate. It was like something out of another world; I wasn't sure she was even chewing on them before she swallowed them down. I had a feeling we'd need another plate.

"It pains me to tell you that we still haven't tracked him down, but we at least need to keep you updated," said Elena. "I hope you'll overlook the fact we're not here in uniform too."

"I know you did that out of consideration for me. I'm grateful," I replied.

"If only the men among us were as accepting as you are, Karen. Don't you think so, Ern?"

"It'd be plain creepy if they all just turned over a new leaf."

"You think?"

Elena and Ern appeared to get along very well. I wondered if it was because their names were similar, even though they only really shared a couple of letters.

"I know I invited the two of you for tea, but aren't you both rather busy?"

"I'm just a bottom-of-the-barrel fresh recruit," said Ern.

"Nika drove me away, said I was being a nuisance," added Elena. "I was just hanging out when Haring found me. I wanted to bring Ern here anyway, so it was perfect timing."

Exactly *how* Elena was being a nuisance remained unclear. But what did she mean when she said she wanted to bring Ern to see me? Ern herself must have noticed the quizzical look on my face, because she chose that moment to speak.

"So actually," she said, "I'll be moving to the empire at some time within the next six months. You're going back to Conrad anyway, but we might not see each other again for some time."

"When did the orders arrive?" I asked.

"It was talked about quite some time ago, but from Six, I only received a written directive. I think it's probably to go along with the move."

“When you say move, you mean to a different post?”

Ern cast a troubled glance in Elena’s direction.

“We all go back to the empire at times,” said Elena, picking up for Ern. “Those under Reinald’s direct command are sent to an unknown location for training. You didn’t know?”

“I know little about such matters...” I admitted.

“I see. I suppose that’s only natural, really.”

I had heard that once every few years, there were strange trips, like blank periods in people’s records. I wonder if that’s what they were talking about.

“We can tell you a little about it given your position,” continued Elena. “Due to everything that has occurred, Ern will need to head across the border. It seemed like a waste to have her simply spinning her wheels, so she’s being moved.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but are you saying that Ern didn’t go to the empire with her parents back when *they* moved?”

“Oh, that was my choice,” said Ern. “I didn’t go with them because I wanted to see the castle at least once.”

So Ern’s split with her parents was just a matter of curiosity, then. I’d been worried, but I felt like a fool for the answer I was given. I decided it was only fitting that I ensure Ern’s next cup of tea was especially bitter.

“I see that it’s all quite complicated,” I commented. “Please rest easy; I won’t say a word to anyone.”

“Please,” said Elena. “I certainly don’t want to lose any of my friends.”

“Would you like another cup of tea? Some more cookies? If so, just say the word.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. We won’t be eating anything sweet for a while, so best to stock up while we can!”

Elena made eating look so enjoyable that it felt good just watching her. I asked Nico to bring us another plate of cookies.

Now, what to talk about while we wait?

“Elena,” I said, “could you tell me a little about the empire’s towns, and what’s in vogue over there?”

“In the empire? Really?”

“I’ve been interested in the place for a while now, but there aren’t many people for me to ask about it. I’d love to hear about the country from somebody who has actually lived there.”

“Hmm,” murmured Elena. “I’ve been here for quite some time now, so admittedly I’m a bit vague on what’s popular. But I can tell you what I know. The empire is famed for its bullfighting, its underground public hot spring baths, and its theater, which exemplifies the arts.”

“Hot spring baths?” I asked.

“Hooked you, huh? Yes, the empire has a public bath that is open to any and all citizens. There are also smaller bathhouses too. The baths are always lively and bustling in the evenings.”

“That sounds marvelous,” I remarked.

“It is, it is! And baths feel like such work over here. It’s safe to say that the first complaint for ninety percent of visiting imperials is the lack of baths! Washing yourself with wet rags... I can only stand it during training exercises.”

The imperials valued cleanliness, then. Elena went on to tell me some other rather fascinating bits and pieces, and it made the day before our departure feel truly meaningful. When it was time for Elena and Ern to leave, I wrapped Ern in a big hug. She looked decidedly awkward, and there was quite an impressive tension running through her back.

“Until next time,” I said.

“Yes...until then.”

I wondered if Ern would feel lonely. I did, certainly, but I held fast to the belief that this was not the last time we’d see each other. I could still write her letters, which would reach her by way of Elena. I tried not to look anxious; I knew it would only make Ern worry.

“You’ll be fine no matter where you go, Ern,” I said. “I will always pray for your happiness.”

I wanted to ensure that the two of us remained friends well into the future. For now, that meant trusting my friend and seeing her off with a smile.

13: Most Unexpected News

I was on the verge of turning eighteen. It was the time of the year when a light frost covered the fields, a sign that told Conrad's elderly to watch out for colds.

"Doctor Wendel, if you please," I said.

I respectfully handed the young Wendel (who had matured a little) some herbs wrapped in a woven bamboo sheet. The two of us were in Doctor Emma's little workshop. Dried tree branches and flowers hung from the ceiling in bundles. Now in glasses, Wendel took the herbs with a murmur and began to inspect them.

"Hmm... This is what the blacksmith's wife ordered, isn't it? I was of the thought that a fever medicine would be sufficient, and no more. Was I wrong?"

"Her son came later," I replied. "She's also having stomach trouble and asked if we might also supply some medicine for it. After consulting Doctor Emma, I prescribed medicine to help with loose bowels. I also took the liberty of adding some berries that help nourish when a body is weakened by such issues."

"You made a wise choice," said Wendel. "However, in powder form this stomach medicine is rather harsh in terms of taste. Let's prepare the medicine in tablet form. The woman is pregnant, after all, and I'm sure the professor prepared some with just that idea in mind."

"Oh, quite right. How thoughtless of me. That's why you're the doctor."

"No, no, I just realized that we're running out of stock that will soon require replenishing. It will take some time, but you'll be doing us a great service, my dear Karen."

"Think nothing of it. It is an honor to be working with such an accomplished doctor."

So went the conversation between Doctor Wendel and me, his ever-conscientious assistant. Meanwhile, Nico and Doctor Emma whispered between

themselves as they watched.

“What is going on?” Nico asked.

“They’re playing doctors and nurses,” replied Doctor Emma. “It’s a fairly recent little game they’ve fallen in love with. They do it whenever they have a free moment.”

“And Wendel is the doctor? They’ve been doing this a while?”

“They simply won’t tire of it...” muttered the doctor. “I don’t mind as long as nobody’s getting hurt, but recently they’ve gotten quite wrapped up in their roles, and it’s getting rather hard to deal with.”

“They both have a tendency to get rather obsessive. By the way, who’s this professor they spoke of? Has there ever been a professor?”

“That would be me,” replied Doctor Emma. “I wonder why they even started this game of theirs in the first place?”

If you’re going to have a secretive conversation, ladies, at least keep your voices down.

“By the way, my dear Karen, about this evening’s schedule,” said Wendel.

“Yes, you mean your studies, I assume? I will be your company for the session.”

“Ah, yes, about that. You see, I have a rather...pressing engagement to keep with Ben’s grandson.”

“Would that be the bug catching, or the construction of your secret base?”

Doctor Wendel, you have let me see your hand. I know you want to go and play, and I understand the appeal, but overseeing your studies is a task given to me by your parents, and as such it is most important. As your assistant and home tutor, I cannot simply let you skip classes.

“You have the whole day free tomorrow,” I said. “And given the time, it’ll be dark out before you know it. You’ll only be causing trouble to his family. Be a little more prudent, please.”

“But I want to try dressing a deer tomorrow.”

“You can do that when you’re a little older and a little stronger.”

Apparently, Wendel and his friends often spent time with the old hunters at their lodge. As for *why* they’d grown interested in such pursuits, well... Nico’s burning gaze told me exactly whose fault *she* felt it was, but I bore no responsibility.

“Speaking of which,” said Doctor Emma, “how is this year’s stock looking, Karen?”

At this time of year, the word “deer” brought to mind winter food stockpiles. Naturally, the region also had grazing cattle, but with a vast forest right next door, hunting was common. Each family prepared their best for winter, but it was also necessary for the margrave to ensure the warehouses were readily stocked.

“The hunters tell me that their traps are doing even better than expected. We might even have everything we need earlier than usual. That said, they’re still rather worried.”

“But why? Isn’t the faster pace a good thing?”

“This is far more deer than they’ve seen in recent years,” I replied. “It’s also a problem if the deer overpopulate, and so the hunters approached Whateley to consider an extra warehouse.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, that makes sense. It’ll be no good for anyone if the deer eat too much of the forest. But is it possible to build another warehouse in time for winter?”

“We added an extra granary early in the spring of this year. Given that it won’t be used for anything over the winter besides storage, they’re discussing whether or not to make that another place to store food.”

“Oh, I think I recall hearing talk of that...” muttered Doctor Emma.

“Not ‘think,’ mother, you *did* hear about it,” said Wendel. “Karen and Whateley both told you about it. I remember it well, and you were right there.”

“Oh, I suppose I’ve been so busy it must have slipped my mind.”

Wendel pouted, but it wasn’t all that surprising that Doctor Emma didn’t

remember. Right around the time we'd been discussing the potential warehouse expansion, the margrave—and many of the region's elderly—had fallen ill. Doctor Emma had been rushing every which way in order to check on everyone and nurse them back to health. She'd had anything but the luxury of a free moment.

With Doctor Emma looking after the margrave, the duties of governance fell to Whateley and his aides, with me taking on a support role. Doctor Emma was very hands-off when it came to the responsibilities of the region as a whole. That said, she didn't really know much about the work, and so we merely explained the situation to her when it was necessary. Her usual response was something along the lines of "Yes, then I'll leave it in your capable hands." In any case, she was not the margravine; she was a talented pharmacist. While different people held different opinions on the matter, everybody seemed fine with this being how the region was run.

"You've got quite the remarkable memory, Wendel," remarked Doctor Emma. "I'm shocked."

"Well, when Sven comes back, I'm going to have to help him with his work. It's fine now because Karen is here, but we have to be able to keep him informed of what's happening in the region."

The region was fortunate; it had an exceptional aide to the margrave in Whateley, a willing heir in Sven, and an enthusiastic, supportive assistant in Wendel.

"You're such an upstanding young man, supporting your brother like that."

When Sven left, Wendel began turning his attention to things other than just the study of herbs and medicine. He was always secretly very excited to see one of his brother's letters arrive, and while he *had* been putting off his studies to play with his friends of late, that struck me as just the way of young, growing boys.

"I'm glad to see you so enthusiastic," I said, "but you do realize I'll be around until Sven comes back, yes?"

"So you'll leave *after* he comes back? Isn't that rather soon?"

“Perhaps, but I feel it’s only appropriate.”

Wendel already knew that at some point I would leave Conrad. At present, it was a fact known by everyone in the Conrad household and three of its servants.

“But I still have yet to improve on horseback,” I said, “so I don’t think it will be for a while yet. There’s still so much for me to do...”

“And let’s not forget the carelessness that almost led to you falling off your horse.”

“I fear you might not be well suited to physical pursuits...” muttered Doctor Emma.

“And your attempts at swordsmanship were outrageous,” added Nico. “Being that bad is a kind of skill in and of itself.”

All three of them had comments. The very definition of nasty, wouldn’t you say? I was actually growing more confident in my horse riding, but Whateley still didn’t trust me to go riding on my own.

“By the way, Nico,” I said. “Is something the matter? It’s not often we see you here at the doctor’s workshop.”

“Now you’re asking me?”

“Quit stomping your feet. What are you, a child?”

“But my lady, you never listen!”

It was not something to be said while sipping at tea, as we were. My assistant was already showing her propensity for slacking, stretching her arms out lazily as she told me why she’d come.

“I’m here to inform you that two letters arrived for you. I’ve placed them on your desk.”

“Letters from whom?”

“The Kirsten family lord, for one. Then, there was a rather withered-looking envelope from someone by the name of Quach. Does the name ring any bells?”

My eyes went wide. I’d sent a letter by way of Elena since I last saw Ern, but

until now I'd yet to receive a reply. Elena had told me the letter had arrived and that Ern was doing well, but this was the first time a letter had arrived under the name of Quach.

"A letter from your brother," said Doctor Emma. "Must be important. Go and take a look. I'll handle things here."

"But Doctor Emma..." I started.

"Yes, we'd prefer to have your help, but it's not like you'll be gone all day, is it? Now go. I'll have Nico help with delivering the medicine."

The look on Nico's face. She'd thought this the perfect place to indulge in a little slacking. How very wrong she was.

"Oh, in that case, I'll be off, then," I said.

I foresaw no issues with Nico filling in for me. Upon my return to my room in the manor, I found two letters waiting for me on my desk, just as Nico said. The envelope from Ern was in horrible shape, and even the paper was of a very poor quality. It had my name written on it but nothing else.

"Weird," I uttered. "This is it?"

Just as I was about to open it, a knock came at the door.

"My lady, the margrave has called for you."

"Understood. I'll be there right away."

It was Whateley. I decided to leave the letters until later. I found the margrave in his office, looking over a letter himself.

"Karen," he said upon noticing me. "Please, take a seat."

I sat down on the sofa, and Whateley immediately prepared me a cup of tea.

"I apologize for calling you so suddenly," the margrave went on. "Have you read the letter from the Kirsten family yet?"

"No, I only just returned to the manor."

"Ah, in which case I apologize. Hmm," he murmured, "I'm not sure if this is something you should hear from me..."

“Which is to say that a letter arrived for you too? I don’t mind who the news comes from, so please feel free to let me know.”

“Yes, well, even so,” muttered the margrave. “Please, take a look at this.”

He passed me the letter in his hands. It wasn’t like him to act this way. I took a look at the letter, written by my brother Arno, now the lord of the Kirsten family. We’d written to each other a number of times since last seeing one another, and though he was of course rushed off his feet most of the time, I knew he was otherwise doing well.

“He wants me to return to the capital again? But why...?”

That was his request: that I return to the royal capital. Following his request, he wrote out the reason for it. That reason, and Arno’s shaky handwriting at having to actually write it out, left me momentarily speechless.

“And he’s certain?” I asked the margrave.

“He wanted to let you know before the rumors began to spread.”

And it *was* true to say that I would have wanted to hear such news from him before anyone else.

“Gerda is pregnant...” I uttered.

A part of me felt as though this were inevitable. Since she entered the royal family as a concubine, the king’s love for Gerda had only grown stronger over time, along with Gerda’s influence and authority—if one believed the rumors. I had visited the royal capital on a number of occasions since the ball, but I always left as soon as I could; I was sick of all the invitations to this or that event, and I didn’t like the obsequious flattery either.

“Arno writes that Lady Saburova is exhausted and in need of someone she can trust. It’s clear he wants your help.”

“And I want nothing more than to be of help to her,” I said, “but how long would I have to be away for? There is work here for me to do, and I am hesitant to leave.”

“The letter doesn’t go into any details with regard to time. In any case, I think it best you at least visit her.”

“And what about you?” I asked. “If she’s pregnant, there will be a celebration. We will have to prepare a gift...”

The margrave looked to Whateley, but the ever-knowledgeable secretary shook his head.

“Given that you’re still suffering from a light fever, I’ll take Sven with me,” I said. “He’s old enough to attend bigger social events now, so I’ll discuss how to handle things with my brother.”

“Do you think he’ll mind?” asked the margrave. “I realize we’d be placing something of a burden on his shoulders.”

“Arno is quite fond of Sven, so I don’t see any problems. Why, he’s likely even more worried about Sven than we are. I’m certain he’ll be eager to lend a hand.”

“Ordinarily it should be I, his father, who prepares such things for him, but in the capital perhaps it is better for Sven that we leave it in the hands of the Kirstens.”

“They’ll be nothing but good to him, I’m sure of it.”

Such a thing would also help to further strengthen the tie between the families, which had been established upon my marriage.

“I’d like to take Wendel and Nico with me, if you don’t mind.”

“Ah, yes. He’s certainly growing, and he wants nothing more than to see his older brother.”

“He’s set to grow into a fine young gentleman, but he will always look up to his brother.”

However, by taking Sven with me, Doctor Emma would lose one of her helpers. Given that colds were more prevalent as the weather became colder, I hoped to leave *after* we’d helped to sufficiently prepare for the winter. When I informed the margrave and Whateley of this, the two men agreed. They’d been thinking very much along the same lines as well.

“I’m so very glad to have you here, Karen,” said the margrave. “And that goes for this other matter also.”

“Did something else happen?” I asked.

It seemed Gerda was not the only thing that needed dealing with. The margrave produced an envelope from the papers that made up Arno’s letter and held it up for me to see it.

“This came from the Rodenwald family. It was sent by Reinald.”

“Sir Reinald? Not the Marquis? I have to imagine this is the first time you’ve received a letter from him, no?”

“Correct. I’ve been sent letters from the Marquis a few times, usually with regard to trade deals.”

At the mention of Reinald’s name, the margrave seemed to grow restless. The letter opened with a request to meet with the Margrave of Conrad, regarding a matter I had not heard of until now.

“He’d like to see you to allay fears due to the conducting of large-scale military maneuvers, which may potentially bring the military into the Conrad domain...” I said. “He’s just being prudent, then. It seems he has the permission of the king, the official document of which he is prepared to show you. What’s the issue?”

The military often moved to practice such maneuvers. That said, I had to wonder why they were leaving the capital for somewhere as distant as Conrad. When I looked up, I saw the margrave, his lips pursed, and a look on his face I couldn’t quite read.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Oh, er, well, it’s simply that I’d prefer to avoid dealing with him alone.”

There was something evasive in the margrave’s choice of words. He’d chosen them very carefully and spoken them slowly.

“But why would that be? You’ve spoken to him just fine in the past, haven’t you?”

“I was putting up a bold front. We were also out in public. It’s likely that he wasn’t going to make a move under such circumstances.”

“A bold front? You? The margrave?”

I couldn't make sense of what he'd said. He was the margrave. Why would a visit from Reinald be a cause for such concern? The question must have been obvious on my face, for the margrave cleared his throat so as to make a point.

"Karen," he said, "how much do you know about Reinald's father?"

I felt like he'd thrown a bomb at my feet.

"Er, what are we talking about, exactly?" I asked in return.

"There's no need to play dumb. I know that you have accumulated a significant amount of personal wealth. I also know that you received trade rights from a certain Moritz Abelein. No, from Moritz *Ralph Bachem*."

I was shocked. The margrave also looked a touch surprised.

"You received money from the Bachem family, yes? I had thought it was hush money, but perhaps not?"

"It is true that I received an exorbitant sum of money from Moritz," I admitted. "However, as for the matter of the Bachem family..."

When I thought about it, I had never actually learned Moritz's full name. I had been curious about the money in my imperial account and tried to trace the source of it, but there were severe limits to what I could find out on my own. That margrave seemed shocked to discover that I did not know Moritz's last name.

"You don't know the Bachem family?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"The Bachem family is entrusted with the responsibility of the Imperial Treasury Trade Rights. To put it simply: the family has the authority to handle the imperial treasury by order of the emperor. Moritz is one of the heirs to the family."

Moritz is that big of a deal? Really?

"He's one heir among many?" I asked.

"The imperial treasury is far too large to be managed by a single individual. But that's neither here nor there... You really didn't know, Karen?"

“I didn’t, no,” I replied.

“You’re usually so on top of things, I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

The margrave looked confused as he went on.

“Hmm... Which leads me to another question: just how much do you know about Reinald?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but as this is not an emergency we are dealing with, I am sworn to secrecy.”

Coming clean would have made all of this much quicker, but a promise was a promise. I maintained my silence somewhat awkwardly while the margrave rubbed his jaw in thought. His brow furrowed.

“In which case, I will avoid speaking of it all in a direct manner where I can, though I trust you’ll be able to follow me.”

“I will do my utmost.”

The margrave sank into his chair. Though he had merely shifted his position, he struck me now as a Catholic who had come to confession. His eyes appeared to have sunken into a certain gloom.

“Now, how best to put it?” he mused. “I’m not used to speaking about it to anyone outside of Emma... Yes, that’s it. To put it frankly, I, well, I’m scared of him.”

I had never heard the margrave sound so feeble. I could scarcely believe what he’d said. He was the kindly, generous, and exemplary margrave of the Conrad region. And yet, at the moment he uttered the word “scared,” he appeared to shrink suddenly.

“You’re...scared?” I asked.

The question left my lips before I could stop it. I could not understand how a man with so much more life experience than Reinald could be afraid of one young man. But the margrave knew my question before I asked it.

“It is strange, I admit. And all the more so, I suppose, because you two are quite well acquainted.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far...” I said. “But the particulars of that we can discuss another time. But you said you’re scared of Reinald. Is that because something happened between the two of you?”

And if that were so, why did Reinald treat me, the margravine, so well?

“I was very cautious of him, but when I saw him approach you I admittedly felt some relief. Perhaps he does not bear a grudge against the entire family after all.”

I sputtered slightly in shock. The word “grudge” felt so foreboding. I could tell that what the margrave spoke of was no laughing matter.

“I know that the two of you are becoming friends of a sort. The youth of this generation no longer holds the same feelings toward the empire; they are less averse and less discriminatory. You, too, hold nothing in the way of enmity toward the people of the empire.”

“And other people are different?”

“Indeed they are. Those of my generation, at least. Though I have not been acquainted with the Rodenwald family for an especially long time, at a glance I know that Reinald has suffered discrimination. He has been made an enemy. Many people who lost their families to the empire would long for someone to unleash their emotions on, child or otherwise. He therefore has little, if any, reason to feel friendly toward any of us.”

Certainly, the margrave had dealt with Marquis Rodenwald on a few occasions. He had also seen Reinald as a baby, carried in his mother’s arms.

“Reinald is the product of infidelity,” said the margrave.

Though I wasn’t surprised, his words nonetheless plunged me into silence. The margrave spoke as though he were looking back on his own past.

“But it was we who suggested that infidelity, and we who offered up Marquis Rodenwald’s wife for the act.”

This was not a comment that anyone could simply let slide. And yet, I had no words. All I could do was listen closely as the elderly man before me went on, seeming to grow ever smaller as he succumbed to his regret and his fear.

“We wanted to maintain peace in our nation. We didn’t want to live in fear of a treaty that might destroy us. Our power as a nation kept crumbling, and we knew all too well that if we were attacked, we would most certainly lose.”

The word “peace” fit into place; Reinald had been born at the end of the war.

“I told you that when the war ended, our diplomats did a most praiseworthy job. But the problems at hand were far more difficult once peace had been established. We were powerless, and peace was nothing more than words written upon a piece of paper. Around us were only the countries that were already united under the imperial flag; were another invasion to be attempted, no nearby nation would risk mobilizing its forces and breaking its own treaty.”

The nearest neighbor, Latoria, had its eyes on invading Falkrum. Even if Falkrum were to plead for assistance, it was easy to imagine that it would still fall, and at this point the riots within the empire had been suppressed. Falkrum had no meaningful points of contact with the desert nation on the other side of the empire either. In other words, Falkrum had nothing to fall back on. It could try to replenish the manpower it had lost, but doing so too hastily would draw the empire’s ire. The weakening of the country left it deflated, and though the general called for the strengthening of their forces, he was dismissed from his position.

Left with no means to win by force, Falkrum thus had to make do with cunning and intelligence. And it was here, as they struggled to negotiate with the empire, that an imperial higher-up praised the beauty of Marquis Rodenwald’s wife. It was perhaps a stupid, foolish plan, and yet at the time it felt to all not unlike a revelation.

“We rejoiced. And...we did not hesitate to act,” said the margrave.

They presented the imperial with the Marquis’s wife. There was no guilt for this act; instead, they reveled in the illusion that they had finally, truly, secured peace. The tearful woman looked to her husband for help, but none came. She remained with the imperial for some years. He loved her deeply, and as a result, she fell pregnant.

I had always known that Reinald’s birth was a complicated matter. Nonetheless, it shocked me to learn that the margrave had played a part in it. I

was silent for a time. I had no idea what to say to the man, and in the end, I could mutter only the simplest of questions.

“And so Reinald bears you a grudge?”

“It was I who relayed the king’s orders to the Marquis and his wife. I did not oppose the order, and I did not doubt that it was our best course of action.”

But now Reinald had a military force under his command, the majority of whom hailed from the empire, and he was going to oversee military maneuvers in the region.

The margrave, the old man who sat before me, was terrified. He trembled at the thought that vengeance had come for his past sins. It would have been easy to offer him some kind words, but I knew that the margrave was not desperate for trite placations or sympathies. That was not my role to play.

“Let me ask this,” I said. “In the case of an attack, would our own forces not stand a chance against Sir Reinald’s?”

“Were we to lock down and play the defensive, we could hold them off for a time. But what separates us is a vast difference in military experience. Our region has not faced the threat of war in many long years, and it is likely we would collapse from the inside.”

“I see. Then when Sir Reinald visits the manor, I will stand by your side,” I said. “The visit is a formality, and not a cause for concern.”

“I’m sorry, Karen.”

“Please, don’t be. If I can be of use to you in this capacity, then finally I can repay the debt I owe you for your kindness. This is a relief. Thank you for opening up to me.”

I was a woman, just like the Marquis’s wife. It would have been all too easy for me to attack the margrave. To call him a coward, a monster. And in truth, my heart ached at the thought that Falkrum’s decision had ignored that woman’s rights. Even knowing the circumstances, had I been in her position I knew I would have showered the margrave in contempt.

But I was, as I had said, in the margrave’s debt. He gave me shelter, provided

me with an education, and allowed me training in a whole manner of different areas. I knew him too well to simply tear him down with my words. And in fact, there was nothing I could say to him on the matter. In the end, the only thing I could do was leave the old man and his loyal steward.

As I left, I saw Doctor Emma in the corridor; she must have come running at some point during my conversation with the margrave.

“I’ll leave the rest to you,” I said simply.

It wasn’t until I returned to my room that I remembered the letters on my desk. I was unable to harbor much emotion as I read Arno’s letter, which informed me of Gerda’s pregnancy and requested my return to the capital. In this letter, however, Arno wrote more about just how dire Gerda’s mental state had become.

When it was discovered that Gerda was pregnant, somebody had attempted to poison her. This had instilled a paranoia in her. The substance used was a medicine known for aiding in abortions, and the culprit was a maid Gerda trusted. The shock of it all had been devastating, and Gerda was so on edge that she was now even on the lookout for poisoned needles in her clothing.

Even the addition of food tasters for all food and drink could not allay Gerda’s fears, and she was only ever at ease when in the company of Arno or Emil, her brothers. It was times like this that one usually fell back on their mother for support, but alas, this particular mother-daughter relationship was estranged. Given how busy Arno was with his duties as lord of the family, Emil had been staying at Saburova manor so as to remain by Gerda’s side. That said, Emil also had his studies to think about and could not remain with his older sister forever.

“A child’s life might very well hang in the balance,” I muttered.

Though the reality of it hadn’t entirely sunk in yet, this was not just some stranger to me; it was an unborn baby to whom I would be an auntie. I knew from Arno’s letter that my stay in the capital might end up being a long one, so I decided to leave once things with Reinald had been settled. I wanted to stay while the maneuvers were taking place, but that would depend on the stance Reinald took regarding the margrave.

While the margravine always had to be ready for times of crisis, I did not

harbor any ill will for Reinald. If anything, it was the other way around. Speaking honestly, it was hard to believe that he would really do anything.

I opened Ern's letter but wasn't expecting much given the quality of the envelope. I would have been glad if it was simply a message saying that she was doing well, but alas, it was anything but.

"What in the...?" I uttered. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Inside the envelope was a scrap of paper that looked torn out of a notebook, upon which was scrawled a short message. I knew the handwriting to be Ern's at a glance, as I had seen it countless times at school.

"Falkrum is in danger, come to the empire."

I couldn't read a single word before or after it, and could only respond with a wry chuckle. I wasn't laughing at Ern; I just didn't know how else to respond. Nonetheless, I uttered a quiet apology to Ern, who had gone to the trouble of sending me a letter. It *was* a warning of some kind, but it wasn't one I could easily heed. It might have been different were I to receive a message like this *before* coming to Conrad, but since then I'd made many connections; too many to simply abandon without so much as a word.

Mrs. Henrik brought some tea, but the fragrance did little to soothe me. A quiet moan escaped my lips. Couldn't life in another world be a simpler thing? How much easier everything would have been if the world had a simple-to-follow, black-and-white dichotomy of good and evil, or at least the existence of absolutes in both directions. But the hazy anxiety at the bottom of my heart wouldn't clear, and a part of me wondered if it ever would.

14: Reinald and Kamil

“My lady, a report from the guards.”

It was word that the guests we’d been expecting had arrived right on time. I was surprised, however, by the sheer size of the entourage. I had expected a carriage and a unit of bodyguards, but I was met by something else entirely. Haring arrived ahead of all the others. He had a few officers with him, and people had already begun to gather at the sight of visitors from the capital.

Haring broke into a smile when he recognized me.

“Why, if it isn’t the Margravine of Conrad,” he said. “It is an honor to have you come out to greet us personally. Do you remember me?”

“But of course. Have you been well, Sir Haring?”

“You remember my name. I could not be more grateful. You look to be in fine health, my lady. I am glad to see it.”

“Thank you. However, I came out here when I heard there were visitors, but where is everyone else?”

Oh my, would you look at that... I could practically hear the women’s thoughts as they gazed upon the well-mannered Haring.

“They’re close behind and should arrive shortly,” he replied.

“You’re the advance party, then. But I must say, you’ve brought quite the number of troops with you. Last I checked, the Conrad region had no issues when it came to public safety. Is there a problem I should be aware of?”

“Not in the slightest! The domain of the margrave is something of a rarity compared with other regions. It boasts excellent security for its people.”

Well, yes. I already knew that.

“I’m embarrassed to admit it,” Haring went on, “but we’ve always been like this. I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding; it is our duty to ensure the protection of our leader.”

“Don’t mind me,” I replied. “Just having a little fun at your expense. I’m not going to nitpick the work you do.”

“Rather harsh, that joke.”

“I, of course, intend to be mindful of your position in understanding the situation, but I *am* the wife of the margrave. The arrival of such a large number of troops will only leave our people flustered and anxious. I beg your understanding.”

“As I beg yours. And I apologize for my spotty memory; I keep forgetting you’re the margravine, my lady.”

“Didn’t you greet me by my title the moment we recognized each other?” I asked.

“I suppose I did as much to remind myself. You are, after all, a beautiful young lady.”

With so many watchful eyes around, this environment was not one conducive to conversation. I led Haring out of the gates and away from the nearby residents. To them, it would have looked as though we were leaving so as to be in a better position to meet Reinald when he arrived. As the region sat on a small hill, the location offered excellent visibility, though the lack of trees often made for strong winds. The cold breeze sent my hair and skirt fluttering, and I pulled my stole tighter around me.

“Sir Haring, I brought you here so we could speak more freely. Is my friend doing well?”

“Ernesta? You mean Six and Kokoska’s new favorite, yes? From what I hear, she’s doing well. She’s young, and she’s been drawing attention of late.”

“I see. Well, I’m just glad to know she’s doing well.”

Which raises the question: did she send me that tattered letter of hers in secret?

“You brought me here to ask about your friend?” asked Haring.

“Yes, it’s not something I want people overhearing.”

“If you’re worried, I’d be happy to handle any letters you might write. I

promise to make sure she gets them.”

“Thank you, but Elena has already offered the same, and you’re here for work duties, I don’t want to burden you.”

I hadn’t talked very much with Haring, but he worked under Reinald’s command, and he was someone Elena trusted. This was how I’d decided I could ask him about Ern.

“How long will it take for Sir Reinald to get here?” I asked. “If he’s still some ways off, I’d be happy to provide a place for you and your people to rest.”

“I appreciate the generosity, but we’ll be fine. He is coming on horseback as well.”

So not in a carriage, then, which meant he would arrive all the sooner. Going back to the manor was something of a pain anyway. I was all set to wait with Haring and stroll the area when he made a suggestion.

“We can leave the waiting to my officers. Would you mind showing me to a location where we have a better view of the forest between Conrad and Latoria?”

“Not at all. Though, you should know that it’s grown rather wild, and not in any state to be put on display for anybody, really.”

“Think nothing of it. I am asking a favor of you, after all. If you’re happy to show it to me, that alone is enough. I’ve no complaints.”

Perhaps he was interested in Latoria. Still, I had no reason to refuse the request, and more to the point, I couldn’t. The best places for a view of the forest were the hunting lodge and the guard towers. We walked along the outer wall—a path I was very familiar with now—and Haring let out an awed sigh at the sight of the expansive forest stretching out before us. The nearby hunters at the lodge looked up at the soldier with some shock, but they went on with their work when I reassured them everything was okay.

“It’s even more sweeping than I’d thought,” he uttered. “The whole place...it’s *all* forest.”

“Yes, forests and mountain ranges as far as the eye can see. It’s perhaps hard

to believe, but I'm told that in the past, Latoria's forces marched straight through it all to invade these lands."

"Well, Falkrum really *is* worth the effort. Even now it's a treasure trove of ore and natural resources. The Conrad region too. It might seem an arid landscape at a glance, but the amount of produce harvested here is unbelievable where I hail from."

"But it's not just the soil?"

"It's definitely that too, but according to Six, apparently the protection of specters is powerful here."

Specters. It was one of those words, like swords and sorcery, that echoed with the fantastical.

"I have heard about that in picture books," I said.

"The customs of spectral faith are still followed at a few small churches, though not in great number. Not really surprising, really; there's so little in the way of ghosts in the modern world."

"You seem rather knowledgeable on the topic."

"In the past, a nation was integrated into the empire which worshiped specters extensively," explained Haring. "Walk the streets of the empire, and even now you'll walk by people who called such a country home, or otherwise their descendants."

That nation had fallen, of course. Even after all I had studied under the margrave, I still could not grasp the entirety of the countries that had been unified under the imperial flag.

As we stared off at the forest, word arrived that Reinald was arriving. He and the rest of the troops had arrived by the time Haring and I returned, and the sheer number of them all left everyone more than a little panicked.

"Miss Karen," said Reinald upon seeing me. "It has been a long time."

His striking good looks, which seemed to glimmer under the light of the sun, were of little importance. What mattered more were the battalions spread out far behind him. Even at a rough estimate it was more than a hundred soldiers at

least, the majority of whom were fully armored and on horseback. The only members in formal dress were Reinald and around ten of his closest officers; all of whom, I assumed, intended to join Reinald on his visit to the manor. And even though the military under Reinald's command would remain on standby upon the hill, it was all too easy to see how spooked Conrad's own guards were.

I cannot shrink with hesitation here, I thought, clenching my fists.

"It has indeed," I said. "The margrave awaits you in the family manor. He has been rather unwell of late, so I am here to greet you in his place. I do hope you understand."

"To have you grace us with your presence upon our arrival is far more than we could ask for. I realize I am here with quite the entourage, but please, pay it no mind."

Like I'm going to just nod and say, "Oh, in that case, consider them forgotten." I'm not that stupid.

"You really did come with quite the group," I commented.

"We recently came into possession of some fine horses," said Reinald. "I couldn't help myself; I wanted to see how they fared."

"We did try to make sure we were prepared to accommodate you and your people, but given the sheer numbers, such a thing might prove rather...difficult. It gets especially cold here in the evenings, so we'll do our best to provide you with firewood and provisions."

Judging by the circumstances, I did not expect Reinald to answer honestly as to why everyone was fully armed and armored. As I led Reinald and his entourage to the manor, I noticed that Moritz was among them. Unsurprisingly, the group drew a lot of attention. Their air of refinement was unusual in Conrad, and it marked them as outsiders.

The margrave was at the entrance to the manor, and while Doctor Emma was absent, Whateley was on standby not far away. There was tension in the air as the margrave and Reinald greeted one another. The margrave then brought everyone to one of the manor halls, only to find it was not to his guests' liking.

“I would like to request a more intimate location; one more amenable to conversation,” said Reinald.

“In that case, I fear the room will not be up to the correct standards of excellence.”

“I don’t want to speak of important matters in such a public space,” said Reinald. “It should go without saying that I do not want others present.”

Whateley, Mrs. Henrik, and I noticed a tremble through the margrave’s fingers. The group moved to the room which Whateley and I had used to discuss matters in the past. Reinald’s entourage followed after them. It made me uneasy to think that even Whateley had been denied attendance. Though he tried to negotiate, Reinald’s people were steadfast, and when the margrave told him to abide by their wishes, there was nothing more he could do.

“My lady, he’s going to be all alone in there. What will we do?” asked Mrs. Henrik.

“Prepare the tea, Mrs. Henrik,” I replied. “I am going to hang around.”

I had made a promise, and I would not leave the margrave to fend for himself. With a tray of tea at the ready, I thus made my way inside the room. As I poured cups for everyone, the margrave and Reinald spoke of ordinary matters.

“When he heard that you were coming, Sir Reinald, my husband made sure to acquire some wonderful tea,” I said when the opportunity presented itself.

Moritz shot me a message with his eyes: *Get lost*. I feigned ignorance. My going along with the conversation as if I were always meant to be there, then, was probably only fuel upon the fire as far as he was concerned.

“As for the military maneuvers, margrave...” said Reinald.

“Ah, yes. May I see the document the king granted you for that?”

“But of course. However, I notice the margravine is still present...”

He wanted me gone, but I could not do what he wanted. I felt the prickly gazes on me, but they had no effect.

“Do not mind her,” said the margrave. “My health is rarely in my favor these days, and so she acts to support me. Given that I am merely reviewing a

document, surely you don't mind?"

"As you wish."

Nice one, margrave!

The document was signed by the king himself. The margrave looked it over, and Reinald watched him the whole time.

"She cursed your name," he said.

In an instant, the air in the room shifted.

"Hmm...?" murmured the margrave.

Perhaps he hadn't heard it. The margrave lifted his head. All of the expression had left Reinald's face, and his quiet gaze studied the old man sitting across from him.

"A message from my mother," he said. "'Even if my body should wither, I will forever curse your name.' That was what she said before she left us."

The room was silent. The document dropped from the margrave's hands, and the man who had given it to him promptly picked it up. Nobody seemed to care that the margrave seemed completely unable to move.

"Seeing as you lacked the courage to take this message alone, you gave me no other choice," said Reinald. "And I do not care to make this visit a second time for such a purpose."

"Those were...your mother's words?"

"As she spoke them."

It took a long time for the meaning of the words to sink in. The margrave looked up at the ceiling. The strong front he had been trying to maintain was, in an instant, destroyed.

"So she curses me," he uttered.

"I am merely here to deliver the last words of the woman who was my mother."

For some reason, Reinald glanced at me and sighed. To anyone watching, it looked as though he were holding back a growing rage, except...

Hmm?

“I remember you,” continued Reinald. “On a number of times, you came for my mother after my birth to take her away. You pulled her by the arms as she screamed and cried, and you delivered her to my father’s bedroom.”

“You’re...” started the margrave.

“I don’t remember much else, but I do remember that. It is burned into my mind. Back then you were a powerful general, now you are barely even the shadow of who you once were.”

The margrave did not offer up a fight. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His fists remained clenched. He was in no state to offer any answers, but it did not seem that Reinald was looking for them either.

“It’s true,” said the margrave, “I...”

“Margrave,” said Reinald, cutting him off. “I came here to confirm something.”

In that instant, he seized control of the conversation, but the margrave offered no objection.

“If I remember correctly, in those memories of which I speak, you were smiling. You enjoyed what you were doing.”

This shook the margrave. Confusion flooded his features. He had no such memories.

“No...” he uttered. “No, it’s not possible.”

“You don’t remember. I suppose I should have expected as much. Our suffering is hidden beneath your happiness. And as such, it would seem that many such memories have been rewritten.”

His voice was flat, as though he were merely reviewing historical facts.

“Ah, Miss Karen,” Reinald continued, turning his attention to me. “Would you hold out your hand for me?”

“Hm? Oh, like thi... Suh?!”

I did as requested without even giving it a second thought, and suddenly

found myself pulled with such force I couldn't even resist. I felt certain I was going to collide with the table because of the sheer force of it, but before I did Reinald held me up. Fortunately, the whole thing only resulted in a few cups being spilled.

But why am I suddenly so close to Reinald's face?

"This is how we'll make sure," Reinald stated. "You have steeled yourself for this meeting of ours, but I wonder; will you simply sit there and let me take that which is important to you?"

Reinald's eyes were on the margrave as he spoke his question. His expression remained unchanged. I was still so shocked that I couldn't speak, but I knew that things were not good. I wanted to release myself from Reinald's grasp but couldn't easily get to the arm wrapped around my waist.

"Karen has nothing to do with this!" cried the margrave, leaning forward.

"Nothing to do with this... What a strange thing to say. This woman is one of your wives, and it is all too easy to see how well you treat her."

"Yes, it's true..." uttered the margrave. "She is a precious blessing who comes by way of the Kirsten family. Even you must know that things will only get worse if you do anything that causes her harm!"

"My mother, too, was one such precious blessing, entrusted to a new family."

"I know. But if it is vengeance you seek, then the point of that spear should be directed at *me*. Karen is simply—"

"And why am I supposed to be considerate of *you* when nobody was considerate of *us*?"

Reinald's words were accusatory, but that same blame could not be felt in any other part of him. The margrave could not understand what Reinald was asking of him, and for a time he simply opened and closed his mouth, dumbstruck, until finally his head drooped between his shoulders.

"If it is my riches or my head you are after, take them," said the margrave. "But I beg of you, please, spare Karen. The blame lies with me. With those I worked with. The residents of this land bear none of that sin."

His voice was one of pitiful sorrow, but none reached a hand out in support. From every direction his person was impaled by sharp, impassive gazes. That was when I made my move.

“Sir Reinald,” I said.

The room had been soaked in such silence that even my utterance seemed to echo. All eyes turned to me, and when my eyes met Reinald’s, I paused to think.

In times like this, how does one take their foe by surprise without starting a quarrel?

Given that I had few other options, I pinched one of Reinald’s cheeks and pulled at it.

“If you aren’t going to take this seriously, then can we *please* put a stop to this bullying?” I asked.

I had succeeded in taking the room completely by surprise, but quickly regretted how I’d done it. There was death in Moritz’s eyes!

I’m sorry! I’m sorry!

I quickly let go of Reinald’s cheek, but my gaze stayed on his.

“What a strange thing to say,” he remarked. “I’m certain you know what happened to my family.”

His was a smile that could have turned a person’s blood cold, and yet I was not scared. Something had been odd to me all this time, and I knew I’d made the right choice in bringing that niggling doubt to light.

“Of course I heard,” I said. “And the circumstances are that much clearer now that I’ve heard this too.”

“In which case...”

“I realize that it’s complicated. Which is why, if you were truly angry, I never would have spoken up to interrupt you, even if I were here with you in this room.”

“Which is to say you have some reason for speaking up?”

“Sir Reinald, from the moment the conversation turned to this particular

topic, you've appeared *bored*. You're not even angry, but you insist on acting like it. And when my husband's head drooped just now, you looked, in every way, disappointed by that reaction."

Reinald's eyes, the color of a blue melting in open water, went wide with surprise. It was a beautiful sight, but not one I could admire for long.

"If you were just bored and playing around, that would be one thing, but can you please stop with this verbal bludgeoning?"

This was at the crux of how strange it all felt to me. Why was Reinald pretending to be angry?

Hmm, so words alone still aren't enough to make my case. I would very much like to put a little space between us, however; we're awfully close.

"What an odd thing to say, Miss Karen," said Reinald.

"Is it, though? I would bet everything I own, right this instant, that you are not really angry right now."

"You're confident, I see."

"Because if you were truly angry, you would have cut my husband down already, no?"

Of that I am certain. Well, mostly.

I was brought back to the guardhouse, when I had been saved. Reinald had summarily ignored all of Lang's excuses. The man was despicable in Reinald's eyes, and completely useless. I hated the idea of comparing Lang to the margrave, as it was disrespectful to such an honest man, but rank and title meant little to someone like Reinald. He would not let such things impede his actions. And as I'd thought much earlier, Reinald was anything but a hero for justice.

"I do not believe you to be the type to show mercy to any you deem undeserving of it," I declared.

Keep eye contact, Karen. Don't wimp out now. Stay strong, oh features of mine.

For a time, a battle waged entirely in silence played between myself and

Reinald. And fortunately for me, it was Reinald who broke first; he released his grip on my waist and lifted his hands in a show of defeat.

“You give me far too much credit,” he said, “but I appreciate the kind words.”

A compliment hadn't been my intent, but at least I hadn't hurt his feelings. I was also finally free. I mused for the briefest of moments on the fact that Reinald likely used a most wonderful soap, but did not entertain the thoughts for very long. Reinald's fake anger was gone, and he now looked upon the margrave with respect in his features.

“Margrave Conrad,” he said. “You have disappointed me.”

There was compassion in the gentle smile of Reinald's face as he went on.

“Had you responded the way I expected you might, I would have lopped your head from your shoulders. Things did not go that way, however, perhaps because I was expecting too much.”

The margrave was still in shock. I walked over to his seat and tapped him on the shoulder, which brought him back to his senses. Even then, however, he was unsure what to make of Reinald's attitude.

“You...didn't come here for revenge, then?” he asked.

“I told you,” replied Reinald. “I came to convey a message. As for revenge, had I been so inclined...perhaps. But I've no desire for such a thing now.”

“But what I did to your mother, your dignity...”

“Whatever grudge my mother may have held, it was hers and hers alone. What I expected was the arrogance and cruelty of your past,” said Reinald, who paused to let out a long sigh. “But time lays waste to us all.”

“Reinald, you...”

“Once an indomitable, lionhearted warrior, now it is not even worth pointing a sword in your direction. It is enough that you simply wither away, left to your own misery.”

I had thought Reinald was done, but there was a cruelty in his words. They were made to attack. The margrave put a hand to his heart. His teeth were clenched tight. I had seen enough.

“The margrave is tired,” I said. “Consider this meeting concluded.”

“But Karen...” uttered the margrave.

“Did you intend to keep this up looking so pale? Stop it, please. None could possibly go on with you looking so utterly exhausted. Did you forget the doctor’s orders? She’s adamant that you are not to overdo it.”

The margrave might have been ready to die at Reinald’s hand, but it would have been the rest of us who suffered for it. And when I reminded him of Doctor Emma’s existence, he thankfully regained his wits. Reinald made no effort to stop the man as he excused himself from the room.

Now that I was alone with Reinald and his officers, it was up to me to handle things from here. I thought it best to start with words of thanks.

“If we were to lose the margrave, the region would fall into disarray. You held your blade, and for that I am grateful.”

“It was the twists of fate. Nothing worth thanking me for.”

“Nonetheless,” I replied, “while I am admittedly not especially knowledgeable in the matter, it would appear you have every reason to act in the name of vengeance. I am beyond relieved to see this matter settled without bloodshed.”

From the moment I’d seen the countless soldiers, I’d been worried as to what negotiations were to be at play. Now I could breathe a sigh of relief.

“And yet the Kirstens would only benefit from such an outcome,” said Reinald.

“That’s a decidedly awful thing to say.”

“It is the truth. With the old man gone, Conrad would come under your control. Should that be your wish, I offer my support.”

“I’ve no such wish, and besides, didn’t I tell you earlier to stop it with the bullying?”

“And I did, didn’t I?”

“Then don’t push me around either. It’s not good for my heart.”

What a terrifying idea. I never want that, now more than ever.

“In any case,” I continued, “the margrave already has an heir in the form of Sven, his son by way of his other wife. Therefore, there is nothing for me to inherit in the event of his passing.”

“What a surprise. Are you unaware of the value of the region?”

“I’m well aware of it, which is all the more reason to let Sven have it. I have no interest in Conrad’s riches.”

And even if Sven were to suddenly have a change of heart, there was always Wendel waiting in the wings. While he was not a direct descendant of the margrave, in his every gesture he was just like his father-in-law, and could be trusted to be his heir if necessary.

“You’re not interested in the region’s riches in the slightest, then,” said Reinald.

“Your words surprise me, Sir Reinald. Why would you ask such a thing now?”

“I apologize. Did I hurt your feelings?”

“Nothing of the sort. But if it were gold, silver, and jewelry that I was interested in, I would have made *you* my husband from the very beginning. Certainly, I’d have had no reason to move all the way to the countryside to get married.”

And Reinald knew this better than anyone in the room. Perhaps he’d forgotten our first meeting. I wasn’t impressed, but something seemed to click for Reinald, and he chuckled. I couldn’t stand it. I’d said nothing even remotely funny. I glanced at Haring for support, but he looked rather awkward and unlikely to be of any help. As for Moritz, well...the man was terrifying, so I opted to avoid his gaze entirely.

“Is it safe to assume that this discussion is over now?” I asked. “It’s rather hard to speak with all the pressure in this room, and so if you don’t mind, I’d like to direct you to somewhere more spacious.”

“We are done with the margrave,” replied Reinald. “As such, we’ll excuse ourselves posthaste. Ah, Miss Karen, would you mind acting as our guide for the region? I rarely ever visit Conrad, and I’d like to see the forest everyone is talking about with my own eyes.”

“As you wish. Please wait just a moment.”

Finally I was free from the pressure cooker of the office. I had Reinald and his men move elsewhere, and when I returned for them I was met by a pale-faced Mrs. Henrik.

“My lady, are you quite all right?” she asked. “They didn’t do anything to you, did they?”

“I’m just fine, Mrs. Henrik. More importantly, how is the margrave?”

“He’s with Emma at present. He’s been given some medicine to help him get some rest and sleep...”

“In which case he’s okay. You don’t have to worry, Mrs. Henrik, really. Nothing’s going to happen to him. Oh, by the way, Wendel, would you come here a moment?”

The boy was peeking out from behind Whateley, and I called him over like one might a dubious little cat.

“What is it?” he asked, looking decidedly uncertain.

“I’m going to give our guests a guided tour, but I’d like to ask something of you.”

“My lady?” said Mrs. Henrik. “I daresay young master Wendel—”

“Oh hush, Mrs. Henrik,” said Wendel. “Okay. What is it?”

That’s my Wendel. So quick on the uptake!

I was heading out to guide Reinald’s group myself, but I wanted Wendel as support. Which is to say, someone to help calm the air, so to speak. For a time, I’d considered leaving the guide work to someone else, but I had the feeling that Reinald wanted to talk to me. By the time I was all ready to go, so too were Reinald and his officers.

“I know you’d like to see the region, but there isn’t much else to see besides the forest,” I said.

“Even the fields and the water sources in the area are fine,” replied Reinald.

“Very well. Wendel.”

“I think we should head out of the manor and circle around the left,” he said. “It’s harvest time over there, and there’s much to see, including the new warehouses and the forest too. Then we can just as easily head from there to the hunting lodge.”

Ask, and ye shall receive, as they say. Having Wendel to offer an immediate route to our destination was a huge help.

That said, the forest that connects us to Latoria sure is popular...

Wendel handled all necessary explanations as we made our way toward the forest, and Reinald’s officers listened in rapt attention. But it was the forest itself that drew in Reinald the most. Haring was intrigued also, and so Wendel pulled in one of the old hunters and we made our way into the forest by way of the path the hunters liked to use. As for Moritz, well...he made it clear that he was not going to leave Reinald’s side.

I told them everything I knew about the area, but naturally that wasn’t a whole lot, and it wasn’t long before we were out of things to talk about. I didn’t have any particular objectives, so I let my gaze wander to wherever Reinald and his officers were looking.

The forest was, even now, thick with green leaves, though here and there they were beginning to turn red. In the mornings, light streamed in from above and the wind offered a cool breeze, giving one the sense that it was a wonder of the natural world. When you actually entered the forest, however, you quickly realized it was bug paradise, full of leaf beetles flying to and fro. Taking a step off the beaten path also meant potentially stepping straight into piles of rotten leaves. The forest was anything but the place to visit wearing your Sunday best.

“It was my understanding that there was a road through the forest that linked to Latoria. It was popular with merchants. What’s the state of it?” asked Reinald.

“There’s another road that bypasses the forest,” replied the hunter. “It’s longer, but it’s also safer. People started using that, and the forest road fell out of favor. In time, it was buried under the forest.”

“No unwanted guests traveling through the forest, then?”

“Never heard of it outside of the locals, nope. As you can see, it’s as deep as it is wide; unless you know the lay of the land, you’ll get yourself lost right quick. The only path through goes right by the watchtowers too.”

I wasn’t allowed to go deep into the forest, but I knew that there were steep cliffs farther in. I couldn’t help but be somewhat in awe of the fact that *anyone* would dare pass through the forest to invade, regardless of how long ago it had happened.

“I have to ask, Miss Karen,” said Reinald then, “am I really so easy to read?”

He picked a fallen leaf from the floor and spun it between his fingers.

“I speak of when I was with the margrave earlier,” he continued. “You saw that he had disappointed me and said as much, but even now I cannot fathom how you knew.”

Ooh. Curious, are you?

“As I watched your conversation, I simply got that sense, I suppose.”

“So you saw through me via means indefinable,” remarked Reinald. “How unfortunate. Such negotiations are usually my specialty; I’m confident I can best even Moritz.”

“And yet he appears so much more skilled,” I replied.

Whoops, slip of the tongue. Did Moritz hear that...?

Fortunately, his attention was on the watchtowers.

“That I was right in my hunch was a stroke of good luck,” I said. “I was nervous, and I was desperate. I wouldn’t normally dare such things.”

Or so I said, though in truth I’d been certain for a number of reasons. For one, at Arno’s inauguration party I’d bumped into Reinald quite by coincidence, and he’d talked to me of his youth. What struck me about the story was that there was no echo of resentment in his words, though I suppose it was possible that he had hidden his true feelings on the matter. In any case, I got the sense that Reinald had accepted the past for what it was and simply told me the truth. I felt certain in this impression.

“It struck me as odd that you spoke of the grudge spreading as far as

yourself,” I said.

“You seem to think me a saint of some kind, when the truth is that revenge *was* on my mind. Going home having failed leaves me rather vexed.”

“So you have some kind of scheme in mind? Something to set into action before you leave? I do hope you’ll notify me if such is the case; I’ll need to prepare a countermeasure.”

I did not want to be thrown into a panic. I’d spoken honestly, but Reinald merely shrugged.

“And what kind of countermeasure would you be considering?” he asked.

“Don’t expect a word if you won’t answer my question. Shall I start by crying and screaming? Perhaps you’d be satisfied if I dropped to my knees and bowed my head into the mud?”

“No, thank you. I’ve no interest in seeing you so humiliated.”

“Good. If that’s what you expected I’d have no choice but to despise you.”

The conversation was easy and fun, and it was just starting to go somewhere when we heard a shocked cry echo through the forest. Everyone was on guard in an instant. That was when Haring dashed into view holding Wendel in his arms. The old hunter followed soon after.

“There’s a bear nearby!” shouted the hunter. “Someone bring a bow! We have to scare it off!”

The cry had almost been a scream, and it drew everybody’s attention immediately, myself included. It was a hectic moment, and we opted to turn back so as to stay out of the hunter’s way.

Though we’d originally planned to eat somewhere around the area, the margrave was sick and in bed. Reinald and his officers had never intended to stay long either, so we wrapped things up earlier than scheduled. It was something of a disappointment, but there was a bear near the hunting lodge, and the vast number of soldiers on the hill had the residents uneasy. I had no reason to keep them, and so I saw Reinald and his group off. It was then, as we were saying goodbye, that Reinald asked me a strange question.

“Miss Karen, it would seem people appear to think I have rather handsome features. I am told quite often; do you happen to think the same?”

It was the most peculiar of questions. I recalled the way Reinald appeared to have little interest in himself. As such, it stood to reason that he was not particularly concerned with his own appearance. I answered without hesitation.

“I think you have beautiful features,” I said. “And while I’m not one to judge a book entirely by its cover, yes, I think you make for a fine cover, so to speak.”

Reinald dropped into thought for a moment, and in the next instant he had my hair in his hand.

It’s not the fingertips this time, it’s the hair...?

...is what I would have thought, had I had time to think. In a flowing movement Reinald’s face drew near and his lips brushed against my dark hair. His eyes felt almost close enough to touch my own, and there was a hint of mischief in them. I had seen them this close before. I knew them. But the surprise of it, and the situation...

“While not exactly what I was hoping for,” he said, “I suppose I’ll just have to settle for the look on your face. So long.”

Reinald’s face returned to its usual state as he turned on his heel. As I watched him walk away, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

Ah...

It struck me then that Reinald was perhaps the type you’d call a sore loser, and this had been a revenge of sorts. I could feel my face flushed with heat, and I hoped very much that it would subside sooner rather than later.

15: Turning Points

The military maneuvers were scheduled to be held over thirty days. Given the length of time, it was clear that it was a serious operation. Whateley was very concerned with the movements of the military, and he made sure to quickly update his intelligence in detail. What had him most worried, however, was the reaction of the early inspection group when we had given them a tour of the region.

“I find their interest in the forest most concerning,” he said. “I send people to check regularly, so I don’t foresee any problems, and yet...”

If Latoria were to ignore the long road and attempt to reach Conrad through the forest, they would need to rebuild the bridges across the ravines, all of which were broken. According to Whateley, there was no sign that anyone had crossed, but the forest was so vast that even the people who knew it best still had blind spots.

“While I’d like to expand our search area, at present we have the increase in deer numbers and that roaming bear to worry about. I held a meeting with the residents, and there’s little more we can do while we’re right in the midst of winter preparations...”

“How far into preparations would you need to be before you could dispatch more people?”

“We’ll need at least ten days. Reinald also brought a cavalry unit, which has caused another layer of anxiety among the townsfolk. They’re asking for us to put more guards on watch.”

“And the safety of Conrad’s people should indeed be prioritized.”

“From what we can see, nothing unusual is taking place in the forest. We’ve looked it over not so long ago, and it’s too soon to conduct another investigation.”

“But Whateley,” I said. “Even with all that said, I gather that you’re not

opposed to the idea of keeping a close eye on the forest?”

“In the past, I was taught never to ignore where others put their attention and never to make assumptions because you believe your knowledge to cover everything. I’ve been more vigilant ever since.”

“Wise words, and ones I would like to heed also.”

“Indeed. Though the person who spoke them was a truly incorrigible piece of shit.”

“Huh...?”

And so it was that among such conversations, Whateley and his closest advisors went about their work. After a time the margrave’s condition improved, though Doctor Emma was adamant he take things easy.

I couldn’t help but be intrigued by the man the margrave had once been—the man that Reinald had spoken of—and so I asked about it quietly, but I soon realized it was not a topic Doctor Emma was particularly fond of. All she did was sigh, then let out the following tantalizing tidbit:

“I don’t know very much about who he was as a soldier, but I did try asking him about it in the past. When I did, however, he grew melancholy and depressed. He was back to his usual self the following day, but when I asked him about the previous day, he was very awkward and at a complete loss.”

Doctor Emma had been careful not to carelessly bring the topic up ever since. I checked with Whateley too, but it seemed that the taboo subject wasn’t just the past, as such, it was Reinald’s mother in particular. The margrave’s memories were scattered and unclear when it came to that particular topic, perhaps in an attempt to assuage and flee past feelings of guilt.

It was all very concerning, but not to the extent that I needed to confront him about it. And in any case, did I even have the right to force such a thing?

Reinald had not brought judgment down upon the margrave. He had turned a pitiful gaze at the old man, whose head was slumped between his shoulders, and he had said only this: *“It is enough that you simply wither away, left to your own misery.”* Leaving him alone was punishment enough, it seemed. In that case, was forcing the man to confront reality a salvation, or an all-new

suffering? Either way, it left one wanting to tear their hair out.

“Though I suppose we are fortunate that things settled the way they did...” I muttered.

“Did you say something, my lady?” asked Nico.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Then could you *please* help with the packing? We’ve so much more baggage this time, and it’s a real pain to deal with.”

“Look at you, bold enough to order me around.”

“He who does not work, neither shall he eat! You taught me that, my lady!”

To what extent would Reinald pursue and prove another’s crimes? I still couldn’t grasp what his goals were, though it seemed the king was involved in some way.

There were other worries too. One particular to Conrad was that of a decline in the number of merchants traveling between nations. Exactly why this was happening was unclear, but people were being sent to the border to investigate. This dip in merchant numbers meant goods intended for sale remained in storage. This had even the margrave concerned. All signs pointed to the winter being something of a tense one.

Nico looked out the window for a moment while she continued packing.

“Lots of bad weather this year,” she said. “It’s supposed to clear as winter nears, but it just keeps raining. Everyone’s complaining that they can’t go out in all the fog.”

“Well, you can barely see anything through it,” I commented.

“And kids are always running around here and there in a heartbeat. The knights are usually relieved when winter comes because it means fewer get lost, but they’re as busy as always.”

Children rarely ever intended to get lost. They simply ended up that way when their games drew them away from the familiar and they realized, often quite suddenly, that they were very far from home. One might think that a child would be easy to spot, given that Conrad had little in the way of trees and much

in the way of visibility due to its geographical position, but a quick walk around showed that there were many areas full of long grass too. There were also big rocks, and visibility wasn't great on the rear side of the region. After I arrived in the area, it struck me that it was one thing to look for a gang of full-grown adults among the environment, but it was very much another to look for children.

"Once we're done packing, we have to go over our itinerary," I said.

"How about taking a break while you're in the capital? You'll be there to check in on your sister anyway."

"Yes, but I don't like the idea of leaving my responsibilities here. I do intend to come back here to check up on things, after all."

"It won't be a long-term stay in the capital?"

"I'd like to make time to return here a few times. Did you make any plans to go somewhere with Sven?"

Until now, Nico hadn't really responded in any particularly noticeable way upon mention of Sven, but when she heard my question, she blushed.

How very interesting.

I couldn't help but flash something of a wicked smile.

"N-No! No plans!" exclaimed Nico. "I-I haven't spoken to him about this coming visit to the capital!"

"Oh? Is there something you can't talk about?"

"Don't ask me!"

I knew that Nico and Sven regularly exchanged letters. Sven was also of the age where it wasn't unusual to be thinking about a wife. Perhaps things had progressed to that point.

Which would make Nico the future Margravine of Conrad. Perhaps it's best to teach her the rules of etiquette, then?

The blushing Nico was adorable, and I teased her until there came a hesitant knock at the door. It was Wendel who entered. He took a quick look around to

make sure we were alone and kept his voice low. His expression was very serious, and he'd come to consult us about something.

"Father hasn't been well recently," he said, "and mother always looks troubled. Whateley and my wicked stepmother won't tell me a thing. The air in the whole manor feels so gloomy."

"Huh? Wicked stepmother? Me? Wendel?"

"Oh, hush, my lady," said Nico.

Wendel went on to discuss what was on his mind. The margrave's birthday was coming up and he wanted to find a gift for him. At the same time, he wanted to cheer Doctor Emma up, so he'd come up with the idea of buying the two of them a matching gift of some kind.

"I heard that lovers and couples sometimes do it," said Wendel. "And I know they don't have any matching items. I thought such a gift might brighten them up."

Wedding rings weren't a tradition in Falkrum. Wendel wanted a little financial support from yours truly to purchase said gift.

"This is how much money I have," said Wendel.

He took a leather bag from his pocket, filled with gold coins.

"My, that's quite a lot," I remarked.

"Well, I get pocket money, plus what mother pays me for helping her. She already receives gifts from father, but she never wears that jewelry because she thinks it's too lavish. She's happy enough just to look at it. The merchants around here don't offer any jewelry or accessories that jump out at me as appropriate, and besides, they're far too cheap for my father to wear anyway."

I didn't think the margrave or Doctor Emma would care in the slightest how much a gift from their son cost, but it nonetheless played on Wendel's mind.

"Very well, if it's something the two of them can both wear, then let's avoid anything too flashy," I said. "Something plain, but of high quality. It'll probably be fastest to look around in the capital for something."

"That's what I thought. So look for something, please? And pay the difference

if my savings isn't enough."

"Talk about being direct, young master Wendel," said Nico. "You really should consider a more cordial way to convey your desire for financial support."

"But Karen will pay, right?"

"Of course she will."

Clearly I have no say in this whatsoever.

"Given the nature of the gift, let's have Sven help too," I said. "If it's from all of us, they can't simply thank us then put the box in a cupboard somewhere."

"And you're pitching in too, right, Nico?"

"But of course! I can't put in as much as either of you, but the margrave and the doctor have been nothing but good to me!"

"Yep, that and it's a gift for your future mother-in-law."

"Why do *you* have to talk like that too?!" cried Nico.

"Ugh, everybody knows you two are head over heels for each other; why not just roll with it?" I said. "Wendel, did you know that Nico is petrified that Sven might leave her? She's worried because she's convinced the capital is full of pretty young ladies."

"But Sven is the very portrait of a devoted young man. What's there to worry about? Then again, he asked me to make sure that no would-be suitors showed Nico any excess attention. What a pain."

"What?! Did he really say that?!"



Nico could do little more than scream, but it was like music to our ears as I took the leather bag from Wendel's hand and began counting the coins in it. I didn't expect us to have any problems finding something suitable in the capital, which meant the problem was whether I could find something that met my expectations. Wendel didn't know much about jewelry, but finding a shop that offered something simple, which could be worn in everyday life and that I was also happy with, might not be a simple thing. We also wanted to make sure we kept the price down where possible.

"Ah, Wendel," I said, remembering something. "If you have any tea that's helpful for pregnant mothers, could you prepare some leaves for me? Ideally something with a relaxing effect. Anything that can help with sleep too."

"Got it. I'll prepare some ingredients to mix when we get there."

On my trip to the capital I would be joined by Nico, Mrs. Henrik, and Wendel. Wendel was going for the gift, of course, but that was something of a top secret mission. On the face of it, he was going for books.

Preparations for my return went smoothly, and Doctor Emma saw us off when we left. I wasn't looking forward to the long days of carriage riding that were part and parcel of our journey, but it was nice at least to be heading somewhere. Unfortunately, the rain continued, so let it be known that the roads were muddy and fog blocked our path. Such rain wasn't common in the winter, and the villages we stopped at to rest in looked to be struggling with it.

It wasn't until we stopped by our final rest stop, another village, that we met with the unexpected. Upon stepping into our inn for the evening, I encountered a familiar face.

"Sven? What are you doing here?" I asked.

For an instant I wasn't sure it was actually him. He'd grown taller since I last saw him, and his features were more adult.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked back. "Nobody said anything to me about you visiting the capital."

"No, that's *my* question. What are *you* doing here? You look like you're by yourself. Where are your guards?"

Wendel and Nico were just as shocked at the sight of Sven, who by all accounts shouldn't have been where he was. Nico said she would inform Mrs. Henrik and promptly disappeared. Sven was shocked for an instant, but quickly looked rather hesitant to answer my question and scratched the back of his head, embarrassed.

"Oh, so I, uh...I paid some merchants and they're letting me travel with them for a time."

Sven was on the way home, dressed in decidedly cheap clothing. He'd left on his own, and no matter how safe a place the Conrad region was, the roads were still dangerous. When I returned to the others with Sven in tow, Mrs. Henrik had a fierce glare waiting for him.

"You are the heir to the Conrad region, traveling alone without your guards. What were you thinking?!" she demanded.

"Let's not use the word 'traveling,' please," replied Sven. "I'm just headed home, nothing more. If I didn't do it like this, I'd never be allowed to go on my own."

"You think that's a good enough excuse?!"

Mrs. Henrik's scolding was a fearsome thing, and Sven had nowhere to run. The plan was initially to bring him with us to the capital, but Sven was hellbent on returning to Conrad. He called me over to speak with him in private.

"Father is unwell, isn't he?" he said. "I want to go back."

"Be that as it may, what of your studies?" I replied.

"I took an extended break. There are zero issues with my grades, and my position in next year's class is already guaranteed."

"Guaranteed...? But isn't it far too soon for that?"

"Not if you put in a concerted effort. Work hard enough and it's a given."

A given, he said. As if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"Even then, you can't expect Mrs. Henrik to just let you travel with those merchants," I said. "And besides, you're lodging in one of my brother's houses. What did you tell him when you left?"

Arno and Achim would never have let Sven leave home without his guards.

“Oh, right... Uh, actually... I lied,” said Sven, confessing. “I told him that guards were being sent to meet me.”

“And Arno believed you?”

“Er, no... He seemed very busy with his work, so I just slipped it in while he was sleeping...”

I already knew, without a doubt, that Arno would have screamed the moment he realized that Sven was missing. Sven held himself with the unique awkwardness of one who knew he was guilty but was not yet ready to give up on his plans.

“Please,” he pleaded, “I must get back to Conrad, whatever it takes.”

“I know how you feel, but would you at least tell me why? What’s got you so bothered? So insistent? I don’t see the problem in returning to the capital first so you can travel with your guards.”

It didn’t look like we’d be able to hire anyone to accompany Sven at this village, so our only other option was to assign some of the guards we’d come with. Fortunately, doing so wasn’t going to interfere with our journey or itinerary, and if we moved all our baggage into a single carriage, Sven could travel in the other. Still, I was worried by Sven’s stubborn insistence.

“Not a word of this to Nico,” he said as a preamble.

“You don’t have to worry. My lips are sealed.”

“There are two reasons. The first is what I told you: I’m worried about father’s health. Mother told me it would be best for me to find time to return home, so that’s what I decided to do.”

“Mhm. And the other reason?”

“I sent a letter to Nico. Basically, I, uh... It was...about a future together... Wait! Wait, wait! Er... Okay. So I proposed.”

Proposed?! A future together?!

I was stunned, but actually such things weren’t all too uncommon among the

nobility.

“And what did she say?”

“She said she’d accept...if father gave his blessing.”

Well, that explains Nico’s U-turn the instant she saw Sven. And I wonder if it’s the reason she never told him about our visit to the capital too?

“And when did this proposal talk happen?”

“Why does that even...? Ugh, fine. Nico sent her reply about ten days ago.”

“And that’s why you threw yourself into your studies and wrangled yourself an early vacation.” I sighed. “Ah, to be young.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“But how does all of that explain why you’re traveling alone?”

“Well, it’s just... The guards are *always* there, and I wanted to experience a little adventure of my own. If I’m ever going to do it, now’s the only chance I’ll ever get.”

In other words, he let his passions drive him to reach his own ambitions by way of his own hand. Still, I couldn’t simply leave the son of my husband to his own devices, given everything he’d done for me, and I *was* set on dragging him to the capital by the scruff of his neck. But at the same time, he’d finally proposed to Nico. There was also the fact that he’d guaranteed his place at school already, which I knew firsthand was no mean feat. If we took him back to the capital, Arno and Achim would no doubt want to lecture him, and so it would be some time before he’d get back to Conrad.

“I’m sure you understand that, given my position, I can’t allow you to go on your own,” I said.

Sven looked crestfallen.

It’s much too soon for that!

“That being said, I can sympathize—at least on some small level—with your desire to be free, and to live as you like while you can.”

“Does that mean...!”

“It means I can postpone Arno’s and Achim’s angry lectures, and only that. We’ll give you a number of our guards, and they will see you safely to Conrad. Whateley is going to be furious with you.”

With all the uncertainties of late, I couldn’t help thinking it was nice to be able to watch over the blooming romance of the young.

Assigning our guards to Sven was not something I had decided on without forethought. It was something I could do because we were already close to the capital, and I knew that the remainder of the journey was a safe one; which was to say that the roads were full of travelers and merchants and, as long as we didn’t stray from the main roads, we wouldn’t encounter bandits.

Convincing Mrs. Henrik took something of a concerted effort from the both of us, and though we were able to assign some guards to accompany Sven, a few further demands were made. Firstly, Mrs. Henrik—seething with a quiet anger at Sven’s irresponsible behavior—would accompany him to Conrad. My priority was for my sister, of course, though the current state of the Conrad region was still something of a worry.

Secondly, Nico would also return to Conrad. She’d been so concerned with Sven that it was affecting her work, and if it was Sven’s intent to convince his father of the worth of their relationship, it did not make sense for her *not* to be a part of the conversation. I wanted to tell everyone that I would be just fine on my own, but naturally that wasn’t the world I was living in. I had to think of my position, and if push came to shove I could always use another servant. It was going to be a long journey for the two maids and the guards who accompanied them, but Sven would be sure to hear all about that discomfort in the form of long, reproofing lectures.

Now, you would think that if the three of them were returning to Conrad that Wendel would join them, but Wendel dismissed the idea.

“There’s so much I want to talk with Sven about, but it can wait until we get back,” he said.

“You won’t join your brother?”

“I’ve got things to look for, and I’ll be fine with you around, Karen.”

Wendel's decision appeared to make Sven somewhat lonely. Perhaps it was like seeing his eleven-year-old brother all grown up. I'd known it for a while now, but Sven was helpless when it came to his younger brother, whom he adored.

The rest of our trip to the capital was smooth and uneventful, so I'll save you the details. Once we arrived, we headed straight for Arno. The Kirsten household was, unsurprisingly, in a complete panic, and they had just been about to send out a search party when we arrived. Both Arno and Achim let out great sighs of relief to learn that Sven was safe.

"I tell you, I think that boy's going to need a punishment..." muttered Achim.

I could tell by his eyes that Sven really was in for it upon his return. I prayed only that he endured, because I wasn't going to lift a finger to help him.

"Karen, am I going to Saburova manor with you?" asked Wendel.

"I'd very much like you to join me," I said. "I want to introduce you to Emil, and besides, you're far more knowledgeable when it comes to working with herbs."

"But is it okay for someone like *me* to go?"

"Don't be like that. You'll be fine. You're well-mannered, and you're my son-in-law, so I don't see any issues. Hmm? Why did you chuckle just now?"

"It's nothing. You just don't seem like the stepmother type."

It was friendly banter between the two of us, but Arno and Achim looked noticeably uncomfortable.

"Well, all right then," said Wendel. "I'll come along, but I'm expecting a raise in my pocket money."

Doctor Emma had expressly told me not to dote on the boy, but he was already taking advantage of the situation. I wondered who he inherited that from. Once Arno and Wendel had properly introduced themselves to one another, we got onto the topic of Gerda.

"Just to be on the safe side, you'll get changed here, Wendel," I said. "I'm certain that Emil still has old clothes that will fit you, and the servants will help

you pick them out and get prepared.”

“Ugh, what a p—”

...ain.

I didn't let Wendel finish. Instead, I covered his mouth, and with one swift motion passed him off to the waiting servants. It was the perfect play. With Wendel out of the room and otherwise occupied, we could now get to matters in earnest.

“I must say,” uttered Arno with some awe, “it is so strange to have a nephew, even if he's an in-law.”

“Have you forgotten Sven entirely? You've been looking after him since he arrived.”

“He's more of a little brother. In any case, about Gerda. Things are especially bad at present, and we couldn't be more grateful that you're here.”

“That bad?”

“Gerda has poison tasters now, and it's done in two stages, but she's still so anxious she can't sleep. I daresay Emil is just about to reach breaking point.”

“And yet, didn't he say he was doing fine...?”

“Young master Emil is doing his utmost even though he still has his studies to worry about,” said Achim with a knowing look. “He's about due for a break, is what your brother means. He can't sleep over with your sister every night.”

“The servants are also exhausted,” added Arno. “Emil is trying his best to keep Gerda in check, but Gerda is the stronger-willed of the two; her opinion always wins out.”

“I'll do the very best I can, but tell me: what's the story with the poisoning that occurred?” I asked. “You wrote that one of Gerda's trusted maids was the culprit. Is this true?”

“Achim knows far more than I do. He handled the intel gathering.”

Achim had talked to Gerda's servants in order to discern the particulars and, as always, he'd had no trouble getting them to open up. However, Achim took a

moment before speaking and even scanned the room quickly to ensure nobody was around. When he did speak, it was in a low whisper.

“The maid in question wasn’t just trusted, she was the very definition of loyal. She was devoted to your sister. A thoughtful and attentive young woman.”

“The way you speak... You don’t think she did it?”

“I don’t believe she poisoned your sister, no, and neither do the maids who work at her villa. Nobody cared about your sister more, and even the maid herself denied it right up until the end.”

“And where is she now?”

“She’s already been executed. She hailed from a relatively good family, but this incident crushed it completely. The whereabouts of the few remaining family members are unknown.”

“But Gerda got along well with the maid, yes? She believed the girl guilty?”

“The maid was caught red-handed, apparently.”

The poison in question was found in the tea that the maid had prepared. Under ordinary circumstances, Arno would have led the investigation, but the king himself had been present at the time of the incident and had flown into a rage. As such, he ordered second prince Demyan to handle the matter.

“Gerda at first believed that someone had made her maid a scapegoat, and asked for her to be spared,” said Arno. “I, too, attempted to talk with her directly, but before I could...it was reported that Demyan extracted a confession. Gerda was beside herself with anxiety, and at a total loss...”

“She was under pressure from everyone around her to ensure that her baby was protected,” said Achim. “It was complete and utter panic. The maid was executed while everyone was still trying to calm your sister down.”

“But the girl denied any wrongdoing,” I said. “She came from a good family. Wouldn’t a trial have stretched things out?”

Even with Prince Demyan handling things, the complete destruction of an entire family line was a most serious matter. Simply putting someone to death without any actual proof, and before investigating any potential plots, seemed

far too hasty and rash a decision.

“You raise an excellent point,” said Achim, nodding in agreement, “and you’re exactly right. The young master was denied his request to meet with the maid, and from the moment she was taken into custody until her death, she talked only to Prince Demyan and his people.”

“So what of the maid’s confession?”

“Prince Demyan justified his actions and explained it all to the king, but from the whispers I’ve heard...”

Achim seemed hesitant to continue, but now that we’d come this far, it was easy for me to guess where things were going.

“She was tortured?” I asked.

“Correct. They say the skin around her collar was swollen and red.”

“Brother, do you think Prince Demyan was aware of this?”

“There’s no way he *didn’t* know. Unlike his brother, Prince Demyan has a very favorable reputation, but he is famous for his harsh treatment of criminals. Rumor has it he employs people specialized in exactly that... So it seems highly unlikely that it slipped his notice.”

Arno crossed his arms, his brow furrowed.

“So the maid wasn’t the true culprit, and it’s possible that she was coerced somehow into doing what she did, but the whole matter was wrapped up before the truth came to light,” I said.

“Oh,” uttered Achim. “You believe me?”

“There are very few maids who can bear my sister’s company without rest,” I said. “Which is to say that this maid must have been a saint of a sort.”

Achim had said he put everything together based on what he’d heard, but his intelligence gathering, given what he had to work with, was most impressive. I wondered how he had gotten so well-versed in royal matters, and I soon discovered there was indeed a reason for it.

“Now that we have connections among the Rodenwalds and the Conrads, I’ve

got access to areas that were once a little more complicated. That's how I found out, but it would seem the margrave keeps occasional tabs on how the king is doing."

"So if I ask the Conrads myself I might pick something up," I said, "like about Demyan's specialized staff..."

Now I knew why the margrave's expression had soured slightly when Prince Demyan came up in our conversation. I realized then that the margrave had a lot going on behind the scenes, and that my work assisting him was but a small fraction of it.

"Well, I realize you can't look into the matter any further," I continued. "But all I can do now is just try to console Gerda, you realize?"

"And that's fine. It took a while for you to get here, so I assume you've been busy?"

"Yes. I also intend to find some time to return home to Conrad for a short spell."

Arno smiled awkwardly at this, then left the room so he could prepare for our departure. I couldn't quite grasp his reaction, and it was then that Achim leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"It's because you said 'return home,'"

The revelation surprised even me. It came so naturally. Exactly when had I started doing so, I wondered. I felt as though I must have been doing it for some time, but it all just served to confirm that at some point Conrad really had become the place I thought of as home.

"Oh, uh, just as heartbreaking for me too, I might add," said Achim.

"Your effort is appreciated, Achim," I said. "But you know, I do miss not seeing you as often."

"What, *now* you realize how important I am?"

"You've always gone along with me, no matter how selfish the request. The two of you are practically joined at the hip; Arno would fall apart if you were gone."

He was the very epitome of reliability, and yet I felt that if Achim were to ever find a wife, Arno would be lost. I didn't sense any women in the picture, but as Arno's younger sister it was a concern.

"Well, that's because I'm like a big brother to you two."

"Oh, dashing and wonderful big brother Achim, won't you buy me a diamond?"

"Your big bro is a bit tight on money, so you'll have to settle for sweets."

Wendel finished getting changed and we headed to see Gerda. We arrived in the evening. Things had changed since my last visit. First to come to my attention were the lavish carriages I'd never seen before, and the armored guards surrounding the place.

"I forgot to mention that they upped security, didn't I?" muttered Arno. "But those carriages... The king is here."

"Hrk," I sputtered.

"Don't you dare take that attitude in front of the man himself, you hear?"

"I'm not a child, Arno. I shan't make such a mistake."

I was with Wendel, after all, so it wouldn't do to look improper. At the mention of the king, however, Wendel's expression grew noticeably tense. Arno frowned.

"I never heard anything about him visiting today, so it must have been rather sudden. Though, I suppose it can't be helped; Gerda's pregnant. The man must be over the moon."

I was never very good at thinking up greetings and conversation starters, and so I was left wracking my brains as we passed through the front doors. But no sooner had we arrived then I found myself without the hassle of such worries. Why? Because we bumped right into the king as he was taking his leave.

"You've come to check up on Gerda?" he said.

He looked us over with a satisfied nod. I could hear the joy in his voice, and even with my head dropped low in a bow, I could tell the man was in high spirits. Arno didn't look flustered in the slightest, and he replied in a relaxed

manner.

“Your Majesty, I offer my humblest apologies. I did not realize you would be visiting today.”

“That’s because I never informed anybody. You couldn’t possibly have known. Now please, raise your heads.”

The king was not alone. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but now I took stock of the male by his side. He looked in his twenties, and he eyed us all with a curious gaze. It was the second prince, Demyan.

“And you are here too, Karen?” said the king. “Come to visit Gerda?”

“Yes. I received word from my brother and arrived in the royal capital earlier today. I have heard the good news; you must be euphoric, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed, my beloved flower gives me nothing but joy. I hope you will do your best to support her, Karen.”

It was a shock to hear him call me by my name, but I managed to maintain a poker face. I introduced the king to Wendel, but the man seemed to have little interest in the margrave’s son...which I felt was a pity, being that he was both intelligent and adorable. Demyan then gave his father a pat on the shoulder, and admonished his father with something of a theatrical air.

“Father, while I take no issue with you indulging in conversation, would you perhaps do me the favor of remembering I am here? I may have made Arno’s acquaintance already, but the lady accompanying him I have never met. Would you be so kind as to introduce us?”

“Surely you picked it up from our conversation, no? This is Gerda’s young sister, and the Conrad margravine, Karen.”

“Ah, the younger sister of our stepmother.”

He called her stepmother, even though he was clearly older than her. But when he came up to me to offer a bow...he got awfully close. He was quick to take my hand too. Ugh.

“That would explain why she is so exquisitely beautiful,” Demyan added.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Prince Demyan,” I replied. “I have

heard so much about you.”

“How wonderful. However, unlike my brother, I have no real defining characteristics. I would love to know exactly what you might have heard...”

“Oh, curious, are you? The margrave, my *husband*, is always telling me how exceptional the members of the royal family are.”

Does this guy not understand personal space?

Demyan’s eyes opened with a hint of surprise when I put a little emphasis on the word “husband,” then offered the hint of a smile as he released my hand.

Feel free to take a few more steps back while you’re at it.

“Demyan, show some restraint when taking a woman’s hand,” said the king.

“Alas. Much like you and stepmother, I am helpless in the company of such exquisite beauty.”

“I don’t care if it’s you or David. Show some integrity. The queen herself has already had a word with you, no?”

“I find it troubling that you would group my brother and me together like that. I aim to be the very epitome of moderation in my relationships, and I find it regrettable you would mention integrity in such a fashion.”

Arno took this moment to step forward as the two were bickering.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “How is Lady Saburova faring?”

“Ah, yes, Gerda. Not well, I’m afraid.”

“I see. In which case, we’d best make haste in the hopes we might help ease her burdens.”

“Quite right. But, before you do...give me a moment alone with the margravine.”

“Uh... Wha?” Arno uttered.

Clearly he had not expected the words. Then again, judging by the expressions, neither had anyone else.

“Your Majesty, has my sister done anything disrespectful...?”

The king did not answer, and merely ordered Arno and Demyan to stay back.

“Right this way, Karen,” said the king, and then, “please, I won’t keep you long.”

I could not refuse the order of the king, and I signaled as much to Arno and Wendel with my eyes. The king’s guards were not accompanying us either, and so I kept a safe distance between us as I followed after the man. Demyan watched us with a certain suspicion in his eyes, and it was then I noticed one of the faces in the group. The prince naturally traveled with his own entourage of guards, but I remembered one of them. He was in his forties, and while he now had a stronger bearing and a more neatly trimmed beard, there was no mistaking him. It was the man who had stopped Reinald’s carriage while we were on our way to the ball. The man who had apparently gotten his carriages mixed up, according to Reinald...

As curious as I am, right now I have the king to be concerned about.

The king arrived at an empty room. It was simply furnished, with chairs, a desk, and a bed, and not particularly spacious. I felt my pulse rising as the king took a seat in one of the chairs.

“I apologize. Any room will do so long as it is empty,” he said simply.

I got the sense that the dignity and pride with which the man held himself in front of the others had retreated into the shadows. As I opened my mouth to speak, the king waved me into silence.

“It’s only me, so enough with the manners and the groveling. You won’t be punished here for speaking out of line.”

The situation was unclear. The king’s smile was gone, and gloom filled his face.

“What is it you would like to speak to me about?” I asked.

“You know there’s very little we have to talk about,” replied the king. “Kamil. How is he?”

“How? As in...”

“I’m not prying because I have a scheme in mind, so don’t worry. I just want

to know how he is.”

“I don’t know what whispers may have already met your ears, but...he comes down with frequent fevers of late, and on some days he works from his bed.”

“He is unwell?”

“He is not the picture of fine health. He has his doctor with him at all times, and on some days he is better than others, but still he often says that nobody beats the clock.”

In this world, an ordinary lifespan was by no means particularly long. The margrave was still relatively healthy, thanks to his living circumstances, but the fact that Doctor Emma could not leave his side was nonetheless a concern.

“It came to my attention recently that the second son of the Rodenwald family met with Kamil. How did that go? Did you hear any of it?”

“You mean Sir Reinald. Yes, he did indeed visit the manor, but he left soon after their meeting.”

“Do you know what it was they discussed?”

“Alas, no. I was not allowed into the room. Er, Your Majesty, if I may, did their meeting have some importance...?”

“No, it’s nothing to be concerned about.”

So the news has reached the king.

Still, because I played dumb, the king assumed I knew nothing.

“In any case, Kamil is not as healthy as he once was, yes?”

“Unfortunately so.”

The king looked troubled by this. His foot tapped the floor impatiently, and he bit his lip. All I could do was watch him until he made up his mind about something and raised his eyes.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” he said.

The king then removed a wrinkled envelope from his person. Every corner of it looked scrunched up, but not intentionally so; I got the sense it had been tucked away somewhere for a very long time.

“I want you to deliver this to Kamil,” continued the king. “From you to him, directly. You are not to have it delivered by anyone else.”

“As you wish.”

“I...I w-want you to make sure he opens it,” he said, stammering as he rushed through the words. “Y-Y-You must not leave his side until you are sure he has read it.”

“Understood.”

“That, and...”

I could tell by the way he spoke that he was fidgety, restless. What struck me as strange was the sudden impression that the king of our entire nation was gone, replaced by an anxious, worried old man.

“Once he has read this letter...should he have any reply... No...”

The king’s expression darkened then, and a heavy gloom fell upon him. It was only when he remembered my presence that he pulled himself together, passed me the envelope, and walked by me to leave the room.

“The rest is for Kamil to decide,” he said. “All I ask is that you deliver him the letter.”

I bowed as the king left, his shoulders drooped. With the letter in my hands, I could see that it had been scrunched up countless times, and marks revealed that just as many times, it had been flattened back to its former shape. It was like glimpsing the anguished thoughts of a troubled mind.

It struck me that perhaps—*perhaps*—this was a letter very different from all the others the king had sent to the margrave thus far. The feeling instilled in me an odd sense of responsibility.

I resolved to ensure this letter made it to the margrave’s hands, by any means, and yet...

“Karen...” Gerda uttered.

My sister’s condition was far worse than I ever could have imagined. She was sunken into a sofa, her gaze empty and dark circles clouding beneath her eyes. Without her makeup on, it was all too clear how pale she had become. She had

people helping with her hair and her clothes so she at least looked presentable, but the lack of maids had left her in a very sorry state.

Emil walked over to me, and I noticed immediately how much taller he'd gotten. He was certainly better off than Gerda, but the constant stress had left him looking tired and drained.

"It's been ages, sister," he said. "Have you been well?"

"I'm fine," I replied, giving Emil a little pat on the head. "Emil...thank you so much for all your support here."

"Welcome," Gerda said lazily as I took a seat next to her.

She appeared to lack the energy to say much else.

"You met with the king just now, didn't you?" said Emil. "Gerda was doing her best to put on a strong front for him, and now look at her."

"She pushed herself too hard, in other words," I said.

Emil nodded. I noticed Wendel off to the side preparing tea, and I surmised that he'd introduced himself while I was talking to the king. I hoped very much that his medicinal tea would serve to ease Gerda's strains, and so with some encouragement, I had her drink a little.

"How's the aroma?" I asked. "It's not making you feel ill, is it?"

"Once it has cooled some I think I'll be able to drink more of it," said Gerda, "so please put it to the side there."

She paid little attention to Arno and Achim. All of us siblings were together, and she was putting her focus on simply recovering. Her husband's visit had put a huge strain on her, and she looked to be suffering.

"Why would the king have brought Prince Demyan with him? Does he not know the state Gerda is in?" I asked.

"The last few days he's arrived without warning. It's not easy for me, the two of them coming together... Oh, thank you."

Emil took a sip of the tea that Wendel served him and took a seat on the sofa with us.

“Gerda won’t tell the king how bad it is. You can see how pale she is, and how tired she is too, but she always smiles and says she’s fine. The king has no idea it’s this bad.”

“Emil, I do believe that’s enough...” muttered Gerda.

“But *you’re* the one suffering, and I keep telling you that the king is only a nuisance while you’re trying to recover. There’s no reason for you to put on a strong front.”

Emil’s words had a sharp bite to them, likely because he was so worn down by the circumstances. This wasn’t surprising; he was exactly the age where boys and girls his age wanted nothing more than to freely enjoy their school lives. Gerda shot him an annoyed glare, and it was then that Arno stepped in, sensing a fight brewing.

“We’ve a young guest among us, so let’s calm down, shall we,” he said. “I’m sorry for all the racket, Wendel.”

“There’s always a racket going on at our place, so it doesn’t bother me. Ka... Er, Miss Karen is always very lively and energetic.”

Wendel’s addition of the word “miss” came from Emil’s shock; in his world, even when there wasn’t a master-servant relationship, the young were never on a first-name basis with those older than themselves.

“I let him call me by my first name,” I said to Emil. “Wendel, don’t mind my younger brother.”

“But sister, he’s your son-in-law,” said Emil.

“And you think I’d have him call me his stepmother? Wendel already has a mother, and besides, I don’t want him to. Not when we’re so close in age.”

“You don’t want him to...?” Emil looked from me to Wendel, then nodded. “Well, I *do* see where you’re coming from.”

I had originally planned to check on Gerda and Emil, then head to the Conrad villa, but now I thought it better to give my two siblings a little time apart.

“I would very much like to stay here this evening,” I said. “Emil, you can go home.”

“You’re staying? In that case I am too,” replied Emil.

This was unexpected. I had thought he would leap at the opportunity for some time away.

“Ah, yes,” said Arno. “You two being here is sure to put Gerda at ease. And it’ll allow me to get back to work...”

“You’re to stay here too, brother,” said Emil.

“Having the three of us here is only going to be a bother for Gerda. And it’s been so long since you three saw each other, so enjoy it.”

“Brother Arno, I’m asking you to stay.”

Arno was surprised by the insistence in his younger brother’s plea, and he nodded even before he realized he was doing it. That left Wendel, but Achim raised a hand on his behalf.

“I’ve got errands to run, so how about after dinner I take Wendel with me to the apartment? This place already has an abundance of guards, so I expect you’ll be fine without me for a day. And besides, aren’t you curious about the house your brother is staying at, Wendel?”

I couldn’t recall Achim and Wendel ever having gotten to know each other, but it didn’t seem to matter.

“Well, yes,” said Wendel, trapped under the pressure of Achim’s curious gaze, “But what of the Conrad villa...?”

“Just send a messenger to let everyone there know. Easy. All that’s left is permission from your caretaker...”

“Just make sure he’s taken care of,” I said.

“Who better to do that than me?”

I just hope he doesn’t impart any twisted “wisdom” on young Wendel...

It wasn’t until Achim and Wendel were gone that Emil finally revealed why he so desperately wanted Arno to stay. He told us himself while he and Gerda were eating some fruit I’d peeled.

“Since Karen is here with Gerda,” Arno said, “I think I’ll see to a little work

before I get some rest.”

“You won’t have any fruit, brother?” I asked.

“I had a few glasses of wine, so I’ll hold off this evening. And being that Gerda seems able to stomach fruit, I don’t want to take any from her.”

“We’re in absolutely no danger of running dry, so why would you worry about such a thing?”

Gerda didn’t eat any dinner, but when she said she wanted some fruit, I got a hold of a knife and started peeling. Emil, being the kindly younger brother, delivered the slices into Gerda’s mouth. My sister was by now used to having a food taster for all meals, and though she was a touch reluctant, she ate her fruit without complaint.

But when Arno rose from his seat to leave, Emil clutched his sleeve and pleaded for him to stay.

“See to your work another time,” he implored. “We’re at Gerda’s now, and can’t you take just *one* night off?”

“But I have a meeting with Zakhar tomorrow,” replied Arno. “There are documents I have to review.”

“But it’s just a review, right? You’d prioritize that over your own family?”

Emil was insistent. Gerda had recovered some energy by now and tilted her head quizzically at the sight of her younger brother.

“You won’t give this up, will you, Emil?” she said.

“He isn’t like this all the time?” I asked.

“When you left, Karen, he stopped being so self-centered. That’s why I told Arno to watch over him...”

Something about Emil’s behavior offered Gerda some relief.

“You never used to touch sour fruits,” I commented, “but today you can’t get enough of them.”

“It would seem a woman’s tastes really do change when they’re pregnant. But if all of you weren’t here, I’d never be able to eat them even if I wanted to.”

It would seem that the ripples from the Kirsten family breakup had reached even young Emil.

Still, it struck me then: couldn't Gerda have asked the king to send some of his most trustworthy servants? When I asked, Gerda explained that the king had wanted to have her stay in the royal palace, and had offered his head lady-in-waiting.

"Why did you refuse?" I asked.

"The head lady-in-waiting would have come by way of the queen. If anything were to happen, it would only make for a world of trouble."

Gerda *did* consider the king's offer, given her unease, but then the whole attempted poisoning incident happened. She then decided she could trust nobody but her only family, and to stay cooped up in her villa, but I had to wonder if these decisions had offered any real solace.

While Gerda was telling me all of this, Arno and Emil continued their back-and-forth.

"Emil, I'll be back as soon as I'm done; isn't that good enough?"

"But you always say that and you always work until late! You workaholic types always get so wrapped up in your work that you forget your promises. I don't believe you."

"That's not true. I'm always doing my best to keep my promises."

"No, you're not. What about summer, when you broke your promise and just left?"

"B-But I made up for that, didn't I? And do you really have to go dredging up the distant past like that?"

"It's not the distant past as far as I'm concerned."

I kept an eye on them, but something about Emil's attitude struck me as unusual. Gerda felt the same, and she gave me a gentle poke.

"Brother, I believe Emil wants to say something," I said.

Perhaps because they were so far apart in age, Emil couldn't bring himself to

be pushy with Arno. Gerda and I always said whatever we pleased, and the tone Emil was taking was new to us.

“N-No I don’t,” said Emil.

“Then Arno is going to his room, okay?”

“No.”

At this point, even Arno began to smile as he cottoned on, but he wanted Emil to say it himself. Gerda and I didn’t think it right to butt in, so we simply watched. Emil didn’t know where to set his gaze, and for a moment he looked to me for help, which he did not get. Finally, and with some pouting, he gave in.

“It’s been so long since the four of us were together,” he said, “so I just wanted us to stay together, at least for today.”

This was our youngest sibling. Arno’s eyes went wide. Gerda put a hand to her cheek.

“Indeed,” she said. She’d regained some color in her face.

“When Karen left, we all saw each other, but it’s so rare for the four of us to get together. There was Arno’s inauguration, sure, but it feels like a while since we’ve met in a more relaxed environment. Wouldn’t you say, Karen?”

It took all of his courage to say it through the embarrassment, and now he was looking to me for support.

“A long time ago, we all got together in someone’s bedroom,” I said. “I remember Arno was there as a kind of babysitter. He said he didn’t want us getting up to anything dangerous, so he had Emil sitting in his arms.”

“Arno was so severely lacking in sleep that he almost dropped Emil,” recalled Gerda. “The only reason he’s fine now is because I was there to keep them both upright.”

When I thought back on it, Arno would have been just as eager to play on his own; it was truly impressive that he did such a good job of watching over his younger siblings. Arno stared up at the ceiling, playing over old memories.

“I remember that,” he mused. “Wasn’t that around the time that Karen was obsessed with fire? Mother and father were insistent that I keep an eye on

you...”

“Huh? No, that never happened,” I said.

“You’d gather leaves and branches together and set them alight, remember?” said Arno, prodding.

“Oh no, did she really?” exclaimed Gerda.

Even my big sister was shocked. As to the veracity of Arno’s claim...yes, I recalled the time in question, but insisted on defending myself.

“I wasn’t *playing* with fire,” I stated. “And yes, it’s true I found flint rather fascinating, but I was just trying to start a campfire to roast some potatoes.”

“That’s the very definition of playing with fire,” replied Arno.

“It. Is. Not. And I will not hear any more about this from someone who cannot appreciate the art of melted cheese on roasted potatoes.”

I remembered it clearly. Once I knew of the existence of flint, I became convinced that living in a fantasy world meant enjoying campfires. Naturally, I went to work immediately. Alas, it was far smokier than I imagined, and that smell got into my clothes. It was a whole ordeal, and everyone scolded me for it.

“You’ve always been a bit weird with food, Karen,” said Emil.

“You don’t know the half of it, Emil,” said Gerda. “When she gets hung up on her food, it just never ends. It’s not normal.”

These people call potatoes a mainstay in their diet. They can’t possibly understand a Japanese person doing their utmost to bring a little fun and flavor to their lives.

“What do my food preferences have to do with anything, anyway?” I said.

“What’s more important is Emil’s request. As long as you don’t mind, Arno, why don’t we spend tonight the way we did as children, all in the same bed?”

“Oh, well, actually, I never went so far as saying *th—*” started Emil.

“Fine by me,” said Gerda. “It’s been so long since we’ve all been together like this, and I like company over the evening.”

“Now wait just a minute,” said Arno. “We may be siblings, but it’s improper for young men and women of our age to sleep together.”

“Oh, dear me,” replied Gerda. “In which case, shall I prepare a bigger room? I’m sure there’s a vacant living room we can use. Somebody call a maid over, please!”

I’d made my suggestion as a joke, but Gerda was all in. And the look on Arno’s and Emil’s faces. I was having a grand old time.

“Karen, would you kindly stop Gerda?” asked Emil.

“But I’m fine with us all sleeping together,” I replied. “After all, it’s so rare for me to be able to spend time with you like this, not to mention the fact that we’re all together. Time is like the blink of an eye, and I daresay we won’t have another opportunity like this one again.”

The words froze Emil in place. And while he showed a touch of inner turmoil, an instant later he gripped a hold of Arno’s sleeve and looked at him with a face filled with fierce determination.

“Brother, I don’t need anything for my birthday this year,” he said with complete and utter sincerity. “So please, I beg of you: I *need* you with me!”

He was so serious he was ready to give up even a birthday present. He was just entering puberty, and the embarrassment of sharing a bed with his two sisters would consume him unless he had someone there to endure the sacrifice right along with him. Arno’s brow creased, but the request came from the younger brother he adored. Then there was Gerda and I, who were full steam ahead; Arno didn’t stand a chance. His shoulders and head drooped as he resigned himself to his fate.

“Under no circumstances—none!—are you to ever, *ever* mention this to anyone!” he said.

“Oh, don’t be so over-the-top,” said Gerda. “What’s one evening?”

“What’s one evening? Gerda, please, not a word!”

“And why would you single *me* out, I wonder? How rude. Why, I’m so *overjoyed* at being asked that I feel I might just *have* to tell somebody.”

“Don’t start. You don’t understand my suffering in the slightest.”

“And look at you, so excited about it all.”

It struck me then that it had been a long time since I’d seen Arno and Gerda playfully bicker like this. I could see by the pleasant relief on Emil’s face that we were both sharing in a similar sort of nostalgia.

“Ah yes, Karen,” said Gerda, still traipsing down memory lane, “how about I wash your hair for you? It’s been so long.”

“Er, that I can happily...”

...do alone, was what I was about to say, but I stopped myself. I had, for a brief instant, completely forgotten why I had come here in the first place.

“Ah yes, that I can happily allow once in a while,” I said. “I’d love for you to wash my hair.”

I could handle a bath with my older sister every once in a while, and besides, would this opportunity ever come our way again? I simply didn’t know. In any case, once we had all had our baths, we gathered in the one room. Arno insisted on being a pain right up until the very end.

“Let me take the edge of the bed, please, I’m begging you...” he pleaded.

“Oh, calm yourself, you’ll get your edge,” I said. “We’ll have our adorable little brother between us.”

The in-bed order was as follows: Arno, Emil, me, then Gerda. The bed was a large one, but nonetheless something of a tight fit for four bodies. I didn’t have any complaints, given the cold weather, but I’d probably have tried to avoid the situation were it summer. So there we were, the four Kirsten siblings, all in the same bed. The fact that more than half of us were full-grown adults, however, probably made it quite the sight to behold.

“How’s your stomach, Gerda?” I asked.

“If I start feeling sick, I’ll let you know. I’m fine for the moment.”

Squeezed between two of his older siblings, Emil was like a little ball of nervous bashfulness. It was all so out of the ordinary that we couldn’t help laughing.

“You likely don’t remember anymore,” said Gerda, “but when we were younger we were all put to bed just like this: together.”

“Karen was the grumpiest out of all of us,” said Arno. “Always crying and screaming that she wasn’t even sleepy.”

“And that’s exactly why you held her hand to soothe her soul and calm her down. She was so very adorable.”

“You liar. You’re the one who said you couldn’t stand her racket. You practically fled.”

“I was just looking after Emil because you were always so horrible at singing lullabies. Our little brother was the most gorgeous little thing.”

“So you looked after me because you *had* to, huh?” I uttered.

“Nobody’s saying that, Karen.”

Was I really all that grumpy? All that loud? I saw myself as the very model of the word “undemanding.” In any case, the loudest of us now were the most excited (Gerda) and the least excited (Arno.) Their bickering even wore Emil out. He caught me looking at him and turned away embarrassed, though he did not let go of my hand either.

For Emil, this was like a long-awaited gathering of separated siblings. As the youngest of us, he would have been the most shocked at my expulsion. I suppose Arno must have known that too, and that was why he ultimately elected to humor us. All the same, I simply hoped that this evening would help to alleviate some of Gerda’s worries.

“This isn’t so bad at all, wouldn’t you say, Emil?” I said.

“I never said it was bad. I’m actually...glad.”

“Arno, Gerda, did you hear that? Emil’s overjoyed to be sharing this bed with us!”

“Knock it off!” Emil replied. “Why’d you have to go and say that?!”

“Oh, I’m so happy I could give him a great big hug. You used to love them, Emil, and when you were little you begged me for them all the time.”

Our youngest brother's screaming and struggling marked the slow, easy passing of the evening. And this, in its own way, was a slice of happiness. After all, there was no way I could have known then, while I basked in these moments of peace, how the world around us silently rumbled and shook.

16: Dark, Looming Clouds

I'm not sure how many days we'd spent at Gerda's villa, but on the particular day in question, Wendel and I went out looking for something for the margrave and Doctor Emma. Gerda was in good spirits with her three siblings around, and Emil said that the strained tension in the air was gone. The servants no longer had to worry about bearing any extra weight on their shoulders. We tried to send Emil back to the Kirsten residence, but he found things easier at the villa. Mother kept a rather strict watch over him, apparently.

"Have you decided where you'll go to school yet?" I asked Wendel while we were out. "Will you attend the same school as Sven?"

Wendel's answer surprised me.

"I'll go, but I'll go to a school for nobles for the connections."

"Oh?"

"Seeing as Sven's going to a public school, it's better for me to get the noble experience. Having friends among the nobility will be good for the family."

"Oh, yes, I understand that, but it won't be easy, you realize. You don't have to make your decision in terms of what's good or bad for the family."

"I know what you're trying to say, Karen, but any noble willing to associate with the likes of me, the second son of the family, is sure to be a trustworthy friend down the line."

"I see you've mapped things out already."

"Indeed. I'm thinking in terms of being Sven's second-in-command, so to speak. Then there's also the matter of books; the noble school libraries are bound to have much more in the way of rare texts."

"Aha, so *that's* your game."

Wendel firmly saw himself as his brother's aide. It wasn't uncommon to hear stories of scheming nobles looking to take control from their siblings, but for

the Conrad brothers the words “support” and “aide” were understood exactly as they were, and they came without any ulterior motives. If a noble school was what Wendel wanted, the margrave and his brother wouldn’t object, so it was more than likely he’d get what he asked for.

The two of us walked the brick-paved roads. There were no bodyguards in the near vicinity, but they were around; I’d asked that they at least give us the illusion of being out by ourselves. But I *had* walked this very road with Achim before, and...

“Why are you looking around so much?” asked Wendel. “You know these roads better than I do. There’s no way you’ll get lost.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just... I can’t help feeling like there aren’t as many merchants here as usual.”

“Probably because it’s winter, right? The weather has been awful of late, and who wants to go selling their wares under such cold, gloomy skies?”

“But even then, there are far less than usual. This is the first time I’ve ever seen things so bare.”

Now, it wasn’t as though the place was entirely devoid of life. The street performers were up to their mind-boggling tricks to earn some coin, and the usual stalls were out selling reasonably priced accessories and fruit. What felt *off* to me, however, was the fact that they were all veterans, so to speak. They’d always been here. Gone were the merchants who visited from abroad, their outdoor stalls all packed tightly together.

“Wendel, let’s get ourselves a drink over there,” I said.

I wasn’t thirsty, actually, but we stopped at the fruit stall and I passed over a few coins for simply made and freshly squeezed juice. I’d frequented the stall a number of times, and the owner recognized me. She looked especially happy when I ordered juice for two.

“It’s been a long time indeed,” she said. “I don’t suppose he’s your younger brother, is he? You two look so handsomely dressed. Out for the day, are we?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve come to Falkrum,” I replied. “Last time I was here there was more in the way of an open-air market over there, but I notice

none of the stalls are out today.”

“That area is for the foreign merchants,” replied the woman.

“I recall there was a shop that sold lovely necklaces. We came looking to buy one.”

“Such a pity. But there are more than a few stalls that set up for a few days then disappear completely. Perhaps your chance slipped away from you.”

“A pity indeed,” I mused, “but perhaps a merchant from the same location might also be selling something similar. We’ll do a little digging, but before that I must ask: have the number of stalls out here dropped? Is it because of the colder season?”

I could see that Wendel had something on his mind that he was keen to speak, but he said nothing and settled for his juice. We were the only customers at the woman’s stall, and she cringed slightly as she replied.

“Really this whole street should be bustling all year round,” she said. “This year the weather has been poor, and the condition of the roads has worsened, so we’re getting fewer foreign merchants here.”

“Oh, my. The roads, you say?”

Does she mean the trade route between Falkrum and the empire?

I knew those particular roads to be very robust, having been used for many years since the end of the war. The route was also dotted with towns here and there, meaning it was well looked after. It wasn’t like they had cliffs to navigate, so what could have resulted in such a thing?

“It’s quite a well-known topic among merchants from the empire and Latoria. You hadn’t heard?” asked the woman.

“Oh... I, er, only recently returned to the capital from the countryside, so I’m rather behind on matters abroad...” I replied.

I gave something of a perfunctory answer and kept things a little vague. The woman clearly didn’t think I was doing any intelligence gathering. Wendel and I finished our drinks and put the stall behind us. Wendel immediately hit me with a curious stare.

“Why did you have to speak around in circles like that?” he asked. “What were you even trying to do?”

“Nothing in particular, really,” I replied. “It’s just bugging me.”

I couldn’t really give him a clear answer, but now I knew for certain that the capital, like Conrad, found itself facing a drop in the number of visiting merchants.

“Well, worry all you want, but don’t forget why we’re out today,” said Wendel.

“Yes, yes, very well. I’m sorry I kept you waiting so long.”

“Very good, then. But, uh...is it okay for two as young as we are to just walk into such a shop?”

“You’ll get your answer when we try,” I said.

We were looking for a skilled engraver’s shop. As soon as we entered, the shopkeeper greeted us with a smile.

“Welcome! What might you be looking for today?”

The shopkeeper had clearly been trained well, and did not even flinch at the sight of two youths entering the shop. This was the very reason I’d ensured we were, as the woman at the fruit stall had commented, “handsomely dressed.” Things could have been made simpler still if I mentioned the Kirsten or Saburova name, but on this particular occasion we were looking for something for the margrave and Doctor Emma. Given that I was his official wife, mentioning names would have only drawn suspicion, so I’d told everyone that Wendel and I were just out for a walk on the town.

“Yes, we’re looking for jewelry for our mother and father,” I said. “I don’t suppose you have anything fitting, do you?”

“A gift for your parents, is it? Come right this way.”

Wendel and I spent about an hour looking for the right gifts, comparing designs and prices before getting to what we wanted. For a time I labored over whether to get something specially made, but Wendel got mad at me over how expensive that was, and we settled on a set of matching rings.

It was around noon when we left, and the sun sat high in the sky above. It was the perfect time for a bite to eat somewhere, but that was when we became aware of a commotion on the main street. Our ears met with a buzz of confusion and surprise, but there was no need for us to walk through the crowds to see what was happening. Even from a distance the soldiers walking the streets were clear to all.

There were a number of carriages too, but what drew the most attention were the horses and armored soldiers. There must have been hundreds of them. They all wore very stern expressions, and they created a most unique nervous tension by ignoring the crowds. An instant later, our bodyguards were by our sides. I asked what was the matter, but even they were still not entirely sure.

“We were just as curious as you and asked around. People are saying that Latoria has mobilized troops,” said one.

“That’s just what we’ve heard, however,” added another. “We haven’t received any detailed information regarding why...”

These were guards we’d brought with us from Conrad, and so the very name “Latoria” made them uneasy and nervous. Wendel, too, appeared to be at a loss.

“Just to be on the safe side, would you prepare for a potential return to Conrad?” I asked.

“A return?” came the astonished reply.

“Nothing is certain yet, but pending circumstances we may need to get there in a hurry.”

The rest of the day’s schedule was promptly canceled. Naturally, we went straight back to Saburova manor, where we found Arno waiting for us. Ordinarily, he would have been out on business, but he was at the front door looking very tense. He quickly called the guards and had them take Wendel to Gerda in another room. Before I could say another word, Arno hit me with a request.

“I need the assistance of a number of Conrad’s guards,” he said. “I already

know what's on your mind. You've seen what's happening out there, I assume."

"I heard it concerned Latoria," I said. "But what's with all the armed knights?"

"I'll tell you because you're a member of the Conrad family, but bear in mind that nothing is confirmed. Promise me you won't go talking about it and spreading rumors."

"Of course."

"We don't have much time, so I'll get straight to the point."

Achim, standing behind Arno, didn't look like he completely agreed with my brother. Curious.

"My information is limited, but when I arrived at the castle the place was already in an uproar. I wasn't allowed an audience with the king, and so I went about learning what I could. That was when I heard that Latoria is apparently mobilizing its forces."

"But that's just it. Isn't that odd?"

The question didn't come from me, but rather one of the nearby guards. Yes, the nation of Latoria had long been an enemy of Falkrum, but its location was the issue at hand. This was why the guard couldn't accept the news.

"Our region is tasked with keeping watch over Latoria," he continued, "and our lord pours his very heart and soul into that responsibility. Had Latoria shown any sort of suspicious movement, the king would have been informed well in advance, and the margravine would certainly have gotten word by now."

"Calm yourself," said Arno. "We are not bringing into question the margrave's loyalty. This is all secondhand news I'm talking about. I suspect that even the margrave doesn't yet know about it."

"What do you mean by 'secondhand'?"

"This is tangential, but the number of foreign merchants entering Falkrum has been declining of late. We've been looking into it, and the king is growing concerned."

I felt my heartbeat quicken. I had encountered this very thing earlier. Arno went on.

“He had a private investigation carried out, and it became clear that there’s an unusual amount of steel flowing into Latoria. Upon further investigation, a source brought up the possibility that Latoria may be proceeding with preparations to dispatch its military.”

“Wait, ‘may be proceeding’? What does that mean?” I asked.

It was so vague. I couldn’t help getting caught on the phrasing.

“It’s all still speculation,” replied Arno. “Everyone is panicked and rushing about, but war is anything but confirmed. It’s all just suspicion and rumors at this point.”

“Then what of the soldiers I saw out on the streets? Where were they going?”

“The empire.”

Why would the empire come up in a potential conflict between Falkrum and Latoria? As it turned out, however, the empire was very much involved.

“The king does not believe we have the sufficient military strength to hold Latoria back, should they launch a dedicated assault. He’s thus dispatched people to negotiate for the empire’s support.”

“You don’t mean to say...”

“Yes. They were guards for diplomatic aides headed for the imperial capital. We’re not at war yet, Karen.”

The relief flushed through my entire body. Even if we were looking at an emergency, the nation still had at least enough time to send a diplomatic party to the empire for negotiations.

“Rumors abound about Latoria, and they are spreading among the people, but there’s no point worrying about such things now. I asked for your guards because I want them to deliver word to Conrad. I could of course send one of my own servants, but someone who knows the roads better would be far more reliable.”

“I’ve no problems with that, but why does such a message have to come from the Kirstens?” I asked.

We were looking at a national crisis. I would have expected any message for

Conrad to be delivered by way of the castle. Arno's answer shocked me.

"Opinions within the castle are split as to whether or not the lords of the countryside domains should be informed. Many believe that there's no point causing baseless confusion and panic when we don't have any hard evidence."

"But if the merchants have stopped coming here, it must be because they know something. And are we supposed to simply ignore the flow of steel you mentioned?"

"Given that Latoria is currently rife with internal conflict, many are dubious that the nation would ever move on Falkrum at present. Prince David in particular is especially optimistic. He's taking things very lightly. Thankfully, the king isn't, and he dispatched the diplomatic party as soon as he could..."

In Falkrum, the king was the ultimate authority. I felt there was no doubt that Conrad would be informed now that the king had made his decision. Arno wasn't so sure.

"I don't like the way things are going," he said. "The margrave has many allies, but there are still those who don't like him, and there's a very good chance they will see to it that word to him is blocked or obfuscated. So I don't mind if we're sending him the same message as the king, I just want to be sure that he knows everything I do."

As much as it made you want to scream, even circumstances such as these would not stop people from their power struggles. The certainty in Arno's words only made me more anxious.

"You say that the margrave may not receive word of what is going on," I said. "What could make you think this, brother?"

"Among those taking a wait-and-see approach to all of this are the margrave's brothers and relatives."

I recalled then that the margrave wasn't particularly close to his relatives, nor did he trust them. He had visited them at most a handful of times. When the topic of them came up, Whateley and Mrs. Henrik never looked particularly happy about it.

"They've been out of touch for going on decades, and separating into

different houses has further strained things,” said Arno. “They don’t really get along. Given that the margrave is seen as something of a pain, we can’t rule out the possibility that his detractors may try something. Even when it comes to the military, we’ve no guarantees that those same detractors don’t have someone on the inside.”

“That’s your take on things?”

“Marquis Rodenwald’s too. If Latoria does incite war, their first target will no doubt be Conrad. We want to make sure the place has a chance to prepare.”

The margrave himself had taught me as such, some time ago: more important than the start of war is having prepared for its eventuality.

“And what is Marquis Rodenwald’s course of action?”

“He’s going to send word to his brother Reinald, first of all. Depending on how things develop, his military exercises may have to be canceled. Speaking of which, isn’t he near the Conrad region at present?”

For a brief second, an image of Reinald flashed through my mind. I didn’t want to linger on the thought, but I wondered what he might feel for us if the Conrad region found itself on the verge of crisis. And what sort of a message would he receive from his older brother? The word “war” weighed heavily on my heart, but before I let myself get enveloped by the darkness of it all I looked up and met my brother’s gaze.

“The circumstances are clear to me,” I said. “I’ll return to Conrad with the messengers.”

Arno could not immediately grasp the meaning of the words that met his ears.

“Karen? Were you listening to what I told you? I said I wanted the help of your *guards*.”

“I heard you loud and clear. I’m going to deliver your message to the margrave, and ensure that we are prepared and ready for a worst-case scenario.”

“Don’t be so daft, Karen. You know I can’t let you do that, not given the

danger you may well put yourself in. And besides, I need that message to get to the margrave in a hurry!”

“And never have I been happier to have learned horse riding than today,” I replied. “Though I wouldn’t dare imagine I’m better than our guards.”

Arno was deadly serious, but so was I. He knew that I wasn’t going to back down, and his eyebrows dropped into a frown.

“No. I won’t allow it,” he said. “You must consider your position.”

“My position is the very reason I’ve made up my mind.”

I knew what Arno was trying to say. If Conrad was in danger, then my lack of any swordsmanship left me both useless and defenseless. There was no denying it, and for the first time in my life the thought infuriated me. But all the same, I stood my ground. I was not going to give an inch unless it was in the direction I chose.

“Say whatever you will. Whatever you must,” I said. “But know that sometimes I too have to stand strong.”

“Karen!”

“That, and the king himself has entrusted me with a message for the margrave. I was always intending to return to Conrad in the near future, and the circumstances don’t change anything.”

“The king? But no, just because... At least tell me what it is! Then I can consult with the king and arrange for me to go in your place.”

“No. He was adamant that this message arrive by way of no other hands but my own. Now, I must ready my things. You should all do likewise.”

That last part was directed at the guards. But in the corner of my eye, I noticed a man walking over quickly. I swiftly put myself behind one of the older guards.

“Miss Karen,” said Achim.

“No,” I said. “I’m not backing down.”

Achim was angry. I mean, of course he was. While Arno was his main focus,

he cared deeply for the entire Kirsten family. Put another way, he cared little about anything else.

“Just try locking me up somewhere,” I said. “I vow to escape, even if it means paying through the nose. I *will* get home. If you don’t like it then you’ll have to cut off my legs, but know this: I will never forgive you.”

A sense of foreboding had taken hold of me. It was like a panic in my heart, a feeling that if I let my position dictate my actions, and if I stayed here in the capital, then everything, all of it, would just come crumbling down. I felt a little sorry for the guard I’d chosen to hide behind, but if I really was thrown into a room, it would only further delay my departure, and I wouldn’t stand for it. Achim and I glared at one another until another voice calmly entered the picture.

“I’m going too. I’ll get my things together, so please hurry.”

It was Wendel, who should have been in Gerda’s care. She was there with him, looking utterly exasperated.

“I kept wondering why you wouldn’t go to a room somewhere, and here you are just making a racket by the front door.”

“Gerda, when did you...”

“Well, I thought maybe it was important...and *don’t* give me that look. When an energetic young boy is intent on something, you know full well it’s almost impossible to keep him contained.”

Wendel had learned that the Conrad region might be in danger. We’d messed up, and yet Wendel himself was cool and calm.

“I’m going,” he declared. “If our home is truly looking at potential trouble, I have to be there.”

“N-No, wait,” I stammered. “You’re to stay here, in the capital...”

“Yes, Karen is right,” added Arno. “You’ll wait right here and I’ll look after you.”

We were against Wendel’s decision, and hastily tried to talk him out of it. Gerda found it amusing.

“So *you* can go, but Wendel can’t?” she asked. “What a horrible uncle and stepmother.”

“Sister!” I exclaimed.

“Who said anything about Karen going?!” barked Arno.

Wendel was still just eleven years of age. How could I let him go somewhere so potentially dangerous?

“If Conrad really *is* in danger,” said Wendel, “then I have to see father while I still can.”

“Wendel,” I uttered.

“Father will make sure Sven and the others get to safety, but he’ll never leave himself. And if he refuses to leave, so will mother. I have to go.”

Surprisingly, he had Gerda’s support.

“Arno, Achim,” she said. “Put the matter of Wendel aside for the moment. If Karen has said this much, she’s clearly not going to listen to reason. Get a collar on her and make sure someone’s watching over her before she gets up to mischief somewhere entirely unexpected.”

Gerda looked at all of us in turn the way a mother might look at children well deserving of some harsh words.

“You won’t *just* go,” she said to me. “You will lay out a convincing plan of action. The day isn’t over yet, and we’ve still got time on our side; you’re being unreasonable.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“So leave, do your thing, return, and be quick about it. If you can condense your stay to a single day, then I’m sure Arno will be more willing to compromise. It’s not like he’s against you going just because he doesn’t want you to go, after all. It’s the danger of it all.”

And so the lecture went. Well, all the agitated energy powering the rest of us deflated, and it was with some timidity that I raised my voice to speak to Arno.

“Will you let me go if I’m only gone a day?” I asked.

“As long as you come straight back,” he replied. “And none of this ‘on horseback’ business either. Prioritize safety and take a carriage, please. Achim, she has my permission, so stand down.”

Our Gerda was nothing if not a necessity in times like these. Achim wasn’t happy about it, but he did as he was told. Like Achim, however, I wasn’t happy about Wendel coming with me, but he’d made his case. He was still young, but I was hesitant to push back against him. After all, if the situation fell out of our favor, he might find himself indefinitely separated from his parents. With that in mind, I wanted him to see them.

Our departure was hurriedly prepared for, and we found ourselves back on the road to Conrad. I was still worried about Gerda, but she was already looking much better and I knew she’d be safe with Emil around.

“My lady, young master,” said one of our guards, “we’re going to be moving as fast as we can, and that means we won’t be stopping by any villages to rest. You’ll have to sleep in the carriage, I’m afraid, but rest assured that you’ll be well guarded.”

“That’s more than fine by us,” I said. “I fear we’re already asking too much of you. You have our gratitude.”

In order to get to Conrad as soon as possible, we would stay on the move constantly save for when the horses were given time to rest. The constant rocking of the carriage put a surprising strain on the body, and though it didn’t make for anything like car sickness, it did hurt. Still, nobody uttered a single complaint at the hard schedule, as everyone was intent on returning to Conrad as quickly as possible.

The weather was at first something of a worry, but fortunately there was no rain to worry about, and the fog never impeded our progress. No doubt it was the gods watching over us, as I’d heard people say.

Though our progress was steady, we did find ourselves at an impasse partway through our journey. Just as we entered the Conrad domain, we were met with a roadblock. And it wasn’t just us either; many had been held up, among them residents attempting to return home.

“We must find out who did this, and what’s impeding the traffic,” I said.

“Wait here a moment, my lady. We’ll look into it immediately.”

One of our guards ran off to see to things, but it was a soldier in a black uniform who returned. I’d seen his uniform before, and if I wasn’t mistaken, it belonged to Rodenwald...or more accurately, Reinald’s unit. He was tall and muscular with a shaved head, and after a quick bow, he stood straight at attention.

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Margravine,” he said. “I work under the command of knight-captain Rodenwald, as part of the royal knight corps. I have been entrusted with managing the roadblock area. One of the larger trees has fallen across the road ahead, and there’s no space for any carriages to pass.”

“A tree? I understand if the road is blocked for some reason, but what is the military doing here? It was my understanding that any necessary traffic problems and related maintenance were to be the responsibility of the regional lord.”

“Yes, quite a coincidence. The tree fell, which put the nearby residents in quite a spot of bother. Our unit happened to be passing by not far from the area and encountered the issue. With all due respect, I hope you can understand that we’re in a position where we’ll have to get the margrave’s approval after the fact.”

“That’s all well and good, but how long will it take to clear the tree? We’re in quite a hurry to return to Conrad.”

“We believe it will take a few days to fully clear, I’m afraid. The best course of action would be to turn back and return later.”

“Days?! Plural?! We can’t possibly wait that long.”

The poor soldier was at a complete loss. Apparently the large tree had brought down several smaller ones, along with rocks and such. The rain of late had only served to make the ground muddy and slippery.

“The rain looks set to continue,” said the soldier, “and we cannot say for certain whether or not the road ahead is safe. How could we possibly face the margrave if something were to happen to you?”

“Are there no other roads?” I asked. “You just mentioned that you were passing by not far from the area, and I doubt you climbed over all the fallen earth and rock. If we were to take a detour, then perhaps we too could take the same path you did...”

“If it’s a bypass you’re after, then yes, there is one, but it’s certainly not fit for a carriage! Wild animals have also been spotted in the area, and while I don’t doubt the efficacy of your guards, I can’t in good conscience allow you to take it.”

He was awfully negative about it all. As far as he was concerned, they simply could not allow me to do anything that might result in my injury. And yet I refused to turn back. This question and answer game of ours continued until the arrival of an unlikely aid.

“Franzen, let her through. I’ll take responsibility for anything that happens.”

Never had I expected to encounter that strange black-blue hair and those noticeably cute, round eyes here.

“Elena!” I cried.

“It’s been an age, margravine,” she replied, flashing a friendly smile.

“Kokoska, Captain Saganov entrusted us with this duty,” said Franzen. “We cannot simply do as we wish.”

“Our orders are to ensure that no harm comes to the local residents,” replied Elena. “And we can’t deny the margravine entry. I’ll oversee her way through, so you continue with your work.”

“But having the margravine traverse such a narrow path...”

“Look, if you’re asking me, I think the captain would make exactly the same decision. Not to mention the fact that she’s a friend of the man in charge of this whole thing; this is a great chance to earn ourselves the favor of the margravine.”

She’d ruined everything with that last line. Wasn’t that something you were supposed to say out of earshot, in private? Franzen seemed to feel the same way. He glared at her in a way that screamed “I’m not touching this matter any

further” and marched off.

“This way, everyone,” said Elena. “With all the people around here, let’s get somewhere a little quieter to discuss things.”

We turned off the beaten path and Elena led us to a small opening filled with tents. She explained that the fallen tree really had resulted in a landslide, and so they had blocked use of the road because they couldn’t guarantee it was safe while they were removing the debris.

“I do hope we still make it in time for the combined military maneuvers,” she said.

“They still haven’t started?” I asked.

“We were on our way to meet with everyone when we ran into the fallen tree. Our group was left to put up the roadblock and remove all the debris. I really thought it was a stroke of horrible luck, but having bumped into you I can’t help wondering if it’s the other way around. Were you returning from the capital, Kar...er, margravine?”

“Yes, it’s something of an emergency...”

I explained to Elena that I had to return to Conrad at all costs, at which point she looked at our carriage with a pout.

“In which case we should leave the carriage and get you and the margrave’s son on horseback. The path is a small bother to navigate, so pack as light as possible.”

“We came light anyway, so leaving the carriage won’t be an issue.”

“If you have someone from Conrad come for it soon, we’ll look after it in the meantime, so there’s no need to worry.”

The path Elena intended to take us on wasn’t often used. It was a narrow path taken only by the locals. While Elena dashed around the tents, we readied our things. By the time we were done, we had a party of six ready to go.

“We can only take you through the detour and back onto the main road,” Elena said, “but come what may, whether bandits or wild beasts, we’ll protect you with our lives!”

She was nothing if not enthusiastic, and I couldn't have been more grateful. Though we were relying on Elena as our guide, our guards were nonetheless worried, but their fears were allayed when they saw how confident she was on the trail. Wendel and I slowed our progress with our awkward gait, but those around us made things easier by helping with the reins.

"You aren't allowing other travelers to use this path?" I asked.

"Apparently there was a kidnapper about recently, so it's not recommended to any in the nearby villages. The kidnapper was taken care of, but there's no guarantee they weren't part of a larger gang. So it's dangerous out here if you consider that the threat might not be entirely gone. The captain said we're to lock the place down until safety is ensured."

"Ah, so Nika's orders, then."

"Yep! We're knights of a sort, after all, sworn to protect the citizenry. We can't allow innocents to come to harm."

That "of a sort" part was curious, but I could see that they took their jobs seriously. Elena was in high spirits, but something had been gnawing at me. It hadn't struck me earlier because we'd been so flustered back before we left when we were sorting through the luggage to bring with us.

"Elena, will it take some time to meet with the rest of the unit?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. It depends on the circumstances. At this rate, it looks like we'll be joining late. Why do you ask?"

"No, I just wondered if perhaps you hadn't heard yet..."

Wendel, who was sitting in front of me, peered up to look at me, but there was no reason not to talk to her about it. Arno had warned me against spreading rumors, and so the guards watched me with pointed stares, but I had my reasons for wanting to open my big mouth.

"My lady," said one of the guards, "did your brother not warn you not to..."

"Yes, he did, but I'm certain that Marquis Rodenwald has already sent word. They're going to find out sooner or later, and then there's the fact that the closest and most trustworthy potential military support in the area belongs to

Rodenwald...which is to say, Sir Reinald.”

Conrad simply did not have ample military power, which to me meant that seeking a partnership with Reinald or otherwise sharing information that concerned us both was not a bad idea. Sending a speedy messenger from Conrad to the capital would take at least a few days, and if Reinald’s unit was to be stationed in our region, then I wanted them on our side. My aura must have had everyone on edge, for they looked at me to see what I would do next.

“Karen, did something of importance occur?” Elena asked.

“It did. It is of such grave importance that I came here on the double.”

Until now, I had viewed our encountering that previous accident as terribly unlucky, but later I would come to realize that informing Elena in fact aided us.

Elena’s guidance was quick and accurate, and we made it back to Conrad proper. I felt a strange agitation as we made our way home, but when we finally arrived we were met with the usual smiling faces and peaceful voices, which threw us all off. Naturally, everyone was surprised to see us back so early, but it was admittedly nice to have people welcoming us home. It was a relief, in fact.

“I can walk from here, Karen,” said Wendel.

“No. We’re in a hurry.”

I knew it was embarrassing for the young boy to be sharing a horse, but time was of the essence. I still wasn’t very good on horseback, but the horse was gentle in nature and listened to instruction, and so we didn’t have any trouble making it back to Conrad manor. I briefly greeted Whateley and Mrs. Henrik, then strode into the margrave’s office.

“Karen?” said the margrave, shocked. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in the capital... Wendel?!”

“We’re back!” I declared.

Wendel ran into his father’s arms and buried his head in the man’s chest. The margrave wrapped his arms around the boy, still confused by it all, and I was left having to break up their heartfelt reunion.

“Have any messages arrived from the capital?” I asked.

“From the capital? Ah, there was a messenger here this morning...”

“And what did they have to say?”

The margrave saw by my expression how serious the matter was, and I heard Whateley close the door behind me. I soon came to find out that Arno and Rodenwald’s fears had been right on the mark. The margrave *had* received word from the king, but his message said nothing about the growing apprehensions of Latoria. When I explained what I had heard in the capital, the margrave nodded.

“I had a feeling that the rambling excuse for a message I received was not written in the king’s hand,” he said, looking rather smug, “and I was just discussing with Whateley as to whether to have its veracity investigated. I’m glad you decided to come back.”

“So you knew it wasn’t from the king?” I asked.

“I may have declined to ever see the man again, but I know he is not so foolish as to hide important information pertaining to a potential national crisis.”

He was just about to leave with Whateley and his aides to further discuss matters, but before he did I took out the letter I had been carefully keeping on my person.

“And this is...?” inquired the margrave.

“It’s from the king. He asked that I ensure it was delivered by my own hand.”

The margrave seemed shaken by the crumpled envelope, but he looked at me and slowly shook his head. “*I will not read it,*” the gesture said, and while I knew it was presumptuous of me, I nonetheless forced the envelope into his hands.

“If you bear even a mere modicum of trust in me, then please read this letter. I believe that you will find it does not contain what you are expecting.”

Though I did not know the king well, I believed that he was genuine in his worry for the margrave’s health and the regretful way in which he spoke. The margrave, though apprehensive, steeled himself and asked that Whateley, Wendel, and his guards leave the room. When he opened the letter with timid,

hesitant hands, I too left.

“Welcome home, my lady,” said Whateley.

“It is good to be back,” I said.

Just those four words made me feel, with every bone in my body, that I really was home. I heard Doctor Emma and a few others downstairs, and so I headed off to meet them. It was a few hours before the margrave finally left his office, his eyes swollen and red.

17: The Beginnings of Loss, and That Which Shan't Return

The meeting of aides was not a long discussion. We took a break until the evening. The entire Conrad family then gathered, and the margrave explained what was to happen.

"Tomorrow morning, all of you will leave to take refuge in the capital. Only Emma, Whateley, and I will remain. A number of my secretaries will accompany you, so I expect things to be fine, even in the event that communication between us is hindered."

We would be traveling in as small of a group as possible. Sven tried to object to the plan but was thoroughly ignored.

"Nico... I know it will be hard for you to part with your family," continued the margrave, "but you will accompany Sven. I will discuss things with your parents."

"My parents can't go, then?" she asked.

"At present, my priority is getting you and Sven out of Conrad. Fortunately, we've seen no changes to the roads and forest paths that lead to and from Latoria. Rest assured, I intend to ensure that your family gets to you in the coming days."

While Wendel and I had been in the capital, Sven and Nico had gotten officially engaged. Nobody had raised any objections, and so everything had gone surprisingly smoothly. That was why Nico wasn't dressed in a maid's uniform, but rather like the daughter of a family of good standing. Mrs. Henrik, too, was dressed in formal attire. The two outdressed even Doctor Emma and myself.

"Father, you must send mother to the capital," said Sven. "It's that or I remain."



Sven was not yet ready to accept his father's orders. While Wendel and I had already had plenty of time to prepare for this moment, and accepted the margrave's need for us to take refuge elsewhere, for Sven this all came as a shock. Leaving his mother and father in Conrad was akin to abandoning them, so it was no wonder he resisted the idea.

"You will all be fine," said Doctor Emma, her voice sharp with a scolding tone. "You will have Mrs. Henrik and Karen with you. But your father and everyone else here will *need* a doctor."

"Then at least let me help," started Sven.

"I'm more than capable of handling things without an inexperienced assistant. I'm going to be doing the work I always do. As the heir of these lands, however, *you* must be conscious of your duties. If you stay here you'll only be sending Wendel off alone."

"Your mother is right," added the margrave. "And besides, war is not yet guaranteed. Reinald's forces are nearby, and thanks to Karen we're able to make inroads with them. It's more than conceivable to think that Latoria will pull back if it sees that we have the empire supporting us to hold the front lines. Winter is an unforgiving season, both here *and* in Latoria."

According to the margrave, both nations boasted harsh winter seasons, and that—along with other circumstances—made it unlikely that Latoria would march its forces through the roads or forest. The margrave was certain that even if it were true that Latoria had mobilized, there had to be specific factors at play.

"But those reasons are opaque to us," he said. "We may have just finished our gathering and harvesting here, but marching all the way to Falkrum will require a considerable stockpile of food. What is Latoria planning?"

"My lord," said Whateley.

"My apologies. In any case, prepare your things and be ready to leave in the morning. That means you too, Nico. Sven can carry your baggage for you."

Both the margrave and Doctor Emma were wearing the rings that Wendel had given them. And while it wasn't really the time to be thinking of such things, it

felt as though our short trip to the capital had been a worthwhile one. Everyone split to see to their packing, and I was aided by Mrs. Henrik, likely because Nico had returned to see her family.

“There’s a chance you might not be back for a while, so please be sure to take what valuables you can with you,” said Mrs. Henrik.

“What’s important is already there,” I replied.

“Very good, then. Knowing you, it would be a right pain were you to thoughtlessly forget something.”

“Oh, surely I’m not *that* forgetful!”

What was truly most valuable to me—my imperial trade rights—I kept on my person at all times. Given that Wendel and I had returned to Conrad in quite the rush, we hadn’t brought anything with us, and our things were at Saburova manor in the royal capital. All that remained of real value to me here in Conrad was the bracelet Reinald had picked out and had repaired for me. I hid that at the bottom of my bag.

“Mrs. Henrik, I notice that you’re dressed quite differently from usual,” I remarked. “A special occasion of some sort?”

“Oh, this? My daughter, she...”

Mrs. Henrik fell abruptly silent; she likely realized then that she’d never actually told me about her daughter. When I said nothing, Mrs. Henrik went on speaking.

“A long time ago I had a daughter,” she said gently. “She gave me this outfit and I usually keep it neatly tucked away, but this morning I had a dream about her...”

“Hmm. And what was this dream, if I may ask?”

“She was smiling, and in the company of her lover. It was when she was her happiest. But this morning wasn’t like the usual dreams; the smile never faded.”

There was a kindness in the woman’s features as she talked about her daughter. A motherly look in her eyes. When she noticed me watching her, Mrs. Henrik cleared her throat, blushed, and quickly looked to cover up for herself.

“But I’ve got a very bothersome young lady to take care of now, and I’ve little time to get lost in reminiscing.”

“A very reasonable, understanding young lady, might I add.”

“A reasonable and understanding young lady wouldn’t go traipsing off with hunters and almost killing herself on horseback.”

“I’d say she’s got significantly better at that last one.”

“My lady, do you really need for me to go on?”

“I...do not.”

I returned to my packing.

Because our departure had been decided so suddenly, Sven and Nico were still out at dinnertime. Doctor Emma was also rushing around seeing to people who’d caught a cold that was going around. Wendel thus came and went, telling me all about the medicines he was going to take with him.

“I was thinking about starting my own medicinal herb garden in the capital, but mother is against the idea.”

“Did she say why?”

“She said that while it would be convenient, people could well get the wrong idea, what with all the plants that are potentially poisonous. She’s no fun at all.”

“Though she does make a good point. Isn’t it about bedtime for you, anyway? Have you taken a bath?”

“I can sleep tomorrow while we’re in transit, and yes, I’ve taken a bath. In any case, Sven and Nico still aren’t back. I’d like to be here when they come home.”

So saying, Wendel laid himself out along one of my sofas. We’d usually all have been fast asleep by this hour, but perhaps Sven and Nico were still out at dinner. More likely it was a party. In any case, I was about ready to take a bath. I was just about to chase Wendel off when the margrave and Whateley arrived.

“Oh, you’re here in Karen’s room, Wendel,” remarked the margrave, smiling at his currently slovenly son. “Mrs. Henrik has been making quite the racket looking for you.”

I couldn't help noticing something unfamiliar at the margrave's side. Something I wasn't used to seeing. It was a well-used sword; not the kind of thing you expected to see on an ordinary elderly gentleman. Wendel noticed it too, and then the margrave noticed both of us and let a wry grin creep across his features.

"In case the worst should come to pass," he said. "I can't wield this the way I once did, but I hoped by carrying it to at least regain some of my former wit. That said, it's heavy and unwieldy." He turned his gaze out the window. "Looks like rain is coming. The mist will be thick, but I pray it will not impact your departure."

"It was a little on the warm side today, and I'd like a little cloud cover, but there's nothing you can do about the weather," I said.

From the terrace, we could see over the Conrad gardens. As my room was on the third floor, it offered the best view, and the margrave stared out at the scenery.

"But look at the time," I said. "Is something the matter? You look like you have something on your mind."

"Yes, I'd like for you to take this with you," said the margrave.

He passed me a letter. Unlike the one I'd received from the king, the paper was clean and even at a glance one could see that it had been prepared recently.

"Please give this to the king," the margrave continued. "And just like his letter to me, I want you to deliver it to him directly."

It was the margrave's reply. I had not expected it so soon, though after a little thought I realized the timing was most appropriate. It was the margrave's duty to ensure that everything was accounted for should something happen to him.

"I promise you it will get to him."

"Thank you. Whateley, too, has something for you."

Now *this* I was not expecting. Just like the margrave, Whateley passed me a letter, though it was addressed to a name I did not know. I had never heard of

Claude Badinter.

“Whateley, who is this...?” I asked.

“My superior, back when I was a diplomat.”

“You don’t mean...”

“At present, he resides in the empire. He’s a smart man; I’ve no doubt that as usual he’s making good money. In any case, should you find yourself in the empire, he’s someone you can rely on if you find yourself in need of assistance. He isn’t usually the type to offer a helping hand, but should he read that letter I’m certain he will.”

“Yes, but I...”

“I had always been intending to give you this letter,” Whateley said. “You are merely receiving it earlier than I expected.”

“I see. Thank you.”

And while I knew this was not any kind of final goodbye, I couldn’t help biting my lip. He had given it to me with such an air of finality!

“I’d also like you to take some wine along with my letter,” said the margrave. “Be sure to visit the cellar tomorrow and take two bottles with you.”

“*Two* bottles?” I asked.

“The wine was made in the year that Sven was born. You can’t miss it; the bottles are very easy to find. I want you to enjoy a bottle with the family, and I want one more delivered to the king. The grapes in it are from a vineyard region he likes very much; he’s sure to enjoy it.”

It must have been of some significance, given that it coincided with the year of Sven’s birth. And if that were the case, I was all too happy to deliver it.

“I’ll go and grab them from the cellar now,” said Wendel.

“Tomorrow is fine,” said the margrave. “It’s bedtime for you. You can’t stay here in Karen’s room all night.”

“I’ll go get the wine and then I’ll go to my room. The cellar at night sounds so exciting!”

“Will you ever lose that adventurous spirit of yours?”

“My lord, I’ll accompany young master Wendel,” said Whateley.

There was every chance that Wendel might sneak into the cellar in the dead of night anyway. The thought clearly gave the margrave a headache, and Whateley could do little more than offer a wry chuckle, resigned to his fate.

“Oh. Sven and Nico are back. Doctor Emma too,” I said.

They were so very late. I wished they’d considered young Wendel, who wanted so badly to wait up for his brother. Sven smiled and raised a hand when he noticed us at the window. Nico and Doctor Emma, carrying some bags of their own, smiled along with him.

“Oh, I wonder if Sven’s had a little to drink?” I mused. “He looks a little wobbly on his feet.”

“Well, Nico’s parents do enjoy a drink,” said the margrave. “He probably tried to keep up with them. Not that he ever stood a chance. I suppose he’ll just need to be taught how to drink.”

“Just Sven? What about me?” asked Wendel.

“You’ll have to wait until you’re a little older. Sven’s like your mother; he can’t hold his drink. I do wonder about you; it would be nice if you could hold your liquor like your father does.”

The margrave’s voice seemed to waver slightly; perhaps he was imagining what it would be like to share a glass of wine with Wendel someday.

“While Nico’s over in the capital, she’s going to need to learn a lot in the ways of manners and etiquette,” I commented.

“Do you think she’ll be all right?”

“Well, you can safely leave the affairs of the domain to your sons. Sven might not have much confidence, but that will change as he grows more able. He’s diligent and learns quickly. He’s capable of much when he puts his mind to it.”

“I gather you put faith in the trust that exists between my two sons. Though I can’t help feeling worried that Nico might stumble over her own tongue when talking to people should her nerves get the better of her. Please be a guiding

hand for the young lady.”

“I regret that there may not be a lot for me to teach her...”

The margrave was worried about his sons, of that there was no doubt, but he was considerate of the girl who was soon to be his daughter-in-law.

“Oh? Did something happen to those people over there?” I asked.

On the other side of the fence, at the main gates, I noticed guards. It wasn’t exactly rare for one to be approaching the manor, but it *was* rare for it to be a group of five or six. The margrave and Whateley, too, narrowed their eyes in the hopes of getting a better read of what was going on.

It was dark out, and the only light came from the bonfires. The guards were stopped by those at the fence, and we could see them discussing something. In the middle of them stood a person who was not taking part in the conversation. They faced Sven and the two women, then lifted their arms in a most unnatural manner.

What...is that?

There was a glimmer of light, and then it finally struck me. It had taken some time because it wasn’t something you saw often. It was a crossbow.

But why?

“Sve...”

His body wavered from the shock of impact, and as a gentle smile drifted to his face, the light faded from his eyes.

I did not want to believe it. I did not want to admit to what I was seeing. The days in which I had lived a life of warmth and generosity, in which I did not know the world or even my own country, had come to an end.

Everything was changing, and I stepped into the collapse that marked its beginning.

To be continued...

Side Story: A Record of Distant Memories

She woke in the dead of night. It was far too late to be up, so she hid under the covers, but only became painfully aware of the insects. Unlike the girl's former home in the capital, her new one was near the forest. The vast splendor of nature brought a wondrous view, but it brought a deafening cacophony along with it. The noise was one thing for the residents who called the frontier home, but quite another for anyone who had moved here from the capital. It was incessant, and it made sleep an impossibility. The Margrave of Conrad's wife, Karen, was yet another victim of that sleep-depriving symphony. It had gotten better in the days since she first arrived, but once she became aware of the insects, she simply could not tune them out. She knew from experience that if she were to somehow find sleep now, waking would be a true struggle.

Still, the margrave's manor was a preferable location. It was showing its age, yes, but Karen's room was on the third floor and the walls were thick. The construction of it helped to block the wind from getting in.

After a time, Karen sat up and got to her feet. Looking for her slippers was a struggle. Dressed in her nightgown, she reached for the pitcher of water at her bedside, but the last remnants of sleep made her clumsy and she made a mess of her attempt to pour herself some water. Nevertheless, she ignored the spill and quenched her thirst. Since arriving in Conrad, Karen had done her best to adapt to the early-to-bed-early-to-rise lifestyle, but compared to its residents, she could hardly have been called active. She was able to get out of bed with the support of her maid Nico, but just getting to the breakfast table was as much as she could muster. Though Karen herself denied it, she simply was not a morning person.

When she opened the curtains, she saw the sky beginning to whiten. A chill ran through the soles of her feet as she stepped out onto the terrace. The wind gently caressed her cheeks. She may not have been a fan of mornings, but these sensations she quite enjoyed.

Upon officially becoming the margrave's wife, Karen learned that her room offered the very best view of Conrad. And as if to prove the point, the forest that stretched across the vast horizon was bewitching in its beauty. Light began to flood in, and soon the veil of mist hanging over the forest would be lit by the morning sun, creating an illusion that felt beyond this very world.

“And how much more wondrous the whole thing would be without the insects...”

Two moons hung in the sky above. Or to put it more accurately, two identical planets referred to as moons. The moon and the stars were not new to Karen, but she could never escape the reminder that the second moon brought with it; she lived in another world. The second moon was something that Karen was unable to get used to, and she knew that whenever she looked to the evening sky she would be filled with a powerful sense of awe.

She thought back, musing on the folklore that concerned that moon. It was a story unique to Conrad, and one she had heard quite recently. A story from a long, long time ago. In it, a being from far away came to fall in love with a precious someone. The being called this someone “God.” They served and loved the god, and even became their companion, but the god did not love that one creature alone. The god had much that they needed to do, and so they took many companions and birthed many children.

And yet, this god was not eternal. It had a limited lifespan and, for this reason, the being and the god were separated, parting for eternity. The being, who was eternal, could not fathom this separation, and it was filled with sorrow at the thought that they would never meet again. Such was its sadness that the being wept, and in time blood flowed with its cries. Every day it shed tears, and when all its tears had run dry, it died.

The being's countless tears became the stars, and its blood became the darkness that covers the skies. Finally, its body rose into the sky, where it became a second moon. And so it is said that the stars and the moon floating in the night sky are that being, calling out to the god it held so dear.

Pieces of folklore like this existed across the countryside and were not particularly rare, but it was the word “god” in this particular tale that tugged at

Karen's fascination. She had been reborn in this world and had originally hailed from modern-day Japan. The people around were not unlike those of the Middle Ages, and so she was able to observe the world with a more diverse perspective. She felt this new world rather strange; while the concept of God existed, the people themselves were not zealously religious. Case in point, organized religion simply did not exist.

"How strange," Karen muttered. "And it's usually a given in fantasy worlds."

There was, however, a reason for this lack of religion. The Kingdom of Falkrum was in a position where it could not defy the Arrendle Empire due to past conflicts. Given that the empire actively stamped out the rise of religion within its borders, Falkrum followed suit. Perhaps nations outside of the influence of the empire had different thoughts on the matter.

However, when a religion permeated a country, a single sentence taken the wrong way could decide the fate of a life. Karen thus felt that Falkrum's current state with regards to religion was, in fact, a blessing; strict rules and expectations would have meant she'd have to play along and fall in line with the nation's religion. And as a Japanese person at heart, Karen simply didn't have much of an attachment to matters of faith.

Bored of standing alone on the terrace, Karen returned to her room. The manor guards would be doing their rounds soon, and it would only make for unwanted attention if she were spotted. The wind had blown away the last of Karen's lingering drowsiness, and so she got dressed and took to reading the book she was part way through. Before she knew it, morning was truly upon her.

Given the time she had woken in the first place, the sandman was just about to take her completely when a knock came at the door, startling Karen back to life. It was her personal assistant who came bounding in a moment later.

"Good morning, my lady!" she bellowed.

The young woman was the very definition of the word "effervescent." She was like sunshine. Her name was Nico, and she was dressed in a plain maid's uniform with a beaming smile. She was as bright and cheerful a person as her morning greetings, and she had done a great deal to support Karen, who was

unused to the way of the countryside.

Nico had expected her master to still be fast asleep, and so when her eyes met Karen's, she was shocked into silence, and she stood like that for a time, blinking.

"What's this? It's morning and you're awake. Perhaps you didn't eat enough for dinner last night?" she asked finally.

"Why would you assume that my waking up early has to do with not having enough food?"

"Well, my lady, as we both know..."

Nico spoke easily with Karen because of their similar ages, and that extended to showing little reserve, even though theirs was technically a master-servant relationship. Karen was left dumbfounded, but Nico had reasons for pointing to her master's empty stomach. Namely, that Karen was *obsessive* when it came to food.

Karen herself claimed to have no particularly strong tastes when it came to what she ate, but her discerning tongue surpassed even the margrave's. Her preference for sweets on the less sugary side marked her as vastly different from Nico in terms of tastes, but she could also easily tell apart the delicious from the disagreeable, and this had made things difficult for the steward Whateley and the manor chef.

This obsessive approach appeared to be something Karen was born with. At first, everyone thought that she had insisted her servants prepare the finest dining during her time in the capital, but when given a knife, she was more than capable of peeling vegetables herself and—if given adequate time—was also a good cook. Karen's arrival in Conrad had in turn sharpened the skills of its chefs. She had no idea, however, that she was the cause of a number of quiet arguments among the staff, who shared among themselves whatever remained of the family meals.

"It truly is unusual," remarked Nico. "You ate so much last night and commented on how tasty dinner was, so I assumed you were satisfied. Should I have prepared a late night snack? Then again, Mrs. Henrik is always saying that if we feed you too much, you'll get fat..."

She muttered her thoughts aloud, but smoothed it all over with a smile. Karen had tried to dress herself appropriately, but her ribbon was twisted. Setting this straight had come to be a daily task for Nico, and with a practiced hand she loosened it and retied it.

“Did I tie it wrong again?” asked Karen. “I’m sorry, I just can’t seem to get it right.”

“You’re much better than you used to be. But not to worry, I’ll be here to teach you until you can do it all by yourself. That said, it’s remarkable you did so well living on your own.”

“I was never good at it, so I bought ribbons I could fix to my collar with buttons.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you could do that.”

“My friend and I were talking about how troublesome it was, and got into a discussion about how we might wear our ribbons without actually tying them...”

Before Karen had arrived in Conrad, there had been much talk of her throughout the lands. Nico and her friends whispered among themselves about city girls and how they could never be satisfied by just a single change of clothes. Theirs was the sort of bias unique to young people who yearned for city life, but all the same this was how they believed the nobility to be. And so, Nico had prepared herself for a young noblewoman who was selfish and arrogant. This, of course, was something she couldn’t bring herself to admit to Karen. Not that it mattered; unbeknownst to Nico, Karen had been able to read it in the maid’s expressions and behavior.

“In any case, did everything go well?”

“Oh! Yes! I brought today’s work, but I’ll need you to check it!”

“Leave it with me. Has a reply arrived?”

“It would appear that the delivery person is late. According to the merchant who arrived earlier on horseback, we’re expecting our mail around noon.”

“In which case that’s when we can expect it. Let’s do our best to think up a reply.”

“Thank you. However...do you think he'll send another letter?”

Nico readied the tea with a steady, experienced hand, but there was worry in her face. Sven was far off studying in the capital, and this left her doubting his fidelity.

“You don't have to worry about a thing,” Karen replied. “The only person Sven never forgets to write to is you, after all.”

It all began after the third exchange of letters. Sven was the heir to the Conrad domain, and his heart belonged to Nico. Nico, however, couldn't help but agonize over the fact that she was just a commoner. She feared that Sven would lose interest in her and become infatuated with the upper class women who called the capital home. Nobody who knew Sven, including Karen, believed this to be even a distant possibility, but it nonetheless clung to Nico's mind. Karen could only watch over the girl, who was the very definition of lovesick.

“This would all be much easier if you just admitted your feelings for one another and started dating...” mused Karen.

Nico shrieked.

“What are you saying, my lady?!”

With her heart aching, Nico brought Karen a booklet every morning. It was filled with blank pages in the manner of booklets used by students in the capital, and was quite the luxury item in a place like Conrad. Karen had given it to Nico out of her own personal stock.

The booklet was filled with Nico's handwriting, which Karen graded each morning. This had begun when Nico had stated her desire to improve her handwriting for her letters. Karen fixed the maid's bad habits and sometimes taught her a lesson or two.

“This is all very neat,” Karen remarked. “I don't think I've anything left to teach you.”

“I never learned from a dedicated teacher like you or Sven. I know better than anybody that my handwriting is riddled with bad habits.”

“Well, I'm not especially skilled at it myself.”

However, Karen *had* had her handwriting mercilessly corrected from a young age. She was told that it was an embarrassment for one to have a crude script. And while the life of a noble meant being trapped within rigid structures and formalities, as Karen watched Nico's struggles she couldn't help but feel she had been raised under most fortunate circumstances.

"I'm getting rather hungry," Karen said.

"Speaking of which, the merchant who visited yesterday brought with them some exquisite salt, I hear."

"Salt, you say?"

"Whateley said that it's of very high quality. He bought it for you and the margrave, so you might find your breakfast tasting a little different this morning."

"My, that's something to look forward to."

Nico opted *not* to mention just how much of a glutton her master looked at the mention of the salt. Besides, she knew nothing of the differences in salt, and if it made Karen happy, then that was all there was to it. And in truth, breakfast really did taste a little different. Fresh fruit and vegetables were a noble status symbol, but the fragrant bread, the spice-infused ham, and the egg dishes—that offered a delightful salty kick—were divine. Sausages stuffed with bowels and pig's blood were a staple at Conrad manor, but Karen didn't like them much, and so not a single one touched her plate. The family had a spirited discussion over the salt—some saying it was *just* salt, others saying yes, but it's *salt*—when the margrave's common-law wife remembered something and brought the topic to the table.

"Apparently there's a very handsome merchant who arrived with the caravan yesterday," she said. "His face was hidden, but all the young ladies are beside themselves."

Doctor Emma was the local doctor in the region, and as such she was always one of the first people to hear any new rumors passing through the lands.

"Part of the same caravan that brought us this salt," said Kamil, the margrave, nodding. "I'm grateful for them for coming as far as our domain, and I bought

quite a lot in the hopes it might encourage them to return in the future.”

“It would certainly be wonderful if they did.”

Breakfast concluded over such ordinary topics, and everyone split to see to their own work. Karen stood from her chair to go help Emma and Wendel, and once they were done gathering the dried herbs and seeing to their studies, they went out for a stroll through the domain. Doctor Emma said that she had plenty of medicine and only her rounds to see to, so they were free to do as they pleased the rest of the day.

“I’m so glad we prepared so much stock yesterday,” said Wendel.

“Yes, and it appears it won’t need replenishing for a little while yet.”

Joining Wendel and Karen on their stroll was Nico. Mrs. Henrik had hoped the maid might act as something of a caretaker, but more often than not she simply joined in on the fun. The reason she was allowed to continue was likely because Mrs. Henrik saw how comfortable both Karen and Wendel were when it came to talking to her.

“I thought you were busy studying with Whateley, Karen. Are you sure it’s okay to be out here with us?” Wendel asked, before noticing one of Conrad’s residents passing by. “Oh, hello there, miss.”

“Why, good morning, young Wendel,” replied the woman. “And my lady too! Looks to be a beautiful day today, doesn’t it?”

“Good morning,” said Karen.

Passing residents greeted Karen and Wendel casually. Unlike Emma, whom all the residents saw as one of their own, Karen had, for all intents and purposes, arrived uninvited. The reason everyone was so friendly to her was thanks in large part to both Wendel and Nico.

“Oh, yes,” said the woman. “The domain hunters have said it’s okay for you to visit them to see them at work. So be sure to drop by next time you’re free, though you’ll have to excuse them for the mess!”

“Oh, really?!” exclaimed Karen. “Thank you! I’ll go the next chance I get!”

The woman smiled at the sight of Karen’s face lit up with excitement. She saw

the young girl as quite remarkable, and certainly worthy of praise. Upon her arrival from the capital, everyone had expected something of a trophy wife, but as it turned out, there was much more to Karen than just her looks. In fact, she was a woman of such courage and bravery that she had been willing to risk bodily harm so as to protect her own servant. Of course, there was also the fact that Emma was welcoming of her, and that Wendel had taken a liking to her. The relationships Karen had with those around her were genuine and could be seen by everyone when she walked the domain. Such small details were not missed by the people, and it was why Karen had come to be accepted.

“It’s so strange for a lady of such standing to want to learn from hunters,” remarked Nico.

The old hunters were more energetic and enthusiastic about their work now that they had a young woman relying on them to learn it, and in this way Karen had indeed brought change to the region with her arrival.

While the trio continued on their walk, other residents of Conrad called out to talk to them. There was the old woman knitting by her front door, and the housewife watching over the fire under her simple stove.

“Got some delicious cherries and pumpkin,” she said. “I’m going to wrap them up and roast them, so I made my husband prepare things. There’ll be more than enough to go around, so if you get hungry later just come on by, you hear?”

It was the sort of thing you only ever saw in the countryside. The housewife placed a chair and table where she needed them, on which she placed a great big pumpkin and a cleaver. They thanked the generous woman for her kindness and headed on their way.

“Come to think of it,” muttered Wendel, “it won’t be long before the tomato harvesting starts. We harvest so many that everyone gathers in the square to stew them and bottle what we all make. It’s like a festival, and so much fun.”

“Wow,” replied Karen. “And everybody joins in?”

“The margrave started it because of the sheer amount in the harvest,” explained Nico. “Anybody who lends a hand gets a few bottles as a reward. And my, it’s so very delicious...”

The margrave footed the bill for the salt and spices, which were often rather expensive, so there really was no reason not to attend and take part. It was also tradition for what was left of the stewed tomatoes to be cooked with noodles for everyone to enjoy. Eventually, the activity came to symbolize the harvest time, and people now brought barrels of wine out for the celebrations.

“Aha,” remarked Karen, nodding to herself. “So that’s why Whateley bought those barrels of wine.”

She looked around at the residents around her. The children running about in play, the housewives doing the laundry and chatting happily by the well, and the chickens in a nearby yard clucking away as if they owned the place.

“Excuse me,” said Wendel, stopping an old man to ask a question. “Have you seen Blacky around?”

“Ah, you mean your cat? I saw it yesterday at Ben’s daughter’s place, with a tabby.”

“So Blacky didn’t come home last night?” asked Nico when they were out of earshot of the old man. “How unusual.”

“Yeah. Blacky brought a mouse to my room and got a scolding for it. I fear it may have run away.”

“Oh dear. And Blacky’s such a clever one. Perhaps its feelings are hurt?”

“But mice are out of the question,” replied Wendel. “Cicadas I can handle, but mice are a straight *no*. Like I said: out of the question.”

Wendel was trying to locate a cat he was taking care of. When Karen got up to speed on the situation, she poked Wendel with a sulk.

“I don’t want mice or cicadas playing around in my room,” she said.

“My lady, you really must get more accustomed to insects,” said Nico. “At least cicadas and praying mantises, yes? All you need to do is pick them up and place them back outside. Simple.”

“I already learned to pick up scarab beetles. And besides, I’ve seen how bad *you* are with grasshoppers.”

“That wasn’t me, that was Wendel. He forgot that he left one in my room and

it got caught in the laundry and I cru—”

“Enough, please, I really don’t need the particulars.”

While everyone had some things they handled better than others, Karen was at least showing that she was trying to overcome her weaknesses. And so the trio continued on their stroll, chatting about nothing in particular until Wendel professed a desire to go outside, past the gates. Nico was reluctant, but Karen was all for it. Nico only agreed to the idea when Wendel and Karen promised they wouldn’t go so far that the gatekeepers lost sight of them.

The gatekeepers let the trio past with something of a wry chuckle. The Conrad domain was nestled at the top of a small hill, and besides the vast forest at its rear, offered little in the way of greenery. The men must have decided it was fine for the trio to leave because they’d see anyone suspicious well before any danger could occur.

“This isn’t my first time past the gates,” said Wendel, humming to himself as he strayed from the beaten path.

“Oh look, a repeat offender,” remarked Karen. “Wouldn’t Sven have been mad at you?”

“Well he started it,” replied Wendel. “My old pals at the gates only acted the way they did because you’re here, Karen.”

Old pals. Clearly they were on friendly terms.

“But what did you even want to do out here?” asked Karen. “It’s not like there are any interesting or helpful herbs to gather.”

“No reason. I just wanted to come out here.”

Karen followed Wendel’s lead and walked upon the somewhat tall rocks that poked up out of the ground. Nico panicked, and the guards at the gates, too, looked flustered, but the climbers paid neither any heed as they hopped from unsteady rock to unsteady rock.

“Having a good time copying me?” asked Wendel.

“More fun than I expected,” replied Karen with an honest nod.

There were no girls Karen’s age who would ever want to do this sort of thing,

and with Wendel it just made more of an opportunity for them to get to know each other. Karen didn't know any girls in Conrad whom she could actually call friends. They were, for the most part, ever reserved due to Karen's rank. All of which went to show just how rare a personality Nico's was.

There was a slight fog hovering over the area, but it felt good to watch the world from the top of the hill as the sun streamed down upon it, even with strong winds blowing against them. At a glance, one never could have imagined that Karen and Wendel were mother and son, if only in the legal sense.

"Hey, Karen," said Wendel. "Sometimes I wonder if it's okay for things to stay this way."

"Things? What things?"

"You know, like the future. I'm thinking about how best to support Sven. Father and Whateley always tell me just to play and enjoy myself, but I don't know. I wonder if that's really okay."

"Well, I'm not sure I'm the best person to ask."

"They tell me to do whatever I want, but even when they do, how am I supposed to know?"

The second son would never be the lord of his family as long as his older brother was alive. It wasn't uncommon for families to thus consider second sons as a kind of backup, but the margrave wanted Wendel to pursue his interests.

"Take your time, Wendel," said Karen. "For one thing, you're already helping out Doctor Emma, so I always just assumed you wanted to be a doctor too. Is that not the case?"

"That's Sven's dream. I help out because of course I help out; we're family. It's useless if one of us isn't helping at all."

"Oh, I do so love that about you."

Wendel muttered a "shut up," but it was drowned out in the laughter of the two young women. Unable to bear being laughed at, Wendel pouted.

"Don't you want to be something, Karen? And it's okay, Nico, you don't have

to say anything; you're Sven's bride."

Nico's dismayed cry echoed across the lands, but she was summarily ignored. Karen crossed her arms, tilted her head, and looked well and truly puzzled.

"Is it possible you don't have any plans except for simply leaving?" asked Wendel.

"Don't be silly. It's just, I was thinking about how I'd like to see foreign countries and eat without having to worry about what those around me think."

"You mean you have to worry about that now?"

"Look, that's a matter of personal opinion, so I'm not about to entertain your ideas. In any case, yes...when it comes to exactly *why* I want to leave..."

Karen did not have an immediate answer. Wendel soon grew bored of waiting and caught a grasshopper in the grassy fields. With the insect in hand, he stealthily made his way closer to Nico, who, upon seeing the grasshopper, squealed.

"W-Wendel!" she shouted.

"But it's so adorable. And to think it was you who helped me to collect those pill bugs ages ago..."

"Pill bugs and grasshoppers are completely different! Now stop it! Don't get any closer! You'll only make me angry!"

Nico and Sven had grown up together; Wendel along with them. And when Nico was flustered, she lost her usual veneer of polite speech. Wendel soon tired of his game, however, and let the grasshopper go.

"Oh," he said upon looking up. "It's father."

Karen turned around and saw the margrave standing by the gate. He gestured for the trio to return with something of an exasperated chuckle.

"Let's go, Karen," said Wendel. "It doesn't look like we're in trouble, so it should be fine."

"Oh, right."

Wendel tugged on Karen's hand. The gesture made one wonder who exactly

was the older of the two. And as she was pulled along, Karen finally answered Wendel's question in a quiet voice.

"I suppose I just wanted to run away..."

Her voice lacked confidence, and neither of her companions heard her at all. Karen didn't mind this, however. She, Wendel, and Nico all returned to the margrave with a smile, and they were surprised to find Emma with him.

"You came together?" Karen asked.

"My scheduled visit today was canceled," replied Emma. "I was wandering around when I bumped into Kamil."

"You remember we talked about the need for another storehouse for the winter," said the margrave. "I was out on a stroll, wondering about a suitable location, and, well..."

...and then he heard that his son and new wife—or student, really—had left through the gates, so he came to check on them. Keen father that Kamil was, he saw right through his son's intent.

"Wendel, you don't have to wait beyond the gates for Sven's letters to arrive safely."

"That's not why we're here!" protested Wendel. "I just wanted to go outside."

The margrave responded with a cheeky, knowing chuckle, and Wendel looked away.

"I don't believe it," Emma said. "Nico, when you next send Sven a letter, do ask him to send one to Wendel, will you? It seems he'll never grow out of looking up to his older brother."

"I just *said* that's *not* why we came out here!" said Wendel.

Wendel was embarrassed with the truth out in the open. He turned away from all of them, his ears burning red, and dashed back through the gates. Kamil watched him with a smile while Emma giggled.

"Well, everyone," said the margrave, "Mrs. Henrik is waiting for us back at the manor, and she's prepared snacks. Whateley also happens to have brewed a most wonderful tea, so let's finish our tasks and get back as soon as we can."

Though the family was missing its eldest son, it was rare for all the rest of them to be out on the domain lands together in this way. It was easy for Karen to see just how strong a relationship the margrave had built with his people by the way so many called out to speak with him. But when she saw Emma apologizing to a sulking Wendel, she felt a shiver down her spine.

“Feeling something of a chill, my lady?” asked Nico.

“Perhaps the wind is a little strong, yes,” replied Karen. “But don’t mind me; I’m quite all right.”

Karen could not put her finger on the reasons for her reaction. It had been as though a strong gaze had set upon her. She took a look around, but soon gave up on doing much more. The family was all together, and none would have been focusing on her alone. She told herself it had just been her imagination.

“Karen, I’ve a message from Whateley,” said the margrave. “He said you’ll need to redo the history lecture. So that’s what you’ve got planned this afternoon.”

“You must be joking!”

It was the ordinary, commonplace talk of everyday life, and yet it was an unforgettable fragment of past memories. Just another thread, woven through the everyday.

Side Story: Dreams of a Utopia

The stance of the Kirsten siblings when it came to their younger sister could be neatly summarized thusly: “Who even *knows* what she’s up to?”

“Hey! Look! Look!” cried that very younger sister, panting and out of breath. “This time I’ve come up with a *really* amazing invention! You won’t believe what I’ve come up with!”

Karen had raced to her older brother Arno, who just so happened to be with the eldest daughter of the family, Gerda, and their foster brother, Achim. Upon sight of her, their gazes softened; with her eyes glimmering with excitement, Karen was nothing if not adorable. There were no favorites in the Kirsten family, and their parents spread their love equally among their children. As such, the Kirstens were a tight-knit family in which the elder siblings often watched over the younger ones.

“Come now, you know better than to run through the corridors,” said Gerda. “And no slamming the doors either. If Emil were here, you’d have frightened him to tears.”

At the mention of the youngest of the Kirsten siblings, Karen seemed genuinely contrite. Though he was out with their mother at the time, he was prone to tears at the slightest disturbance, and so everyone did their best not to scare him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Karen.

“Well, neither mother nor Emil are here anyway, so can’t we just let it go?” asked Arno.

“Why must you always say such things, brother?!” replied Gerda. “Surely you haven’t forgotten that Karen was climbing a tree not so long ago! She almost fell right from it! That never would have happened if she’d been properly taught good behavior.”

“I wasn’t even close to falling down!” chirped Karen. “I used the ladder to aid

in my descent.”

“You idiot. You can’t possibly have forgotten mother’s scream already.”

On this matter, the two sisters clashed. The quickest to see a fight brewing was Achim, who deftly chimed in with a question.

“In any case, what do you have with you there?”

The glimmer quickly returned to Karen’s eyes as she remembered why she’d come to her siblings in the first place.

“Ah, yes!” she cried. “Look at this!”

She opened the notebook in her hands and displayed an image in it triumphantly. Alas, the work of the great ten-year-old artist was seemingly beyond the comprehension of her siblings. All three tilted their heads, befuddled, and Arno, fearful of hurting his younger sister’s feelings, was unsure whether he should ask about it.

“I don’t understand this in the slightest,” declared Gerda, sharing none of her brother’s apprehension. “Is this a person? What is that they’re holding?”

“It’s not unlike a parasol,” said Karen proudly, her nostrils flaring as she spoke of her epoch-making invention, “but it’s *different*. Take this *umbrella* out with you on a rainy day, and you’ll scarcely get wet. Don’t you think it would be amazing to make these and see them spread across the nation?!”

They had all noticed something of the inventor’s spirit in their youngest sister. With great gusto she explained in detail exactly how her umbrella worked, but Gerda could not quite wrap her head around the idea. Arno and Achim were also unconvinced.

“And, er...like a parasol, you’re meant to hold it yourself? When it’s raining out?” asked Gerda.

“Well, yes...” replied Karen.

Karen’s eyes went wide and blank at her sister’s question. The look only served to emphasize the ribbon her mother had tied. It was adorable, yes, but Gerda was merciless in her follow-up.

“So it’s for going out in the rain, then. But our carriages have roofs. Is there

any real need to *choose* to go out walking with this thing?”

“Y-Yes, b-but even nobles walk the city streets...”

“But what’s wrong with a raincoat? The hem of your dress is still going to get wet, so it’s not that different.”

Gerda looked suddenly troubled and averted her eyes. She was just now considering whether or not it was worth pushing her younger sister any further than she already had. However, it was already too late to go back, and so the onslaught continued.

“And it occupies one of your hands, doesn’t it?” added Achim. “For me and my work, that’s an issue. If your feet are still getting wet, it’s pretty much the same as wearing a raincoat. What do you think, young master?”

In the end, it was only Arno who tried to defend his younger sister’s pride.

“Well, when the rain is particularly strong you’d take a carriage. Though, perhaps if you had urgent business... Yes, I can see it. There might be demand for such a thing, depending on the person.”

Falkrum had a rainy season, and when the rain was strong, so too was the fog that followed. The rain caused a great many problems, and so the general consensus among the people was to simply stay inside on rainy days.

“And one more thing, if I may,” said Achim. “What exactly are you going to make this umbrella of yours out of? Even if the frame is built from timber, any fabric you use simply won’t last particularly long.”

Raincoats were usually made with waterproof leather, but even when they were made from cloth, that cloth was coated in special water-repellent chemicals. To make an umbrella with the former would make it too heavy to be held in a single hand, while the latter would come at considerable expense. Either way, Achim felt that it would be a rather difficult thing to popularize.

“Ah, I see,” said Karen. “So it’s a problem of materials too, then...”

Eccentric inventor that she was, Karen was nonetheless intelligent enough to immediately grasp Achim’s point. Her shoulders drooped as she closed the notebook. It was filled with many such inventions, all of which had been shut

down on the grounds of being “unrealistic.” It was a collection of what Karen called “dreams,” which, like the umbrella, had to be given up due to issues with materials, cost, or matters pertaining to technology and construction. The sights of the disheartened young girl invited pity, and Gerda lowered herself to a knee to look her younger sister in the eye.

“It’s wonderful you spend so much time thinking about these things. Now, let’s have some delicious snacks and tea. I’ll even share some of my favorite buttercreams with you.”

“All of your favorites are far too sweet,” pouted Karen.

Sulking in the face of an attempt at peace was common among the two sisters. And though a throbbing vein could be seen pulsing at Gerda’s forehead, before Arno could step in to do anything about it, an intruder arrived on the scene: their mother Anna entered the room. Anna had come because she’d heard that her children were all together. The moment she entered, Gerda was quick to rush to her.

“Mother, Karen is being snide and selfish even though I offered to share my favorite sweets with her!”

“But your favorites *are* too sweet!” said Karen. “They’re so full of sugar that my teeth cry out in pain with every bite! I much prefer father’s favorite treats! I like them *much* better!”

“But they have liquor in them! They’re not *for* kids!”

The bickering sisters continued back and forth in this way while Anna watched on, stunned. Arno took the opportunity to explain the circumstances, at which point Anna felt more able to grasp what was happening.

“There’s no need to throw tantrums over a difference of preferred sweets,” she said. “Why get mad over who likes what, really? This isn’t the first time we’ve had to deal with Karen’s stubborn attitude when it comes to food, Gerda.”

Gerda dropped into silence, but Anna wasn’t done yet.

“And you too, Karen,” she continued, spinning to face her youngest daughter. “Tastes differ from person to person, and there’s no need to take a disparaging

tone just because your sister's tastes don't match your own."

"It wasn't disparaging..." muttered Karen.

"What I'm saying is that it sounds that way when you say it so bluntly. You know we've talked about this before, so it's time to fix that bad habit of yours."

Karen couldn't pretend like she didn't know what her mother was talking about. So, the two sisters apologized to one another, if reluctantly, and their argument was thus settled. Achim, who was keeping his distance from the girls—both of whom refused to look at the others—looked exasperated at the sight of them.

"Dear oh dear," muttered Arno, who sighed before looking up at his mother. "By the way, didn't you go out with Emil, mother?"

"Yes, I did. But we finished up quicker than I expected and when we came back, we found that your father was home too. I came to call upon you all because I thought it a wonderful chance for us all to have some tea together."

"Ah, so Emil is with father already?"

"Yes, wrapped in his arms, in fact, so there's no need for us to rush."

The cheeky grin on Anna's face was not unlike the one sometimes seen on her daughters.

"Oh, and Achim," she continued. "We're certain to have some leftover sweets today, so be sure to share them with the kitchen staff."

"Understood. Many thanks, my lady."

As Arno, Gerda, and Achim left the room, Anna called for Karen to wait just a moment. When it was just the two of them, Anna knelt before her youngest daughter; it was the very gesture that Gerda had copied earlier. She wore something of a cringe across her features, but there was love in her eyes as she spoke.

"Karen, am I right in thinking that you came up with another invention?"

"Yes... I drew it in my notebook."

"And what did your brother and sister say?"

“They said it wouldn’t work.”

Anna knew that her youngest daughter’s inventions were convenient, but that they were too unconventional for most to follow, so she did not reply by saying, “I bet.” Instead, she took Karen’s notebook in hand, and upon inspecting the most recent illustrations, said, “My, my.”

Karen seemed to shrink, though her mother was by no means angry with her.

“There’s more now than the last time I looked,” she commented. “And putting your brother and sister’s opinions aside for the moment, do show some reserve in asking for the opinions of the staff. You too are one day going to grow up to carry the family name on your shoulders, and if you get too enthusiastic about your inventions, you’ll fail to notice what’s important.”

“So I can’t even ask for a few opinions...?” asked Karen.

Unlike her two older siblings, Karen was a most active child. To an unadulterated noble like Anna, her behavior was, for lack of a better word, boorish and unrefined. In the past, Karen had climbed trees for no other reason than that she thought it would be fun, and lit fires in an attempt to roast potatoes. And while none had said as much in her presence, the servants were beginning to whisper about the girl’s hair, and how it was a different color from her siblings’. Still, Karen’s future was something to protect, and so Anna saw fit to nip her daughter’s bad habits in the bud.

“I won’t tell you to stop entirely,” she said. “I will, however, advise you to be wiser when it comes to who you speak with.”

Karen was truly a gifted, intelligent child. Though she was mild in temperament, she was prone to wild ideas, and though it was hard to notice due to how shocking her behavior sometimes was, she was brighter than either of her older siblings. Karen was not the type to simply acquiesce because she was being scolded. Though she conducted herself as any child would, she always understood what her mother was trying to say almost immediately. Her husband only had an inkling of it, but it was Anna more than anyone else who saw through this friction between Karen’s actions, manners, and mind.

“The nobility is not a symbol of freedom,” explained Anna. “We live well because we bear important responsibilities, and this is also why we are allowed

to prioritize and undertake a good education. You may still be a child, but you are nonetheless held to noble standards.”

As she spoke the words, a thought came to Anna; perhaps Karen felt noble society odd *because* she was so precocious a child. In her youngest daughter’s manner of speech, Anna saw flashes of her past self.

“You mean I should be more responsible about how I hold myself?” asked Karen.

“Indeed. Your father and I can protect you now because you’re under our care, but that will not be so easy when you are an adult yourself. The day will come when you will have to be fully responsible for all of your actions.”

Karen listened to these words and took them on board because she looked up to Anna as her mother. Karen’s smile said it all, and so filled with emotion was Anna that she wrapped her youngest daughter in a tight hug.

“Mother...you’re crushing me...” said Karen.

“Oh, Karen, just who did you inherit that free spirit of yours from?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t father. I’m not nearly as uptight as Arno, who is practically the man’s reincarnation.”

“Hmm. Well said. In which case...was it me? There was a time I longed for freedom, I suppose...”

“Really, mother?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Forget I said anything, my adorable little princess.”

And with that, Anna pinched Karen’s cheek. They shared a cheeky grin just as Gerda poked her head back in the door.

“Are you two *still* here?!” she asked.

“There’s no need to shout, young lady,” replied Karen. “You really must watch that voice of yours.”

“I daresay *now* is not the time for lectures.”

“Let’s go, Karen. And no stealing any of your father’s cake,” Anna warned. “The alcohol in it is quite strong, and it’s not to be eaten by young girls.”

She'd seen straight through her daughter's scheme before it even went into play.

"Yes, mother," replied a resigned Karen, who then did a double take at the sight of her mother's hand.

"You don't want to hold my hand?" asked Anna.

"It's not that, it's just... We've Emil with us now, and I'm his older sister..."

"Is that so? I must say it makes me a little sad that you won't. Emil is practically stuck to your father, and your two older siblings run away in embarrassment the moment I try."

Anna let out a sigh which was, it must be said, a little forced. And though Karen showed a touch of hesitation, in the end she reached out and bashfully took her mother's hand, and the two left to be with the rest of the family.

As she listened to Karen carelessly humming a song of some sort, Anna couldn't help but feel a vague uncertainty clutch at her chest. It coalesced into a thought.

I do so hope that her smarts don't some day end up getting the girl in serious trouble.

"Mother, just what *is* that strange song Karen is humming?" asked Gerda.

"Who knows...? Perhaps the girl has an aptitude for songwriting."

"I think those rose-colored glasses of yours might have you hallucinating..."

It was a winter day not too dissimilar to any other, and one that faded into little more than a distant memory.

Afterword

It's nice to meet you all. I'm Kamihara. You can usually find me in a little corner of the internet writing stories. I cannot even express how it feels to be able to bring you all *The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman*.

This story originally began its life on Shousetsuka ni Narou, where it continues to this day. Before there was any talk of having it published, I commissioned an illustrator and made it available to the public. That was about one and a half years ago. However, publishing is different from doing things online, and when a publishing offer did come in, I steeled myself for the possibility that all the illustrations would be removed. However, after some consideration, Hayakawa Publishing decided to use the same illustrator, Shiro 46.

To be honest, I thought this was amazing. I was shocked. Online, there's a lot of illustrations and fan art by Shiro 46 and others from before the story actually became a book. There will probably be more too. If you're interested, take a browse through those storied halls; you'll get a different look at the world and its people. Do keep in mind, however, that you may run into spoilers from the most recent chapters, so be careful where you look.

As for this volume, I suppose many of you will be wondering about that ending, but know that this is where our main character Karen's life begins. I wanted to record her story up to this point, without cutting the smaller stuff, and so the draft that was sent to the editors was hefty.

I should state first that our heroine is not a mover and shaker of worlds. More to the point, she's incapable of it. She has no way to "cheat" the world she's in, nor any exceptional talents to use to her advantage. All she really has is her spirit, driven by her past experiences. This is a story of living in the moments of time in which a generation shifts, and the circumstances and history of a continent changes. Through all of this, the relationship between Karen and Reinald will also shift and change. I do hope you'll look forward to it.

Oh, and the meaning of the cat secretly enshrined in a corner of the cover will be revealed in due time.

I struggle with how to fill this afterword, but speaking of which, let's talk about the title. While most titles are concise and simple to grasp, were I able to manage *that* I don't think I would have written such a long story. I'm good at stretching out short sentences and drawing them out into longer ones, but I struggle when it comes to bringing things together neatly. So when the idea of a subtitle was proposed, I decided immediately to leave it in more capable hands.

And so, we have the apt subtitle of "Married and Off to the Frontier!"

Now, the first volume. It being a "first" volume implies that there is a second, and fortunately I'm working on that at present. I can't be certain, however, as to the volumes that follow. I myself delight in the characters in this story, and now that it's gone through editing and rewrites for the published version, I think it's worth reading, but the story's fate is uncertain if it doesn't sell.

To be frank, an author may simply want to write, but if their books don't sell, that's that. So if you happen to want to read the rest of this story, and if you thought it was interesting, please do let the editing staff know. I'm not joking when I say that your response is everything. I do hope to hear what you think by way of the editing team and will be waiting expectantly.

As I write this before publication, you have my gratitude.

November, 2021

Kamihara



CONGRATS
on the release of volume 1!

When I first began reading *Noblewoman*, there were only ten chapters available.

Even now, I still remember reading it and thinking about Karen ditching the handsome young man for an old man living out in the countryside, who happens to have been happily married for many years. Well, the title says it all, I thought, *none of this is going particularly smoothly*.

In the online description of the series you're told that even upon losing everything, Karen lives steadfast as her fate intertwines with the most important people in Falkrum and the empire, but that all begins from where this volume ends.

I am so very happy that readers can now enjoy the roller coaster that is Karen's trials and tribulations in book form.

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Shiro46





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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman: Volume 1

by Kamihara

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Translated by Hengtee Lim Edited by Ruuri

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