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


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Reinald
Second son of Marquis Rodenwald. A gentleman of exquisite good looks and one proposed fiancé for Karen.
Gerda
(Lady Saburova)
Karen's eldest sister and firstborn daughter of the Kirsten family. Married to the king.
Achim
Karen's older brother's bodyguard and foster brother.
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: To Survive

It all seemed to happen in slow motion.

The figure of Sven, tilted forward, collapsing to the ground head first, burned into my mind. Ordinarily a person would hold their hands out in front of them to protect their body, but I saw no such reflexive movement. Just before his face fell completely out of view, the light drained completely from his eyes.

Sven fell, a number of rods impaled in his back. With those sprouting from his person, one could easily put together what had just occurred. And yet, none of us, not a single one, could so quickly accept that reality. Instead, we stood frozen, as if bound in place, staring at the scene dumbfounded.

Time, however, that cruelest of beasts, gave us no moment of respite; Sven's back quickly turned red, and fresh blood began to pool around his body. Doctor Emma fell to her knees, staring at her lifeless son.

"Sven," she uttered, forcing the words out through a strangled throat.

But the word did not reach him. And it was not just Sven's mother who had lost herself in the shock of the moment. There was one other. She stood by his side, a girl who, until just a few moments ago, had been the very portrait of happiness. It was Nico, my personal assistant and Sven's fiancée. She put a hand to her beloved's red-stained back and shook him.

"Master Sven?" she uttered. "Master...Sven. Sve... Answer me... Why won't you move? Why..."

As the manor erupted in panic, Nico's words were largely lost to me. I stood watching from the upper floors. Nico shook Sven, over and over, and she continued to speak to his body, which had long since stopped moving. Finally, she became aware of the blood covering her hands. Her fingers and her shoulders shook. It was reality, and it spoke to her through a bloody, rust-like stench.

It was all the girl could take. She screamed, her hands tearing her own hair, tears streaming down her face. Her cries were so foreign, so different to the bright and cheerful Nico I knew. It was that very sorrow that shook us, and I shunted back to my

senses. A bell rang incessantly from the manor steeple.

“Emma! Nico! Get away from there!” the margrave shouted as he headed for the stairs.

We did not have the time to ensure that his message was received, but as I made to follow, Whateley grabbed hold of my arm.

“Let me go!” I shouted.

“You mustn’t leave!”

“But…but Sven…!”

“You can’t!”

The shouting was unlike Whateley, and his own panicked voice shook him back to the present. His fingers trembled as they gripped my arm.

“That was Nico… Did something happen to Sven?”

I felt the blood drain from my face at the sound of Wendel’s voice. He stood staring at us, hesitant and uncertain. He’d been with us for a time, but with what was going on downstairs, he still did not know what had occurred. All he knew was that his father had shouted for the others to run, that the bell was ringing, and that Whateley and I were completely out of sorts. It was disorder the likes of which were anything but normal, and so he turned to look out—

“No!”

I shook myself free from Whateley and wrapped Wendel in my arms, my fear taking the shape of a sudden sense of duty. I held him tight; I could not allow him to see what lay beyond the window.

“Let me go,” Wendel said. “What happened to Nico? What happened to my brother…?”

“No! You mustn’t go! You mustn’t look!”

“But why? My brother, Sven…!”

The sobs between his words revealed that, on some level, he knew what had happened, but his cries told me that he could not bring himself to accept it.

“My lord,” said Whateley, “we must go downstairs and rescue the others immediately!”

“It’s too late.”

Whateley’s voice was flustered, but the voice of the old man who replied to him was so calm it was terrifying. Wendel, too, having never heard his father speak in such a tone, froze on the spot.

The margrave's hands gripped the staircase railing. He did not turn around. Instead, he simply gazed down the staircase. To see and hear him like that made every heartbeat sting in my chest. Surely there were others in the manor to defend us. I did not want to think that in the single moment that I took my eyes away from the window, our home had been overrun.

But I could no longer hear Nico's screams outside.

I went to the window, and as I touched the cold of the balcony railing, I looked down at a most horrifying sight.

"Ni…co…" I uttered. "Doctor…Emma…"

I could not comprehend the sight of both of them sprawled across the ground. They had been alive mere moments ago, and yet now they were covered in blood, their eyes staring blankly into a deep nothingness.

"Up there!" shouted someone, pointing at us.

It was clear, even from this distance, that the guards at the gate were dead. None of them moved. With each passing second, our situation grew more dire.

*What do we do?*

I did not know. I couldn't grasp any of it. I knew only that we had to flee. But we had already been spotted, and whoever had come was trying to kill us. But no, we couldn't just leave Sven and the others out there like that. Wasn't it possible that Nico and Doctor Emma were still alive? If we saved them, perhaps they'd come to…

"Get down!"

Somebody grabbed my shirt from behind. As I tilted backward, something sped by me and bounced off the wall with a shrill clang. It was a sharp metal rod, identical to what I'd seen impaled in Sven's back. In that instant, I realized who our intruders were now targeting, and I broke out in a sweat.

"Whateley, don't let those two out of your sight," said the margrave. "Wendel, take Karen's hand, and don't let go under any circumstances."

He was the one who saved my life. The one who woke me from my confusion. And he was the lord of these lands. His voice was cold, his features hardened and tense. He drew his sword with a practiced ease and threw open the door.

"M-Margrave, what should we—" I started.

"Follow me. You'll need to keep your wits about you from here on out."

We entered the corridor and heard the faint sound of screams below. Once the margrave was sure there was nobody on the third floor, he strode ahead with us behind him and Whateley watching over us. As we attempted to make our way downstairs, we were met by a man with disheveled hair and patchwork leather armor, wielding a hatchet.

The man let out a roar when he saw us and made to dash upstairs. The margrave responded in an instant, reaching without hesitation for a lavish hand axe hanging from the wall. The axe sliced through the air as it left his hand and embedded itself in the man's skull; he let out a scream and was dead before he crumpled to the floor. I put a hand to my mouth as blood and brains spilled from his forehead, staining the carpets red. Had the two older gentlemen not quickly hidden the sight with their backs, I might have passed out on the spot. The steward carried Wendel and pulled me along down the stairs.

"You mustn't look, you two," said Whateley, and then, to me: "My lady, you must be strong."

"I'm... I'm fine," I muttered. "But never mind me, Wendel..."

That I was still capable of speech surprised even me. I was, in truth, anything *but* fine. Still, I knew who took precedence over myself. Wendel was still far, far too young to bear witness to such sights.

"Master Wendel, listen well. You must endeavor to keep your eyes closed until we reach the bottom of the stairs."

Wendel was beyond the ability to form words. How I wished that I might speak to him the way Whateley did, but no words of comfort or encouragement came to mind; it was all I could do just to keep up as I was pulled along.

The second floor was quiet and undisturbed, but not so when we reached the first, where we were immediately assaulted by the sound of hurried footsteps. We prepared ourselves for the worst but were met by friends: Mrs. Henrik and a number of the manor guards.

"Is everybody okay?"

Mrs. Henrik was in tears as she spoke, taking me and Wendel into her arms. She had to have been terrified, and yet her concern was for the two of us. I felt her hand through my hair, and some of the tension in my body calmed slightly. It was a single moment of peace, but our situation was not getting any better. Margrave Conrad was quick to grasp the situation.

“Tell me how things look,” he barked.

“Apologies, my lord,” replied a guard. “We came here as soon as we could, but the bandits came from out of nowhere and attacked the manor…!”

“Save that for later. Tell me how many men we’ve lost. Be concise.”

“My lord! We’ve not seen any of the other guards. Of the twelve guards stationed in the manor, three are dead. The remaining servants are taking shelter in the kitchen; the doors are thick, and it’ll take a lot of force to bring them down.”

“I see… Do you know how many enemies we’re looking at?”

“Six were disguised as our own guards. But there were others, so we don’t have an accurate number to work with. We took down those we found, but…we couldn’t stop them attacking your wife…”

“I took one down earlier. Which one of them killed Emma?”

“Ebbo gave his life to mete out vengeance.”

“I see…”

As the men spoke, the remaining guards kept their eyes peeled, watching the environment and ready to kill at a moment’s notice. The margrave needed no time to make up his mind and decide on a course of action.

“Whateley, Mrs. Henrik, can you take Wendel to safety?” he asked, calling upon his two most trusted friends and putting a hand to his son’s head. “I’ll assign you four of our guards. You know where the secret passage is, yes? In the basement storeroom? You’re to take the children and escape.”

“Wait just a moment!” protested Whateley.

“What are you saying, my lord?!” exclaimed Mrs. Henrik.

Whateley, in particular, refused to accept what he’d been told.

“Why would you say such a thing?!” he cried. “Bandits may have made their way here, but you are the ruler of these lands. It’s not too late. If we can gather our forces, we can still drive them away!”

“That may be so,” replied the margrave, “but I am doubtful of our chances.”

“My lord, this is not the time for such weakness…!”

Still, the margrave refused to budge. There was a calm in his eyes as he put a hand to his son’s cheek, his gaze somewhere distant. It wasn’t like Whateley to lose control of himself like this, to cry with such indignation.

“This isn’t like you, my lord!” he shouted. “Have you forgotten you have Wendel to think of?!”

“But even if there *is* a way for us to drive our enemy away, I can go nowhere with the children still here,” explained the margrave. “You understand that having them flee is for my sake as much as theirs, yes?”

“I do. But why must we take them and leave *you*…?”

“Let me ask you this,” replied the margrave. “Why did our men in the guard towers not raise the alarm?”

It was then, with Whateley at a loss for words, that it dawned on me. The Conrad domain was built atop a hill that allowed a view across the entirety of the lands, including the vast forest. At the sight of anything out of the ordinary, the guards would have raised the alarm.

“The guards should have rung the alarm at the first sight of any bandits, whether inside the walls of this domain or outside of them. So why didn’t they? You heard the manor bell ring when Sven fell, just as I did. Six men have died, and yet *nobody* has come to check on things here. Given all of that, can you make a strong case for waiting here peacefully for reinforcements?”

“All the same, the very idea of leaving you here…”

“It is the job of a parent to ensure their children live,” said the margrave, “and I am not such a fool as to think it works the other way around. But the people here… They too are my children, and I cannot leave without knowing they are safe.”

His face was resolute. I had learned much from the margrave—both as his student and in my role as the margravine—but never had I seen him like this.

“Karen,” he said suddenly.

“Y-Yes,” I stammered.

“Remember the features of these men well. At a glance, the Latorians look just like us, but red hair and a slight shade of yellow in the skin is typical of their people.”

“Wh-What…?”

“That is my final lesson to you.”

He was giving me a lesson…*now*? And by telling me it was our last, he rendered me speechless. Someone listening muttered that the Latorians were invading, but they were quickly corrected.

“No, these weapons, their formations…they’re too atypical to be Latorian military. Above all, these bandits are shoddy in their

work; they're too disorganized to be part of the army."

"In which case..."

"They may be bandits, but the scale and audacity of their strike is far too large. No ordinary gang of bandits could do something like this."

But what did that mean? The question lingered, but I was not given an answer. Instead, the margrave's gaze softened slightly. His eyes were those of the old man who had taught me so much since I arrived.

"Do not force yourself to hate for hate's sake," he said. "See the world with your own eyes, and walk your own path."

There was no time to ask what he meant. All the time we had left had to be used effectively, and the margrave opted to use it for his son. As he faced Wendel, he had a guard hold his sword. Then he took Wendel's face in his hands and pressed their foreheads together.



“Father,” Wendel uttered.

“Wendel, listen carefully.” The margrave wrapped his son in a tight embrace. “I know it always worried you that we are not related by blood, but you have always been my family, and I have always thought of you as my beloved third son. There’s no need to get caught up in matters of lineage. I want you to live your own life, and to that end, I leave you everything I have.”

“Fath…”

“Thank you, Wendel. It’s because you’re alive that I have the strength to remain standing.”

The margrave once again took his sword in hand. As he left for the manor entrance, Wendel reached a hand for his back, but a guard held him back.

“No! Let me go!” he cried.

“Forgive me, master Wendel!” said the guard.

“Father! Father!” Wendel shouted. “Father, wait!”

Those who remained with us lowered their heads, their eyes bloodshot. Their actions were like a final salute. Though they prayed for his safety, all of them could feel it in their bones—this was the Margrave of Conrad’s last stand. Their lord was heading off to the land of wind and ghosts. Their shoulders trembled at the thought that this was the only send-off they could give him.

And while Wendel’s shout of “Don’t go!” must have reached his father’s ears, the margrave did not once turn back. When he was gone, his son’s wailing echoed through the manor, but the sentimental moment was short-lived for the adults in the room. Whateley led the way to the storeroom, a dark place in which a chill floated through the air. Our four guards split into two groups, one in front of us and one behind, to protect Wendel, Mrs. Henrik, and myself.

“Hil,” said Whateley, speaking to a guard he was well acquainted with. “They’ll be relying on you from here on out. Take good care of the two of them.”

“You have my word,” replied Hil. “But Sir Whateley, should the worst come to pass…”

“Yes, I know… Now come, you two,” he said to us. “Liz, can you keep moving?”

“We’ll need something to light the way,” Mrs. Henrik replied. “I’ll prepare the lamps, so you just get the door open already.”

She lit up some oil lamps, and as their light spread, I looked vaguely around the basement. It wasn’t particularly spacious and

was filled with neatly arranged wine bottles. Whateley moved to the far end of the room and put his hand to a candleholder set in the wall. It looked just like any other but was in fact designed to function like a handle. He used it to move a section of the wall, revealing a hole on the other side.

"This is a hidden passage known through generations of the Conrad family," explained Whateley. "It goes under the domain proper, so you may have to walk for quite some time, but it will lead you to the back side of our lands."

Whateley ushered everyone inside, but there was something about his motions that struck me as odd.

"Wait," I said, when the realization hit me. "You must come with us, Whateley."

"I cannot go with you," he replied. "Once you are all on your way, I must replace the wine cask and ensure you are all properly hidden."

"Whateley!" cried Mrs. Henrik.

But as with the margrave, the look on Whateley's face was one of firm resolve. He had Wendel take my hand. Wendel had been calm up to this point, but his face scrunched up at the knowledge of his parting from the family steward.

"Master Wendel, you mustn't let go of Karen's hand," Whateley said. "You're going to escape. You're going to survive."

"I don't care! Why you too, Whateley? Didn't father tell you to run?!"

"I cannot leave the people taking refuge in the kitchen. I know it will make you lonely, but the margrave has made up his mind. He has chosen to fight. And so it is my duty as steward to look after our people."

"You're disobeying orders! I'm staying too!"

"Did you forget what the margrave said earlier?" asked Whateley. "Do not wear such a long face; I do not wish to die here, and I do not intend to either. Once I am sure you are all safe, I will find a place to hide until all of this blows over."

"Whateley..." I uttered.

"Karen, please take care of Master Wendel. Liz, you know what must be done."

"Yes, that I do," replied Mrs. Henrik.

He called me by my name, and not as "my lady." And with that, the ever-loyal steward bowed deeply and, without another word, closed the passage behind us.

“We must be off,” said Mrs. Henrik.

She tried to sound resolute as she put a hand to her mouth, but she could not hide the shaking in her shoulders.

“My lady,” she continued. “You and Wendel go on ahead.”

She did not want to be seen crying. And even though our situation was the definition of precarious, strangely enough I found myself doing exactly as she asked. With two guards leading the way with their lamps in front, we continued in the same order as earlier.

The passageway was by no means particularly spacious and was really just a hole dug into the earth supported by wooden frames. Two well-built men would have struggled to walk side by side, and there wasn’t any real room to swing a sword around either. It remained cramped no matter how far we walked, and I began to wonder if there even *was* an exit to the tunnel we were traversing. The one saving grace was that air flowed through the passage, though oddly enough I couldn’t see anything resembling holes through which air might pass.

“It’s probably a spell,” muttered Wendel, staring at his feet.

“A spell?” I asked. “Wendel, you knew about this tunnel?”

“No, but I’d heard that the manor had secret passageways, and that long ago a powerful mage had been asked to make them. I just…never believed it.”

The boy dropped once more into silence, his hand squeezing my own just a little more tightly.

“I’m sorry.”

I knew I had to say *something*, but all that left my lips was an apology. I couldn’t think of anything more appropriate. This was how it had been since Sven was killed. Perhaps it was a kind of self-defense mechanism; my senses were dulled, as though I were viewing the world through a filter. At the center of my being, I was pushed on by the fact that collapsing here would only cause the others trouble, and that I had to make sure that Wendel escaped.

We walked on in silence.

“W-We’ll make sure the two of you are safe,” said one of the guards cheerfully. “You can rest assured of that, right Instructor Hil?”

“Sir Whateley said we’ll come out on the other side of the mountain. There’s a forest not far from there, so if we can hide ourselves well, we have our path through which to escape…

Humphrey, would you calm down, please?"

Their encouragement rang somewhat hollow, and yet it buoyed me all the same. The guards, too, had left their comrades behind and were no doubt worried about them. Their open displays of bravery made me feel all the more worthless. I should have been more bold, and I should have been leading by example. Instead, the mere thought of Sven's body and then Nico's screams left me without words.

In trying to stand strong I only found myself constantly falling into self-disgust, and the cycle continued for I don't know how long. We may have walked thirty minutes, we may have walked an hour, we may have walked even longer; I wouldn't have been surprised by any of it. In any case, we trudged onward. The passage was just a long, single tunnel with gentle curves and inclines. Just as all of us were beginning to lose our breath, we suddenly entered a wider space. It was spacious enough for five, perhaps six people to stand side by side, and at the end of it was a wooden door. Wendel and I tried to dash for it, but one of the guards stopped us, silently raising a finger to his lips to keep us silent.

The guard gestured to one of the others to go on ahead, and that guard quietly put his ear to the door. Then ever so slowly he opened it. A breeze drifted in through the open space, wafting through our hair.

"Nobody in the immediate area," said the guard. "It's almost too quiet, but leaving won't be an issue. However..."

Their worry was those of us who didn't share the guard's endurance levels. We had marched through the darkness of the tunnel without a single rest; our throats were parched, and though we wore our leather shoes daily, our feet hurt. It had also been a struggle for Wendel and Mrs. Henrik to keep pace. The four guards had a quick discussion and came to a consensus.

"Even if we leave here and head to the forest, the area between here and the forest is all open plains. No matter how much cloud cover there is, anyone used to traveling by night will spot us with ease."

"We'll need to make a run for it, so...we'll need to rest first. Whoever's got the best hearing will take the rearguard."

"But we may find people on our tail."

"We don't know how many enemies we're looking at. Being

found in the open is our biggest concern. Does that work for you, Mrs. Henrik?"

"Yes, I know we don't have the luxury of time on our side, but please give us just a little time. It's possible that those aboveground have already solved our problem for us."

Perhaps it was simply what the maid wished for, or perhaps she was speaking what everyone hoped in their hearts. Regardless, I was grateful for the chance to rest my weary legs. I leaned my back against the wall, then sat down, my arm draped across Wendel's shoulder. Mrs. Henrik took my head gently in her hands and whispered to me in a soothing voice.

"It's okay. I promise you, I *promise* you that even if it's just the two of you, you *will* get out of this safely."

In hindsight, I should have thought more about why she left us and walked back the way we had come. However, at the time I was barely even able to keep my own thoughts properly straight, and I did not have the capacity to more deeply consider Mrs. Henrik's actions.

I wanted to allow myself a short rest but fell completely asleep. When I opened my eyes, Mrs. Henrik was looking at me with a worried expression.

"Oh..." I uttered. "Did you wake me?"

"I know you must be exhausted, but you were moaning in your sleep... I apologize."

"No...thank you. It's strange, but I never meant to fall asleep in the first place."

"It's because of all the unending tension, I imagine. How are you feeling now?"

"Hmm...like I got a little rest. I'll be fine."

Though to be honest, my heart was pounding so hard and fast that it hurt. I couldn't remember what dream I had awoken from, but I had no desire to remember it. I was sickened by the sweat dripping from my forehead, and it took all I had just to calm my own breathing.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'll be fine."

I tried to shrug off Mrs. Henrik's concern with a smile and dropped a kiss on a worried Wendel's head. Putting on a strong front was still too much for me, but I tried to at least give it my best effort with Wendel still here. And yet, in doing something as disgraceful as moaning in my sleep...I had failed. I had never meant to fall asleep in the first place, but before I even knew it

my consciousness had checked out. I took a look around and saw that the guards were in the midst of a whispered discussion. One had their ear to the door, his expressions scrunched up as he strained to listen.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked.

"Not long. We've lost our chance to make a break for it, however."

"Because I fell asleep?"

"No, though while you were asleep, the guards did consider hastening our departure."

Then why hadn't they woken me? The question lingered with me, and Mrs. Henrik's expression was tense. It was hard for her to say straightaway, but eventually she found it within herself to explain our current circumstances.

"One of the guards went outside to check the path ahead, but he had to turn back; he discovered a group of people holding torches…"

I felt such pressure, such tension, that I couldn't breathe. I could see all of our guards here with us, which meant that whoever left hadn't been spotted by the enemy, but all the same Mrs. Henrik's news was not good for my heart.

"And the people holding those torches weren't residents of Conrad…?" I ventured.

"Alas, none of Conrad's people would be wandering around with unsheathed blades without good reason."

"Y-Yes, quite right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked such an odd question."

"Hold yourself together. Thanks to the rain and the fog that came after, our guard wasn't spotted. One might say that the heavens are on our side, and thankfully this location still hasn't been discovered yet."

"Good news. I suppose that even if I *had* been awake the whole thing would have just rattled me. Thank you for letting me rest."

Sleep might have ushered me right into a nightmare, but I was grateful still for the small amount of rest it came with; it allowed me to better accept the fact that the best decisions had been made. It also lightened the hate I felt toward myself for being so completely and utterly useless.

"Fortunately, the entrance to the tunnel is well camouflaged, and it is not easy to find unless one is quite close," said Mrs.

Henrik. “If the mist outside grows thicker, the guards say that it might provide us with cover.”

“And nobody is chasing after us from where we came from, which means we’re safe for now.”

As much as we wanted to simply hole up here at the end of the tunnel, that was not so easy with gangs roaming the fields beyond. If they came in through the entrance where we were now gathered, it would force us back to where we’d come from. Knowing that we couldn’t simply stay in place, the guards had already discussed a course of action: once we made it to the forest we would lie low, then flee to the nearest village under cover of darkness. This brought its own problems, however.

“The nearest village is quite a distance on foot,” I said. “It’s not paved either, and it won’t be easy to run along.”

“Then there’s the temperature,” added Mrs. Henrik. “Even though today was a warm day, it will be a cold night.”

That was when I realized: We had essentially entered winter already, and yet I felt none of the cold. According to Mrs. Henrik, for some strange reason the tunnel maintained a constant temperature.

“Which is to say, we’ll be hit by the cold when we leave,” I said.

“I didn’t even bring a cloak,” said Mrs. Henrik. “I apologize.”

“I didn’t think to do so either. Then we have the fact that it rained to consider…”

We had no idea what might happen out there given the circumstances, so it was only natural that we were rattled by the thought of it. At that point one of the guards, Hil, approached us on behalf of the others. His expression was grim.

“We *can* make it out of the forest,” he said, “but that’s where the problems start. The winds are strong, and there will be no cover; we’re going to get hit by them whether we like it or not. We can give you our cloaks, but that’s no guarantee that you’ll be able to withstand the cold.”

“But if we don’t leave, we put ourselves in danger, yes?”

“The fog is our ally at present, but that doesn’t make us safe by any means.”

“Let me ask one thing to be sure: Are you capable of fighting and defeating the enemies out there?”

“Capable of it, yes. From what I saw of the attackers at the manor, if it is a matter of simply fighting one another, we should be more than enough to handle them.”

The guard declared so with great confidence. Nonetheless, there were still clear and present dangers.

“But fighting multiple enemies whilst ensuring our protection will prove difficult, yes?” I said.

“You see the challenge we face, then. If we were to rush the enemy we might defeat them, yes, but they bear long-range weapons. Our duty is to see you all to safety…”

“Which is to say we can’t afford a confrontation. I understand. Please, give us instruction, tell us what we should do.”

I was mostly fine; my worries lay with Wendel. He was still so young, and I did not know how long the strength in his young body would last. At the same time, abandoning him was not even an option, which meant the matter was one of resolve. The knight looked at me with some shock, perhaps surprised that I had asked him to take charge.

“I may be the margrave’s wife, and I may be a member of the nobility, but in matters of battle, I am not even an amateur. You know this to be true, yes?” I said.

Regardless of how high my rank was, the guards would be the ones who bore the responsibility of fighting for and protecting us. I was powerless, and though my own helplessness vexed me, I had to accept that no matter how much I wailed, my opinions on the matter would only get in the guards’ way. Stubborn pride would do us no good here, not when I had to ensure Wendel escaped alive at any and all cost. And even though this was just another attempt at me trying to put on a strong front as I stood on shaky legs, it was the lie I had to tell myself.

“You’ve made a wise decision, and for that we’re grateful,” said the guard. “Firstly, please take our cloaks and put them on. Make sure to keep your faces hidden, and keep Wendel close at all times.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll be by your side, but should we have to split for some reason, you are to run. Do not worry about us. Even if we fall, do not stop.”

I could see it in the guard’s eyes; he was prepared to die here on Conrad land.

“It is your duty to take Wendel to safety, to survive,” continued the guard. “To that end, we stake our lives.”

No crying, no shouting. No matter how bad it got, we were to run. It was impressed upon me once again that there was no

meaning to anything if we did not escape to safety. Wendel had remained completely silent since some time ago, and by the unnerved, flustered look of him, he simply did not have the energy for any of it. I knew then that I had to be steadfast.

It was then that the guards opened the door slightly, and a huge sound echoed from the tunnel behind us.

"They're still a long way off," said Hil. "Do not panic; it will be some time before they reach us."

If he hadn't offered me this reassurance, I may well have made a break for it right then and there.

Vision beyond the door was not nearly as bad as I had expected. I'd imagined a thick fog rendering everything a meter ahead invisible, but it was clearer than that. It might have made for quite the wondrous sight during the day, but the time and circumstances instead only served to make it all the more ominous. The rocks at our feet made it difficult to find firm footing, and though I wished for some light, not a single member of our party put flame to lamp; it was far better to brave the gloom than to tremble in fear at the prospect of being spotted. I decided then that I never, ever wanted to relive the experience of navigating a rough, sloping downward path with nothing other than what dim light the sky provided.

"I always tried to be mindful of the area in *front* of Conrad's main gates, but there's just nothing behind it but forest," I uttered.

Conrad was built on a hill, which made for excellent visibility. The unfortunate flip side of this advantage was that it made escaping the place that much more difficult. I steadied Wendel as he tripped and almost fell. Keeping him aware of the situation kept it from being anything serious.

"You must stay strong, Wendel," I said.

Though I still had some energy in me, Mrs. Henrik was tiring. Truth be told, it was starting to become a struggle for me too, but I refused to call for a rest. And so we strode onward, the cold of the rain stabbing us with each drop as we watched carefully so as not to slip or trip over rocks.

When we had walked on until the very idea of even speaking felt exhausting, the forest came into view. For some strange reason, the sight of it filled me with the sense that it was over. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been terrifying, what with all the darkness, the gloomy clumps of trees, and the

general creepiness of it all. One ordinarily would have thought twice, perhaps thrice, before entering such a place. As it stood, however, it felt as though the heavens had opened for us.

"If we make it…"

*…we can hide.*

And perhaps then we would be allowed a moment to rest. And perhaps we might even hope for a stream of clean water… Though I'd felt at the very limits of my exhaustion, my feet suddenly felt lighter. It was then, however, that a sound rumbled loudly from afar. It was such a roar that it could not be ignored. It wasn't like thunder, but more like an explosion, like something I had heard in a movie long ago, and it shook the earth we stood on. Everyone turned to look even though there wasn't anything to see.

"What in the world just happened…?" asked Mrs. Henrik.

Her lips quivered; her despair ran deep. When I thought of how the margrave and Whateley might be faring, my jaw tensed.

"Let's go," I said to Wendel, trying to sound bright.

That was when one of the guards in front of us fell. He had been talking to us just a moment ago, but now a wooden rod ran through the side of his head. His body spasmed, but it was clear that he would not breathe again. The thought struck me that it all happened so abruptly, and I remembered then that Sven, too, hadn't even had a chance to say a word. The remaining guard took my hand and we took off, but the enemy had our location.

"They're in the forest!" came a gruff shout.

The voice snapped me back to reality. I had to pull myself together. I didn't have the time for thought, however, and so I ran with everything I had.

"Wendel!" I cried.

He was about to trip. I pulled him up with an arm just as arrows plunged into the ground behind us. A cold shiver ran down my spine as I envisioned the arrows piercing our bodies.

"Grab the woman in the fancy clothes!"

"The old hag! The old hag and the kid! We haven't got them yet!"

"Lop the heads off but leave the faces clean!"

The murder in the air was like a curse hanging over us. What to do? Where to flee? Why were we being hunted like this in the first place? None of it made any sense. Because of course it didn't; none of us had done anything to bring this upon

ourselves!

I couldn't focus on anything other than running, and before I could properly consider what was being shouted, Mrs. Henrik stopped. Even now, I don't know how I realized that she stopped in place when she was running behind us. Perhaps I simply felt it in my bones.

"Mrs. Henri—?!"

My breath burned in my lungs as I spun and saw a slight smile across Mrs. Henrik's features. It was the bold smile of one who had bet big and won. Her shoulder was stained red, and I knew in an instant that she was badly wounded. Her lips formed a single word.

"Go."

Mrs. Henrik took off in a different direction, and for some reason, one of the guards simply followed after her. He did so faithfully, as though he were following the orders of a noblewoman, and he didn't even try to force her back with the rest of us.

"Wait, Mrs. Henrik!" I hissed.

"Keep your voice down," whispered the guard in front of me. "Or Mrs. Henrik and Hil's decoy play will have all been for nothing...!"

The eyes of the young guard by our side were red with tears.

*Mrs. Henrik...*

I realized then that they had already considered this possibility and prepared a countermeasure. My lungs burned as my breath began to run short, but my mind was racing out of control.

*"...even if it's just the two of you, you* will *get out of this safely."*

That's what Mrs. Henrik had said.

*Why didn't I notice? What didn't I see the way she left herself out of that equation?*

One of our remaining guards, an older man, turned around and with the swing of his sword, knocked down an arrow aimed at Wendel. There was a loyalty and resolve in the strong silhouette of his back that reminded one of the margrave.

"Go!" he barked.

Our last guard clenched his teeth to keep a sorrowful moan from escaping his lips, then picked up Wendel and made a run for it. I did not know what resolve it was that gave men like our guard and the margrave such strength, or what it was that

allowed them to confront their enemies without so much as a glance in our direction. All I knew was that the guard was soon to die. That was the future that awaited him. It didn't make any sense, and yet it was the unflinching, merciless reality before us. I was seized by the sense that if we were to stop now, we would no longer be able to run again.

*Run, run! Just run!*

I did not know where we were headed, and there was no time to even consider the breath in my lungs. We ran so hard and so fast that I swore I would despise the act for the rest of my life. We ran onward into the dark fog, as though we were leaping into the arms of the grim reaper.

Then our young guard suddenly stopped.

"Wh-What's wrong? Is—" I started.

"No…"

His voice wavered. He had lost all of his fellow guards, and he looked down at Wendel with a pained expression, frozen in the long grass.

"I-It doesn't matter which way we go; they'll come after us," he said. "S-So stay low, and s-stay still. If I'm not back soon, you run, understand?"

"Wait," I said. "Where are you going?"

The guard did not reply. He was the one who had put his ear to the door, listening for pursuers before we made our escape. We had nowhere else to go, and there was no time for discussion; before I knew it, the young guard had disappeared into the fog. He had wanted to hide us, but I had little faith in the shadowy grass. I thought about running, but when I heard voices arguing I covered both Wendel and myself in my cloak and tried to quiet my breath. The disgusting spiders crawling along the ground and the incessant sound of cicadas was a trifle compared to the fear and tension that gripped us in the moments to follow.

"You'll be okay," I whispered. "You'll be fine, but you must stay absolutely still, and you mustn't speak."

Angry roars and footsteps approached. I forced back the urge to lift my head to see what was coming, and instead I held tight to the young body shivering in my arms. Soon came the voices of a man and a woman, practically by our side. At first, I couldn't believe I was hearing a female voice, but the bloodthirstiness of it drained whatever relief I might have hoped for. They spoke of

money and of their cuts, and danger filled the air around them.

"I hear the others have already killed the old man, his new wife, and his son," said the woman. "All of them nobles. You can bet they'll be paid handsomely for that, but we're left with the mistress. Won't get much coin for her. They took all the best targets from us. Ain't no value in one old hag."

"I thought you promised you'd shut up about placements!"

"I've got a right to complain! My kids need money!"

"Yeah, but we couldn't hold the inside. You saw them yourself."

"Nah, we could take them. We wouldn't lose to the likes of them."

"The call wasn't ours. Just be glad you've got work at all."

I prayed from my hiding spot, begged that they would just leave and disappear. But the footsteps suddenly grew nearer, and I heard rustling in the grass.

"What have we here, eh?"

The voice came from directly above us. I tried to throw my cloak at our attackers and make a break for it but failed. I was tripped and fell to the grass. Even as I panicked to get back to my feet, the woman had already drawn her sword. She approached with a hint of sympathy in her eyes. In her gaze, I saw a flash of pity.

"Hey, what is it?" called the man.

"Right here. This is who we're looking for! Guessing by the age that the boy's the second son, and the girl...she must be a maid, seeing how young she is. I'll do her the favor of ending things here. A cute face like hers will only see her plowed senseless by the other guys before her end finally arrives. As a woman myself, I can't stand the thought."

She nodded, resolute.

"All your guards were so faithful, right up until the end," the woman continued, "but then your last one just up and abandons you like a coward. Talk about cursed luck."

This was the moment of truth. All I could do now was keep Wendel behind me in the hopes I might defend him from this woman. I was about to be cut down where I stood. I had wanted to live, to *survive*, but I had to accept that this was the price I paid for the glimpse at a second life. We had done our utmost to flee, given it our everything, and as much as I hated and truly despised that it now came to this, the blade was all that

remained. A thought flitted through my mind that if I thrust Wendel at these two bandits I might yet escape, but I did not act on the thought. Instead, I hoped I might be forgiven for my instant of cowardice.

Just as the woman was about to cut me, I jumped at her. I might have screamed something trite, like “Run!” I gave it everything I had but was only punched and kicked relentlessly for my efforts. There was so little I could do, but I held fast, biting my attacker’s shoulder and arms as I prayed it might allow Wendel more space.

A dull pain throbbed through my shoulder. In the shock, my body stopped responding to my commands, and I was thrown to the side. Wendel cried out my name, and I wanted to burst into tears at how little time I had afforded him in the end. The woman flew at me in a rage, and in her hand was the blade that would run me through.

*I’m dead.*

Until now, I had been the one doing the leaving. I’d left my parents. I’d left my friends. Today, for the first time, I got a sense for how it felt to be the one who lost someone close to them. And yet, at the same time, I was filled with sorrow to think that once again, in Wendel, I would be leaving someone behind.

...But the blade I waited for never fell.

I slowly raised my head and saw that the woman’s body had been run through by something. I heard someone shout “One down!” and suddenly someone rushed through the grass behind me.

“Karen!”

The arrival of our saviors came all too suddenly. It was Elena who held me as my body threatened to give up on me and collapse. I couldn’t seem to wrap my head around the fact that she was even here.

“Ele—” I started.

“Yes! Your ever-reliable ally Elena is here!” she said brightly.

I saw a shadow leap upon the remaining bandit and fall to the ground with him. Only the shadow stood back to its feet, and if my eyes weren’t deceiving me, it was Haring. But what were he and Elena doing here? While my eyes were still focusing on the man, Elena was patting my body to check for injuries.

“Haring will be fine,” she said. “As for you...the worst looks to be your shoulder. We’ll have to take the blade out, but it’s going

to hurt, so you're going to have to grit your teeth and bear it, okay?"

"Huh? Er, hrngh...?!"

A stabbing pain burst from the top of my head and sped through my body. I remembered then that my body had shut down when I'd first felt the dull ache in my shoulder. I turned to see a handle plunged into my left shoulder.

"You can thank Ern that this is as bad as it got," said Elena. "You, boy... Wendel, isn't it? Come and give me a hand."

"Er, ah..."

"Your own stepmother is hurt! Get a move on!"

"Oh, y-yes ma'am."

"Karen, I need you to bite down on this piece of cloth and keep your voice down. You can do that, right? Of course you can. You'll be fine."

I wanted to tell Elena to be a little gentler with the boy, but I couldn't speak through the pain. Elena had Wendel keep me firmly in place, and then after a count of three, she pulled the blade buried in my arm. My head filled with a blank white, and while the cloth may have helped me keep my voice low, it did nothing to quell the pain. Even then, however, Elena was not about to let me rest; she quickly tied a cloth around the wound and looked up at Haring, now standing by her side.

"Haring, I'm leaving Karen and the boy with you."

"Wouldn't you be better served handling them?"

They were dressed in a darker black than usual, and though I couldn't see clearly through the mist, I thought I saw maybe ten people in all. Elena shrugged at Haring's question.

"Not given how muddy it is here," she said. "That, and I still have a job to do... Vice-captain Franzen, report?"

It was the man we'd seen at the blocked road, now standing at a slight distance with his back facing us.

"No issues in the immediate vicinity," he replied. "Ready when you are."

"I'm better suited to scouting, so let's get it done and get out. Before that, however... Karen? Are you still with us? Can you speak?"

"I think so, yes..."

"Can you tell us how you escaped Conrad? I want to know the route you took."

I was still wracked with pain, but it was past its peak now, and

while I still felt like I might faint, Elena's words reminded me of what I had to tell her.

"We escaped through a basement tunnel in the manor," I said. "Follow the slope upward, that's where the entrance is, but…all I could think of was running through the mist. I can't give you a more detailed description…"

"I see. Then it was through sheer luck that we found you."

"One m-more thing!" I stammered.

"Yes?"

"The head maid and a guard, they helped us to escape, they…"

*…died.*

I felt my mouth tighten before I spoke the word.

"They were separated from us," I continued. "If you find them, could you…?"

"We'll do our best," replied Elena.

"And…and…we had one last guard, a young man…" I said.

He had run from our side, and I couldn't help thinking of how the woman earlier had called him a coward. Elena and Haring shared a glance.

"Ah…" they murmured.

"I was wondering how he was connected to all this, but he's a guard, huh?" said Haring. "Kokoska, wake him up; he's sure to prove useful. We need to get these two treated ASAP, so go."

"A far better idea than exhausting Karen and the boy with all the questions. I'll leave the rest to you."

Elena then disappeared into the mist along with Franzen and those with him.

"We can't stay long," said Haring. "Let's get you to our standby position, for starters."

"No, wait… Please wait a moment," I said. "Conrad, it's still…"

"I know you weren't expecting any of this, but unfortunately we're no more than a scouting party… We don't know how large the enemy are, so ascertaining that information is our first priority. All we can do at present is wait for the main forces to arrive."

*Scouting party?*

Then how had they made it to us in the time they did? I was filled with questions, but Haring's priority was on us moving locations.

"But…!" I started.

"I know how you feel, but we don't have a clear understanding

of the situation. That we got to you and saved you in time was nothing more than a coincidence; we're not heroes out of some fairy tale."

"But there may still be survivors!"

"Do you have a death wish?"

Haring's gaze also spoke a similar question: *"Are you telling us to run to our deaths?"* I wanted to scream at him. *"Are you telling me to abandon Conrad entirely?!"* I wanted to shout. Instead, I clenched my teeth and swallowed the urge.

"No… I know what you're saying. Please, help us."

I knew where he was coming from. He wasn't wrong. And it wasn't like I wasn't glad to have been rescued…and yet, I could not stop my fists from clenching so hard that my nails drew blood.

A muscular woman lifted me onto her back, while Haring took Wendel on his own. They had more power in their legs than anyone I'd ever known. With us on their backs, they ran as if the muddy ground meant nothing. Eventually, we arrived at a number of tents huddled closely together in the middle of the forest. The woman and Haring let Wendel and me down once inside, then gathered some intel while they saw to our injuries.

"Please," I said, "let Wendel sleep. I can give you most of the answers you're looking for."

The mental shock of the entire experience had brought Wendel to near breaking point. I wanted nothing more than to stay by his side, but I also loathed the idea of talking about the death of his family while he was present. Haring picked up on my concern immediately and set us up in different tents. He had a gentle, kindly looking woman watch over Wendel. Once I explained how we had escaped from the attack and made it to the forest, Haring issued orders to his subordinates.

"There's no need to wait for Kokoska's return. Take the information you've just heard and deliver it to his excellency posthaste. Karen, I know you've been through a lot, and I know it's been anything but easy, but you're safe here. Try to get some rest…"

"Wait a moment," I said. "You still haven't told me why you're all here."

"True. And while I know you must be curious, you must also be exhausted."

"How am I supposed to sleep or rest in these circumstances?!"

My wounds stung. My body screamed in suffering. I wasn't such a fool to believe that I could do a thing to save anybody on my own, and yet I truly wanted to fly from this tent and run to Conrad.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout," I said, calming myself. "My apologies."

"No, it's completely understandable."

I recalled what the woman had said earlier.

*"...the others have already killed the old man, his new wife, and his son..."*

So the margrave was dead. Sven, as I already knew, had also been murdered. Nico had fallen along with him, and it seemed likely the bandits had mistaken her for me. Given how things had played out, I held little hope for the fate of Mrs. Henrik; she'd clearly been mistaken for the margrave's wife, Doctor Emma. This was not surprising, when I thought back over what the bandits had said; after all, Mrs. Henrik and Nico had both been dressed more formally than Doctor Emma and I. And while I knew, somewhere in my soul, that Mrs. Henrik and Hil were both dead, it was nonetheless not an easy thing for me to accept.

"Tell me what you know," I said. "Please."

Haring had just said that we were to wait for the main forces to arrive. While one option was to have Wendel request their help—as the margrave had left him everything—it was far too much to ask of him. The boy had just lost his family. That left only me, and even if I was the margrave's wife in name only, I was indebted to him and his family, and it wouldn't do for me to simply wail and cry and drown in sorrow. I would not let my emotions sway my person any further.

I could cry whenever I wanted, but if I was going to see our people saved, I had to act now. If I didn't, then there was no rescuing Whateley, hidden somewhere in the manor, or the servants shivering in fear as they huddled together in the kitchen.

Haring could see that I was steadfast. He left the tent for a brief moment but returned with a light blanket and a warm drink. It was by no means delicious, but the warmth of it permeated the cold I felt through my body.

"The wound in your arm is deep, but as long as you avoid any big movements, you'll be fine," Haring said. "The painkillers should kick in shortly, but you'll have to deal with the pain in the

meantime. If it gets to be too much, feel free to lie down and rest."

"It's...not as bad as I thought," I commented.

"I bet. For that, you'll have to thank your friend for the protection she gave you."

Haring sighed and looked upward. There was a troubled expression on his face.

"Kokoska mentioned it to me, but you really *are* a calm one, aren't you?" he said. "Very well, as I said earlier, we're just a scouting party. When Kokoska met you, she sent a falcon to the rest of us where we were training."

*She used a falcon?*

I decided not to linger on the question. Haring went on to explain that none of them expected anything out of the ordinary at that point. A little after noon on that same day, they had received word from Marquis Rodenwald and began to discuss the idea of canceling their scheduled military maneuvers. Elena's falcon had arrived after that. In the late afternoon, they began preparations to meet at Conrad and prepared for any possible Latorian forces.

This decision was largely Reinald's own; he had not received any orders from the king to move as such. Though he had permission to enter the Conrad domain, he had decided to set up at a distance from the place because it could be seen as a show of power and authority. Elena and the people with her had been ordered to scout ahead and send word if they noticed anything out of the ordinary. Haring, who I already knew was quick on his feet, had met with her.

"That said, we never thought that things would go so crazy just as soon as we arrived," Haring added.

The scouting party had intended to return to the main forces as soon as they saw what was happening in Conrad, but then they met with the same sudden and deafening roar that we had. Thus, they made the decision to investigate further. They proceeded under the cover of night and fog and discovered a suspicious armed group. They kept watch at a distance, then a man appeared in a half-crazed panic, running at a full sprint. Given his state, they kept their distance and watched the situation play out, at which point he screamed out, telling anyone within earshot where Wendel was hiding.

"The group we'd spotted seemed focused on finding you, so

we handled the man who appeared out of nowhere. I have to admit, it was a shock to discover that he was one of your guards... I imagine Kokoska is putting him to use for all he's worth right about now."

I felt a shame and disgust swirl through my being. I didn't have words for it. It was all the worse because at the time I'd been convinced that the guard was running for help. Haring and Elena had proceeded to make quick work of the bandits, but when they ran into the forest to rescue Wendel, the two bandits who found us didn't notice them due to all the fog. Elena had made it to us in the nick of time.

"That woman stabbed you relentlessly, and I honestly thought we were too late," said Haring. "It wasn't easy for Kokoska and the others."

"When you say 'stabbed relentlessly,' what exactly do you mean?" I asked.

"You didn't notice? She dropped her dagger over and over, trying to stab you from behind, but her blade was blocked by an invisible wall and it bounced right off. That's how magical armor works."

It was a protection that Ern had cast on me at some point, though I didn't know when. Thinking back, I realized that I'd been frantically focused on the hand that held the sword, which left the woman's other hand completely free. She'd tried to tear me off of her with her dagger, and finally she'd managed to land a blow.

The rest we both already knew, but a new question popped into my mind.

"When you arrived in Conrad, you were all very concerned about the forest. Had you already realized the threat Latoria posed?"

"We had a sense that things were awry due to the lack of merchant and caravan movements, but even then, we never considered that they would move so quickly."

While it had been Reinald who made the decision to move into Conrad proper, Moritz had agreed. Almost everyone else was skeptical of the idea.

"His excellency's thoughts are a mystery to the likes of me," said Haring. "Moritz even more so."

I then gave Haring a hand in drawing up a basic map of Conrad proper. We had a detailed discussion regarding the

construction of the manor, the number of soldiers, and the paths and back alleys that were likely unknown to strangers.

“I expect that his excellency will arrive soon,” said Haring when we were done, “at which point the invaders will be dealt with. You’ll be needed in the aftermath, so please take some time to rest.”

“And what will you do?” I asked.

“I’ll wait for his excellency to arrive and, depending on Kokoska’s report, we’ll make a move on Conrad proper.”

So was that where it ended, then? I tried to think of something more I could do, some way to be of assistance, but nothing came to mind. Haring must have understood my frustrations.

“Sleep,” he said simply. “You protected the boy, and you gave us valuable intel. The only thing you can do for your people, for now, is get some rest.”

And with that, Haring left to share the map with the others.

I was alone. Was this really the most I could do? But, try as I might, I could not come up with any grand ideas, and as the time passed my body only grew heavier. My head was a hive of excitement, but that did not stop gravity pulling on my eyelids. In time, my energy deserted me, and I dropped the cup I was holding on the floor. I knew I had to wipe up the mess, but before I could act I was already on my side.

I awoke to slight tremors running through the ground.

# 2: Unforgettable Days, Now So Distant

At first, I thought the tremors were an earthquake. I opened my eyes to find the world wavering before me, and as I wiped the sleep from my eyes I wondered vaguely what magnitude it was. I felt so sluggish that I was just about to doze off again before I suddenly sat up. This wasn't Japan.

*Earthquakes rarely ever occur here!*

I stared up at the ceiling of the simple tent, my "mattress" little more than a blanket covering the ground. Little by little, I combed backward through my memories. Everything hurt, and I felt icky, my body covered in sweat and grime. When I tried to use my left arm, a dull pain throbbed through it, forcing me truly awake.

But even then, I still felt incredibly exhausted. I fought off the urge to lie down, and stumbled outside. It was still pitch-dark, which meant I hadn't been asleep especially long. The tremors continued, I could feel them through my entire body, and it was then that a woman called out to me.

"You mustn't move too much," she said. "Please go back to your tent."

It was the woman who'd carried me here. She was a head taller than me, and her muscular body made it easy for her to support my weight with a single arm.

"What's with this shaking?" I asked. "At least tell me that."

"It would appear that Sir Reinald has arrived with the advance troops. They'll continue straight through into Conrad proper."

"So soon...? How much time has passed?!"

"Not enough for you to get worried. Dawn is about to break. Now, please get yourself some more rest. Now that the main forces are here, there's really nothing more to worry about."

"Dawn...is breaking...?"

I thought back. A considerable amount of time had passed since the first attack on the manor. Even the mere act of imagining how many might have been lost in that time terrified me. As the woman tried to move me back into the tent, I clutched her arms tight.

"Please," I implored her. "I need you to take me to a place

where I can see Conrad clearly."

"No, I..." she started.

"I won't get in anybody's way. I won't cry or scream. I'll be quiet..."

"It's too dangerous. And I apologize, but I fear you may have a fever. The young boy is still sound asleep, so I think it's best for you to take some medicine and lie down yourself."

"No, I'm just tired from all the running," I said. "Please, I simply *must* see what has become of Conrad!"

Before I was born into this new world—and even *after* I was born into it—war was always something I only ever read about, or otherwise saw on the television or in movies. I knew it in no other way. However much Reinald and his troops were looking to rescue those in Conrad, I had no idea how the place had transformed since the attack was launched upon it. All I knew was that people had died before my very eyes, and for that reason I begged; I did not want to simply take refuge somewhere safe.

My request, however, was perhaps asking for too much. The woman looked awfully troubled, and she knew that I was not simply going to do as I was told. I was a handful, but she had obviously been ordered to watch over me, so I couldn't really blame her. Still...

"What are you doing?"

The two of us had been so focused on our own back-and-forth that we never noticed the horse and its rider approach. It was Moritz and a few subordinates. He took a rolled-up map from one of them and checked its contents.

"Get this to his excellency, and quick," he said.

Moritz then turned his gaze back to me and the woman. His gaze was as it always was; cold and devoid of emotion. It was also hard to make out his words, being that they lacked almost any tone whatsoever.

"My apologies," said the woman. "She was resting until recently, but..."

"No matter... Margravine," said Moritz, "I see that you are wounded. Have we been disrespectful to you in some way?"

"No, it was I who was being pushy," I replied. "Sir Moritz, I have a request to ask of you."

If I couldn't get my way through the woman herself, then I had no choice but to negotiate directly with her superiors. When

I asked the same request of Moritz, he responded with a brief moment of surprise but never lost his cool.

"While I respect how you feel about the matter," he said, "everything that will take place from here on out is the work of soldiers and the military. You are a relative of the nation's king. Should anything happen to you, it would be our responsibility to inform not just the margrave, but the king himself. Please, I ask that you have faith in our ability and remain here."

"I have a duty to the people of Conrad," I said, "and that means I must see what has become of them and their home."

"All the more reason that you should wait here. Or are you saying that you do not trust us?"

As expected, Moritz was not about to simply let me have my way.

*Think, Karen. If you don't hold out here, you'll never know. There must be something you can use to bend Moritz…*

*…and there is.*

It was the king. I was the stepdaughter of the king. But if I failed here, Moritz would simply leave. I met his gaze with a resolute look of my own.

"If you are worried about your position here in Falkrum, then what if I were to tell not just the king, but *everyone*, that Sir Reinald was exemplary in his actions here?"

"You mean to say…?"

"That I can make it so that Reinald Rodenwald had a *reason* to direct his forces into Conrad proper. What do you say?"

Confusion flashed briefly across Moritz's face. Now I had his full attention.

"In other words…we can rely on you to inform everyone that the margrave was already in touch with our military forces beforehand?"

"If that is what you wish."

Moritz was already considering what might happen upon their return to Falkrum. They had not received any orders to move their forces into Conrad proper. As such, a reason could be constructed in the case that such actions might look bad for them. Moritz did not want to see Reinald showered in criticism for his decision, and he could potentially put me to use to see that such criticism never came to pass.

"It was a request from both the Margrave of Conrad and his wife," I continued. "That alone should be enough to ensure you

do not find yourselves in unfavorable circumstances."

It would all sound something like this: The margrave, sensing danger the previous day, sent a messenger to Reinald's forces, who were stationed nearby. Reinald made the decision to respond to the margrave's request, wrapping up his military maneuvers and mobilizing his forces for action.

Moritz was already more concerned with the future, and the truth of the matter was that the invasion of Conrad was not the first thing on his mind; he was more concerned with its aftermath. As much as it pained me, we needed the Latorians stopped, and so I was not in a position to grumble and complain.

What we needed was military power. What they needed was validation for their actions.

"I am asking you now, as a proxy for Margrave Conrad, to save our people. And as the person seeing over our domain, it is my responsibility to oversee what happens to it…no?"

Moritz was quick to make up his mind.

"Do as you wish. State my name and none will stand in your way."

All he needed was someone to accompany me, which was a simple thing. I was given a horse, and then Moritz promptly left. Once I had his permission, however, things moved quickly. Wendel was left in the care of those on standby at the camp, and I was to be watched over by Sofie, the woman from earlier. Together we got moving.

"The medication will dull the pain some, but the movement of the horse will still hurt. I assume that's fine?"

"Let's get going," I said.

She had been ordered to watch over me, yes, but all the same she seemed genuinely concerned for my person. We rode the horse together, Sofie supporting me, and I really did feel safe and at ease with her body wrapped around my own. That said, traveling by horse *did* turn out to be tough. It didn't feel like much of anything at first, but as we galloped on, I felt as though I were being stabbed by needles from the inside. Still, I knew if I said anything we'd simply come to a halt, so I gritted my teeth and did my best to endure it.

We passed soldiers as we went, and though some of them attempted to stop us, Sofie needed only to fall back on a single phrase to get us on track.

"Sir Abelein's orders."

I had learned that Moritz's last name was Bachem, and I wondered why he'd changed his surname.

"We're almost there," announced Sofie.

At Sofie's words, all my confusion around Moritz and his last name vanished from my mind. We emerged from the forest and onto a gently sloping hill, beyond which we could observe the whole of Conrad. The sky was dark and the view wasn't totally clear, but I could nonetheless work out what was going on in some parts of it; the cavalry and foot soldiers heading straight for it were proof enough.

Reinald's unit was far larger than I had imagined. A flood of more than two hundred soldiers sped down the hillside. I gasped at the sight without even realizing it. Beyond the thin fog I saw the walls that surrounded the Conrad domain. Smoke billowed up from fires of such magnitude that they couldn't possibly have been mere bonfires.

"Conrad...it's aflame..." I uttered.

Black smoke crawled into the sky, more of it than could have ever felt natural. As the sky whitened it grew even more stark, and it struck me as a beacon for the death of the place.

Behind those walls, many had died. And all I could do was watch, safe and protected, as black smoke billowed under a cold, ashen sky. The sky itself was covered over by shapeless white clouds, and little by little, dawn broke. The pure white fog drifted like a phantom, and had it not been for the circumstances the sight might well have been breathtaking. It looked beautiful as it drifted along the ground, but my eyes were held fast instead to the walls that protected the domain as they came more clearly into view.

I could do nothing but simply take it all in while Sofie kept me upright. How much time passed, I did not know, but eventually morning was truly upon us, and the horses that had earlier sped to Conrad were now simply trotting. Sofie and I began wondering if the bandits had been driven off, and it was then that a messenger arrived from Moritz.

"We've secured the area," we were informed. "Sir Abelein has requested the margravine's presence to inspect the area now that it's safe."

Surprisingly, Sofie flew into a rage upon hearing the message. The area might have been secured, but black smoke still billowed from the domain. She argued against the idea of taking me

inside while I was still injured, and while I appreciated her kindness, I knew what had to be done.

"Take me to Conrad," I said. "I need to see what has become of it."

To tell you the truth, I did not really know that we would be plunging headfirst into an invaded city when I spoke. It was only when we neared the gates and I was met by the foul, drifting stench of burning that I could truly understand Sofie's hesitance about bringing me.

The main gates had been thrown open where Elena stood, waiting for us. Her expression was grave.

"You're really doing this," she said, a warning at the edges of her voice. "It's far from a pretty sight in there; the fires still haven't been completely extinguished, and the rubble has yet to be cleared."

"But the bandits are gone?" I asked.

"We fought off some, but the greater half retreated. It's likely what they had planned from the outset."

Though I knew that I could not back down—not after having come this far—when I witnessed what had become of my former home, I could not stop myself from vomiting all that remained in my stomach.

Conrad guards lay strewn by the main gates, their corpses yet to be moved. I remembered the face of one of them, an older man who always met us at the gates upon our return. Now his head and his body had been separated, connected only by a single flap of skin. I looked into the empty gaze of his eyes, dry heaving as my body shivered uncontrollably. He would not know the joy of life again.

"I'll take you inside," said Elena. "Close your eyes if you must."

Neither Elena nor Sofie wanted me to see the chaos that my home had become. This much was clear in the burnt stench that refused to leave my nostrils; I knew that it contained far worse than just charred wood.

We followed the road from the gates. I spied an arm poking out from burning rubble. Those who hadn't been able to flee in time were dead; the housewives who met to chat by the well, the old woman who weaved straw by her front door, the man who had asked us for medicine for his wife and daughter, and the merchants who had bellowed with such vigor from their outdoor stalls. As we passed them by, my eyes took in the reality of what

had happened here.

It was a place in ruin. Everything, all of it. Everybody was dead. Soldiers ran here and there, working to put out the fires, while elsewhere I thought I heard cries of sorrow pierce the air.

*The people who once lived here…none of them are left…*

"Elena, do you know what happened here?" I asked.

"I…"

"Tell me. Don't gloss over any of it. It's something I need to know."

I didn't want to hear about it. I didn't want to know. But I had to. I couldn't comprehend why everyone had to die like this. And while she appeared hesitant, Elena answered my question.

"They spread oil and lit it aflame…but you can see that yourself. However, outside of that there's the sense they were deliberate and methodical in their targeting of the residents. There are absolutely no signs of sexual assault on any of the women, though we've noticed that they gathered and stole valuables."

"Where are the survivors?"

"They've already been evacuated, but there aren't many. We're gathering testimony, but so far there hasn't been much to go on… That, and…"

Elena pointed and went on.

"For the relatively small number of assailants, far too many residents were killed. We believe there may have been a spellcaster among them. Too much of this doesn't make any sense otherwise."

Ordinarily, to look over the forest from town, one had to climb either a watchtower or the walls surrounding the town itself. The only other option was the third floor of Conrad manor. The high walls that surrounded the town were there to protect the residents from outside threats, but when I followed Elena's finger, I could see straight outside to lush, green forest.

"The wall has been torn down…" I uttered.

The walls were core to the Conrad domain. Their existence was a reassurance for its residents. They were so thick, so sturdy, and none could have believed they would ever fall, and yet…it had been penetrated, and pieces of it lay strewn across the ground.

"Some of the debris flew quite far from the wall itself," said Elena. "That was likely the sound we all heard late last night."

“An explosion...”

I had never heard of any weapons or technology capable of tearing down walls. Not in *this* world. This was why Elena suspected that a mage had been involved. But there were other signs too; residents who appeared to have successfully fled from the bandits had been discovered dead without any visible injury. No cuts from blades, just froth bubbling from their mouths. Elena pointed to this as the reason that there were so few survivors.

“Kokoska, that’s enough...” started Sofie.

“I’m fine, Sofie,” I said. “Thank you, but please, go on.”

Everywhere I looked, there was a portrait of hell. Even when I closed my eyes, I could not escape the reek of burning flesh. I looked skyward to avert my gaze but only saw the upper body of a corpse slumped out of a window. When I looked to my side, I saw a child cut down alongside their mother. I saw a young father dead, curled up in a ball as he tried to protect his infant child. Elsewhere, an elderly couple had died hand in hand. All of them had died with hearts full of regret and despair. In a movie, my eyebrows might have simply furrowed at the sight, but to see it and experience it all firsthand left me without even words.

But as I bore witness to all of those corpses, the emotion drained from my face. The margrave had wanted to protect them all, these people now dead. They had all greeted us with smiles.

Only the road that led from town to the manor was neatly cleared of corpses. We passed, step by step, over the black red stains that dirtied the path and through the manor fence. I had been here just yesterday, but instead of the familiar faces I was so used to seeing, I was met only by rugged black military uniforms.

“We’ve brought Lady Karen,” said Elena.

I recognized a few other faces aside from Nika and Moritz, but I could not remember where I had seen them before. Still, it did not matter; the bodies lined up at their feet were of far more importance, all three of them lost to an eternal sleep. I had known all of them so intimately. I tried to take hold of an arm, but it was already like gripping hard stone, and so cold as to no longer feel human. As I knelt there, I heard Moritz speaking to me from where he stood at their heads.

“I would like to ask that you confirm the identities of these

three," he said. "We have already been able to confirm that the young man is Sven, son of the margrave, but unfortunately we do not know who the women are. Are we right to assume that this one is the margrave's other wife?"

"Moritz!" spat Nika. "Put a little more thought into your choice of words!"

"Do you think sentimental words will bring any of them back to life?" he replied. "Lady Karen made the decision to come here; she knew what she was walking into."

"That's not what I'm saying! I'm asking you to be more considerate!"

"Cap, calm down..." urged Elena.

Nika made her feelings about Moritz's attitude clear, and people on both sides urged them to calm. It was for this reason that only Sofie heard the words I muttered.

"This is Sven, his fiancée...and his mother..."

I remembered Sven dying with his eyes open, but all of the corpses now had their eyes closed. I was grateful to the imperial forces for this small courtesy; I did not think I could have borne to look upon their muddied, empty gazes. And yet, at the same time, a painful truth impressed itself upon me: that we would never look each other in the eyes again. A gaping white emptiness opened itself in my heart, and I crumpled to my knees by the three bodies. I put a hand to their faces and was only brought to my feet by a whisper in my ear.

"My apologies. It's freezing out here, isn't it?"

We headed for the second floor. Though I had used the corridors without so much as a second glance in the past, now I was aware of a red line drawn from something having been dragged along the floor. Farther down was one of the margrave's guards, slumped against the wall. He had left us just before we headed for the secret passage, and no doubt he had fought until the bitter end; he had breathed his last breath with his sword still clutched tight in hand.

Through the open doors and in the room beyond was a conspicuous head of blond hair. It spun to face me, and for a brief second our eyes met, but just as quickly my gaze was ripped away and to a sight farther in the room.

I did not have the words to express the state of my heart when I saw the man.

He was not even allowed to fall to his knees, his chest and his

stomach run through with blades that pinned him to the wall as he breathed his last. Like his wife and his child, it was not a death in a single strike. His empty gaze stared off into the distance, blood having streamed from his mouth down his person. He was nothing more than a hunk of flesh now, his arms and legs dangling uselessly from his torso. His blood soaked deep into the carpet, to the extent that stepping upon it resulted in a disgusting squelching sound.

With Reinald here, there was no need for me to tell the imperials who exactly we were looking at. And so I was troubled. There was nothing for me to tell them. More to the point, what was I even supposed to say to the corpse hanging on the wall? Perhaps I was supposed to cry, but though my gaze clouded, no tears came. Such was my confusion.

The man's skin had long grown cold to the touch. When I put a hand to his head to tidy his messy hair, his blood stuck to my fingertips. The man had brought me and sheltered me here in Conrad. He was my teacher. He was my family.

"How am I supposed to tell Wendel?" I asked the margrave's corpse. "I can't simply shirk that responsibility entirely..."

But he would give me no answer; not even the hint of a smile. It all felt so painfully unusual and strange, and it was all too much; I felt the hints of a smile on my own face. I didn't understand it. I spun to Reinald, watching me silently.

"Can you please take him down?" I asked. "If we do not put him by his wife and son's side, all of his efforts will have been for nothing."

Reinald watched me for a moment, then closed his eyes softly. I felt a sliver of discomfort from him that was so unlike the man I knew him to be. It was gone in an instant—perhaps it was little more than my imagination. But if for a brief moment he felt some pity and some regret for Conrad, then such a thing would have brought me a small solace.

I took some slow breaths, and it was then that the cold set in; my sense of temperature had returned. But the days I had spent with my family here and the people of Conrad were days I would never see again. So many of them had now left for a place outside of my reach. My memories of it all, hitting me like nostalgic slides from a projector, were all in the past, where they would now stay...

This place I had called home was now lost to me.

## 3: A Wish Impossible to Fulfill

As the margrave's body was placed next to Doctor Emma's, a powdery snow began to fall. It should have been too early in the winter for it, but the white crystals seemed to envelop Conrad's downfall.

"This will help to put out the fires. That should make things easier for our soldiers," uttered Moritz, his words true to form as always.

The man's unyielding stoicism, even under Nika's withering gaze, was something I almost envied.

The four bodies were to be taken away and buried. The cold weather slowed their decay, which at least meant that Wendel could say his goodbyes in person. And while I wanted to be by his side to support him, there was something I still had to see to first.

"I'll be back…" I muttered.

It was as I touched Doctor Emma's hand, however, that I realized something. I checked her fingers and even rummaged through her pockets with some hesitancy, but her ring was gone. The margrave still wore his, and while rigor mortis had already begun, it was a simple enough task to remove the ring.

"Are you looking for something?" asked Elena.

She peeked over at me. My rummaging through the woman's pockets must have looked odd.

"I can't find her ring," I replied.

"Her ring?"

"Yes, the ring. *Her* ring. Wendel and I gave it to her… She was wearing it when we came back. They seemed so happy to have matching rings, and they were always wearing them."

"That ring…it was a precious metal, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it matched the margrave's…"

I intended to take their rings and some hair as a keepsake, and I thought I'd take the rings now. But Emma wasn't wearing hers, and it wasn't on her person. I felt trapped in a frantic panic as Elena put her hand gently over my own.

"I'll look for the ring for you," she said. "But you should go back. Your fingertips are freezing."

“But…I have to give the rings to Wendel…”

“I know, and so I’ll search high and low for you. But you have a duty to fulfill, don’t you, Karen? Shouldn’t you check on the survivors and let them know you’re okay?”

“Oh…”

“We even rescued one from inside the manor. A servant dressed in very formal attire.”

*A servant in very formal attire?*

I could think of only one person who fit such a description. When she saw my reaction, Elena smiled kindly and left me in Sofie’s care.

*Is it possible? Could he have survived this ordeal?*

Haring was set to show us the way, and we were just about to leave when a voice stopped me.

“Miss Karen.”

It was Reinald. He watched me intently, and I wondered if he had some issue to speak with me about. I waited for him to say something, and a troubled expression flashed across his features.

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t keep you,” he said. “We can talk later.”

It was only after we’d left that I remembered I had forgotten to thank him. I made a mental note to do so when we next met.

The encampment for the survivors had already prepared for the falling snow, and many stood huddled around campfires. The situation was even worse than I had thought. They were all as exhausted as I had expected, and I imagined that I looked just as haggard. What left me reeling in shock was not that, however, but rather how many people I was looking at.

“This is…everybody…?” I uttered.

Conrad was indeed a countryside domain, but it was a land such that it required a lord to govern it, and a great many people lived within its walls. Even if the members of the Conrad family itself had fallen, I had expected at least a hundred, perhaps two hundred, to have been rescued. How very *wrong* I was.

They had been through a screaming mess of blood and tears, and yet I, the margrave’s wife, had arrived almost brazenly, with an officer watching over me to boot. I entered the encampment expecting rage, but so few had survived. These survivors remained downcast, eyes on the ground and without the energy to muster anything in the way of anger. The survivors held one

another or otherwise spoke desperately to those who had yet to regain consciousness.

*There's not even fifty people here...*

"Is this really it?" I asked.

Haring nodded.

"In the beginning, there were more," he said, "but after a time, many began frothing at the mouth and collapsed. We don't know why."

A painful squeeze wrapped my heart. The true scars of war came after it was over, one after the other, and my heart and mind simply could not keep up. I looked around at the camp, dumbstruck, and it was then that I recognized a familiar face. It was Ben, the manor's elderly gardener. He sat with his head drooped between his shoulders, but he stood to his feet when he noticed me.

"My lady..." he uttered. "Lady Karen...you're safe..."

"I'm so glad to see that you are too. Wendel is okay."

"Oh, is that so? The young master survived..."

The old gardener looked completely exhausted, like he had no more tears to shed, his hands trembling as he spoke. By his side was the steward whom I'd never thought I would ever see again.

"Whateley!" I cried.

His clothes were dirty and the bandage wrapped around his head was stained with blood, but when I put a hand to his arm I felt the movement of his shallow breaths. He had yet to regain consciousness, but nonetheless he was alive. I was flooded with relief at the fact that somehow he had survived.

"I stumbled across him by accident," explained Ben, "and I carried him over here."

I saw no other signs of any of the Conrad manor staff. I asked Ben if there were any other survivors, to which he somberly shook his head.

"All of the young ones in the kitchen were killed," he said. "I escaped the same fate only because I was elsewhere..."

When the bandits attacked, the servants fled into the kitchen, but Ben could not move nearly as fast as any of them. Unable to catch up, he instead buried himself under the laundry. For a time he stayed there, terrified, but there was only so long he could remain still; his daughter and her family—his grandchildren—were somewhere in town. When he could no longer bear it, he left, and it was then that he discovered Whateley, collapsed on

the floor and bleeding. The kitchen door had been flung open, and all the servants who had taken refuge inside were dead. Haring, who had investigated the manor, filled in the details.

"We found traces of something having been burned in front of the door," he explained. "We think the bandits lit a fire and let the smoke filter through the gaps in the door. Given that there are no windows in the kitchen, the servants likely thought that the manor was on fire, and their only option was to flee elsewhere."

When the servants burst out the doors, flustered and panicked, the bandits were waiting for them. This was Haring's best guess, and while there was no way to be certain, I had no choice but to accept that Ben and Whateley were the manor's only survivors. I looked up at the sky, hesitant, while Sofie put a hand to the nape of Whateley's neck.

"His energy levels won't hold up long in this weather," she said. "Let's move him inside a tent."

"Thank you."

If Whateley made it through, if he survived, then there was still a sliver of hope. I urged Ben to join Whateley in the warmth of the tent, but he refused.

"My grandchildren... My daughter still hasn't arrived," he said. "They're smart ones, and they always were good at hide-and-seek. Even in these circumstances, they might still be okay. I'm going to wait right here for them. So please, take care of Sir Whateley, my lady. I'm certain it was his desire to see the servants flee to safety."

Ben wrapped his blanket tighter around his shoulders and trudged back to the campfire. Haring watched him go, a pained look etched into his features.

"We've rescued everyone we could," he whispered. "The chances of anyone else surviving, well..."

"I know," I said. "And...I think he does too..."

But it would not have been an act of kindness to confront the poor man with the truth. It was best to leave him be until he was ready to accept things for himself. And when the time came in which he was ready to accept that his family would not return, we would have to do whatever we could to support him.

"So many were lost," I said. "What will happen to the dead?"

"We intend to bury as many as we can, but a clear decision still hasn't been made," replied Haring. "It's dangerous to remain

here too long, so we're looking for a good way to handle things."

A topic likely being discussed at this very moment. Haring told me that once a search of the surrounding area was concluded, the survivors would be moved to a camp closer to Reinald's main unit. With the wall that protected the domain now useless, he said, there was no reason to stay.

"And how about the losses on your side?" I asked. "Were none injured?"

"For us, not so many... But there's no need to worry. Kokoska merely tripped and earned a scrape for it."

He skirted around my question. I thought it likely they'd lost some soldiers.

"We know war, and we know battle," said Haring, "and we did not expect to come out of this unscathed. It would be going too far to tell you not to worry about it, but if you want to buoy the morale of our troops, you can send Nika and the others wine and gifts as you did in the past."

"Would that be enough?"

"There's a lot we begrudge about our work. That alone would make for a sufficient reward."

"In which case, I will endeavor to provide you with some wine when possible. As much as I can, and enough that you won't be able to drink it all."

"We'll look forward to it."

The sobbing of those who had lost family and friends flitted through the air on the winds that carried the powdery snow. It would not be long before we would know what had happened with the Conrad walls while we had been fleeing for the forest. But while we waited, there was still a mountain of things to see to, including finding out how things would proceed. I wasn't sure where to start, but now that I knew of all the deaths, my next step had become clearer.

"I'm going to see Wendel," I said.

He would likely wake soon, and it was my duty to inform him of the death of his family. I was determined to see it through. To my surprise, however, Wendel was calmer than expected. When I arrived back at the other camp, he was already up and waiting for me. His face was cleaned of dirt and grime, but it did nothing to hide how haggard the boy looked. I told him first that Whateley was alive, though injured, and would likely pull through. When I promised Wendel he'd be able to speak to

Whateley, the boy spoke up.

"Father is dead, isn't he?" he asked.

My words seemed to stick in my throat. It took me some time to answer his question. But it seemed that Wendel himself had already come to accept the worst while he waited for me.

"You're too easy to read, Karen," he said with a smile. "You said all that about Whateley like you were avoiding the topic of father and the others. What else was I supposed to think? And I mean, look at you—I can read it on your face."

"I'll have you know I'm very good at faking my way through things..."

"But how long have we known each other now?"

I knew that he was putting on a brave front. Even his smile was a tragic thing. I took him in my arms and squeezed him tight.

"Ouch," he said.

"I'm here," I said. "We're still here."

"Yes, I know. And I'm fine, Karen."

Wendel wanted to see his family, but his request wasn't granted until some time after noon. When we did once again enter Conrad domain, all the corpses within the immediate vicinity had been taken away. The original plan had been to take the margrave and the others somewhere else, but Wendel and I had requested they all be buried near the manor. There was an open plot of land behind the manor anyway, and burying them there would not make for any issues, even if people one day returned to these lands.

The margrave, Doctor Emma, Sven, and Nico. Wendel was silent as he stood before the four of them. On my own authority, I had made it so Nico would be buried by Sven's side. This was because the Conrad family was to be buried separately, whereas the domain's residents were to be buried in groups at a number of different locations. If she were buried with them, I would not be able to keep her by Sven's side. Searching for the girl's mother among the countless corpses was a struggle, but we were finally able to leave her with a lock of her daughter's hair.

For the longest time, Wendel stayed with Doctor Emma, holding her hand. Everyone else watched over him, uttering their condolences. Reinald and some of his people were also in attendance, given that the family would be buried once Wendel had said his goodbyes. They had shown us a generosity by

cleaning up the margrave and hiding his wounds from view.

And so Wendel, now the orphaned heir of Conrad, called out his brother's name while he weakly slapped Sven's cheek, surprised by the chill of it. Then he buried his head in the margrave's chest. This was as much as he could take, and he began to sob. His sobbing grew louder and, eventually, when the dam of his heart burst completely, he wailed with grief. He could do nothing more than cry, just as I could do nothing more than stay by his side, gently rubbing his back.

Respects were given to the margrave, who had been there to the very end, and his family. The simple funeral was over in what felt like an instant. We were allowed to stay at the manor until evening, and we were told to prepare our things before then. Conrad was to be abandoned; too few residents had survived, and restoring the place to what it once was would be a gargantuan task. Only a small regiment of soldiers would remain in the area, and the nearby villages would be warned to stay vigilant.

The decision struck me as far too hastily made, and I asked for further discussion, but Moritz would have none of it.

"We had to leave behind supplies for your people in our efforts to get here quickly. Recovering them may well require that we stay here for a time, but the injured need to be moved and the king will require a report; it is imperative that we withdraw posthaste."

"And what of the Latorians?"

"They have already retreated. Should they intend to launch another intrusion, organizing such a strike will require time."

"You speak as if you've learned something about them."

"It's nothing more than speculation at this point. I cannot speak any further on the matter for fear of increasing everyone's worries."

If we were to remain in Conrad, we could not fight off a large-scale attack, nor could we rely on any reinforcements coming to our aid. According to Moritz, this was all because Falkrum lacked the necessary military forces. Still, I couldn't help feeling that he sounded too sure of himself. All the same, it was true that we had to get the injured residents somewhere safe and secure. It was foolish to remain purely out of feelings of sentimentality and nostalgia.

"I've already explained why we must take this course of

action," said Moritz. "The Conrad stronghold is meaningless without its outer wall. If you are standing in as the representative for the domain's lord, then I need you to understand that meeting with our allies is our best course of action."

When Wendel was done crying, he asked to be alone and headed for his room in the manor. A soldier would be standing on guard to watch over him, so I was assured he would be fine. I, too, asked for some time to be on my own.

It felt like a long time since I had been in my own room, and it was now a mess. The shelves and dresser drawers lay strewn across the floor, and all the jewelry was gone. The bag I'd begun preparing earlier was open, and all the clothes I'd packed were left lying on the floor nearby. The bracelet I'd placed at the bottom of the bag was also gone.

I took a deep breath and sat down on the sofa. The sensation of sitting upon something soft shocked me; it had never felt like such a luxury before. I stared up at the ceiling until I heard a knock at the door. It was Reinald. Being that I had no reason to refuse his visit, I let him in. For a brief second, his eyes went wide at the state of my room.

"There was much in the way of valuables in my room," I said. "So they clearly turned the place upside down looking for them all. And I'm sorry, but the bracelet you had so kindly mended for me was stolen."

Reinald understood that the room was not something I wanted others to see. His aides were largely kept from entering, though I was grateful for the warm drinks and sweets they brought.

"Oh, but the trade rights I received are safe in the kingdom," I added. "At least they're safe. You can rest assured that they won't be put to some nefarious use."

The trade rights being stolen would of course be troublesome, but even just using them seemed like it would come with its fair share of headaches.

"Miss Karen," said Reinald.

"Yes?"

"Have you rested?" he asked.

I had thought Reinald's purpose here involved some business he had with me, but his question was so simple that it caught me completely off guard. He took a seat, the look on his face

showing that he was clearly bothered by something.

"Of course I have," I said. "Your people provided me with a tent for just that reason."

"Be that as it may, since the moment I saw you this morning, you haven't taken a single break. At least, as far as I'm aware."

I hadn't tried to do anything out of the ordinary, and yet I felt strangely as though I were being scolded.

"Nika kept an eye on things," Reinald said. "She tells me that you visited the survivors at their camp, then hurried to say goodbye to your family. It's all but a certainty that you did not get much rest last night."

"Well, *someone's* well informed…"

"My officers asked me to ensure you get some rest. You'll be no good to anyone if you burn out."

My unceasing movement had apparently been a source of concern. I apologized, but Reinald could tell that my heart wasn't in it.

"Look, I know that I might be causing Elena and Sofie some trouble, but if I don't keep moving, then all of it is going to catch up with me… Please, will you just let me have my way for the time being?"

"What good would that do if it only resulted in you collapsing?"

"Yes, there's that, but… I have to get everything sorted and organized in time for when I meet with the Conrad aides in the royal capital, not to mention my brother."

"I am not telling you to stop any of that," said Reinald. "I'm telling you that my officers ask that you *rest*."

He looked troubled in a way that was unusual for him, and that only served to trouble *me* too. And the truth of the matter was that all of the exhaustion I'd felt this morning seemed like it had vanished. I was strangely awake and alert, to the extent that I didn't think I'd be able to sleep even if I were to lie down. More to the point, I felt my best when I was moving. I tried to tell Reinald as such, but he couldn't seem to accept my reasoning.

"Have you cried?" he asked.

"Have I…what?"

"Have you cried? It is my understanding that the Conrad family meant a great deal to you. That was how it appeared…"

*What an odd question. Of course they were dear to me. They were my family.*

“I gather that your answer is no,” said Reinald.

“Ah, you mean tears. Regretfully, er… I was at a complete and utter loss when it all started, and little by little those feelings just crept away from me, I suppose.”

“It’s important to give them space. To let them out.”

My feelings, however, had gone numb. Even when I had held Wendel in my arms, I had been unusually calm. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t troubled by it, but I had decided that I could just cry my heart out when everything was well and truly under control.

Reinald, for his part, looked exasperated. I offered a wry grin in reply.

“If *you’re* exasperated by it all, imagine how *I* feel.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“But your face speaks *for* you, is what I’m saying.”

It’s important to understand that Reinald was surprisingly easy to read. And he looked so taken aback by my comment that I had to laugh. He didn’t seem to like that very much, and he looked bothered again.

“Will you tell me about the margrave?” he asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“The margrave. If not him, then his family is fine. I would like you to tell me about them.”

He was curious, but what in the world did he want to know?

“Do you have an interest in the margrave?” I asked.

“No. I’ve already told you what I thought of him. He’s of little interest to me.”

“In which case, why?”

“Because I want to hear about him from *you*.”

He crossed one leg over the other and sat up straight, his fingers interlaced over his knees. It was inscrutable, but I got the sense that even if I tried to drive him away he wasn’t going to leave. It was quite bold of him to sit so calmly in a woman’s room, the whole place a shambles, intent to persistently linger.

“You may want to hear, but…I don’t know what to talk about.”

“Anything will do. Perhaps what you talked about over breakfast or dinner, or even just any memories that have left a strong impression on you.”

*A strong impression…*

There was but one memory I could think of that fit the bill.

“Like, say…when I asked him for instruction?”

“Instruction?”

“We chatted about nothing in particular, and he told me about things not recorded in textbooks, and…well, anything and everything, really. Since birth, I’ve never left Falkrum’s borders, and the margrave taught me all sorts of things about the nations outside of it… Naturally, he didn’t leave Conrad out. He taught me about governing and overseeing the domain, so that I’d be able to make do wherever I went. Thanks to him, my math improved considerably.”

Reinald’s eyebrow twitched, and I realized I’d said too much. It wasn’t very nice to imply that the margrave taught me on the assumption that I was going to leave. I could have attempted an excuse, but anything I said would have felt forced. Fortunately for me, Reinald didn’t say a word; he let the moment pass as though it had never happened.

*What else is there to say…? Doctor Emma teaching me medicine? Then again, my knowledge of that is haphazard to say the least; I’ve nothing on Wendel.*

“Once, when the margrave was amenable to it, he talked about the war, and suddenly Doctor Emma—that is to say, his other wife—suddenly burst in looking practically demonic. She flew into a right rage, all ‘What do you think you’re doing telling her about *that*?’ I can only assume that it was the head maid, Mrs. Henrik, who informed her of what was going on.”

*Henrik… Mrs. Henrik…*

*She’s gone too.*

They’d found her body in the forest, minus her head. I identified her clothes myself; there was no mistaking them. Her head still had yet to be found. The guard who had been a decoy along with Mrs. Henrik was found by her side, still alive but missing an arm. Like Whateley, he hovered somewhere on the precipice between life and death.

“Sounds like you enjoyed it,” commented Reinald.

“Yes, it was so much fun. I’m very interested in stories of the past, you see. History. And one day we slipped past the servants and secretly entered the manor study.”

When I thought about it, we were the very portrait of a scheming granddaughter and grandfather, up to no good. Even Whateley was in on it, conspiring with us to make it happen.

*But would Reinald even find such ordinary tales interesting?*

“He taught me things I…I never would have learned in the capital,” I said. “He was…strict, but he and…the others…they

always…”

As I spoke, it struck me: the words weren’t coming particularly easy anymore. I felt like there was something in my throat. There was so much to talk about, so many wonderful little episodes that I couldn’t keep count of them. There was the time Sven stole some of his favorite ham and shared it with Nico and I, the three of us eating in secret. When the crime came to light, we pushed the blame on him alone and fled. It was such a silly little story.

*But I suppose Reinald wouldn’t really know what to do with it…*

I felt a trembling in my throat. Instinctively I put a hand to my mouth only to find that my hand was trembling too.

“The… They… They tau… They taught me…” I stammered.

My eyes grew hot, tears falling in droplets onto my skirt. I was with company; if I was going to cry, I at least wanted to do it when I was alone, but the dam of emotions in my heart had ruptured completely. I looked down at the floor, intent to at least hide my face. My shoulders shook. I couldn’t control the sobs from escaping my lips.

Reinald took a seat by my side and gently rested my head on his shoulder.

“I know it would have been better were it your brother instead, but I hope you can make do with me for now.”

*Ah…now I get it.*

My head had been so muddled until now, but the realization came like sunshine through the clouds. It had been Reinald’s intent, right from the very start, to make me cry like this. I couldn’t believe it. I’d done so well until this point, and now it felt like all my efforts had been in vain.

I wanted to give the man a piece of my mind, but the warmth of another person was something I had yearned for, and I could not bring myself to pull away from Reinald’s embrace. Mrs. Henrik had promised that she would not let us die, and she too should have felt just as warm. Alas, we would never meet again. The sorrow of it gripped me. To think that we had to part in the way that we had; it was all too much. My sobbing grew worse, and I could not even put a word together.

“As I have said before, I’ve no interest in seeing you humiliated,” said Reinald.

I didn’t even have it in me to reply. I could only cling to him. I felt as though my only option was to hold fast to the kindness that had been presented to me. Such was my state that I was not

even aware when my own consciousness left me. All I remembered was that I had cried and wailed and shrieked like a small, unsightly child. I seemed to vaguely recall someone gently patting my head as I slept.

I had never cried so much in my life, and the exhaustion that swooped in after it came quickly. I must have felt comfortable enough to allow myself enough relief to rest, though it seemed that once I had fallen asleep I was moved to a bed.

It was Elena who came to wake me. I let out a single, relieved breath at being somewhere I knew as safe, but when I once again took in the state of my room, I was reminded that the attack on Conrad was no mere dream.

I had woken just before we were set to take our leave. Elena was apologetic, but I thanked her and began repacking my bag. The fact that she'd gone out of her way to prepare me a damp towel let me know she was aware I had bawled my eyes out. Still, she made no comment about it and instead went on talking the way she always did. My eyes felt heavy, but I at least had the wherewithal to know that this was a kindness on her part.

"Please make sure you pack everything you need," she said. "Once we leave, thieves may well look to loot the place. We'll have guards stationed around the domain, but there are bound to be gaps in security..."

"I don't have that much to take anyway," I said.

Which was to say that I intended to take keepsakes for lost family members and Whateley's things. And while I was hesitant to go through a man's things, with Whateley still not conscious, there wasn't really anything else to do. Wendel must have thought the same, for when I arrived at the servant's quarters he was there going over the desks and shelves with Haring, helping him to pack.

But even the usually decisive Wendel had more than a few things he could not bear to part with when it was time to finally take our leave. He had gathered Doctor Emma's handwritten booklets from her workshop and clutched them to his chest, his eyes puffy from all the crying as he closed them.

"Leaving father's books," he said. "I hate it."

In the margrave's study was a bookshelf packed full. Wendel had taken those which he knew to be rare, but in truth *all* the books were of value. I cleared away some of my own things to allow us to carry more books, but we couldn't possibly take them

all when we also had to bring the Conrad family's accounting books and important documentation. And while I'm aware this is an awful thing to say, in this sense we were lucky that the thieves were only after money and similar valuables; the bandits had taken anything gold, silver, and jeweled, but had paid no attention to the manor's books.

In the end, with all the preparations and moving to and fro, it wasn't until late in the evening that we finally departed from Conrad. Still, none complained about the holdup; Reinald's people had been late to start the burial process anyway, and it gave the residents time to pack their own things when they finally found the energy. Everyone helped out whoever was in need, and finally we managed to load our things and board a carriage, at which point I let out a sigh.

"In the end, we couldn't bring everything," said Wendel.

"But at least we have what's important with us," I said. "We'll make sure to come back for everything else later, I promise."

"Yes, I know, it's just… Blacky…"

Wendel was disheartened, his face one of gloom. While he'd been picking out what to bring on the journey, he'd also been looking for the cat he took care of. He still hadn't given up on Blacky, claiming that the cat was very clever, but our schedule meant there was no time to do a dedicated search. Wendel cried as we put Conrad behind us, and right up until the end he was loath to leave; it was, after all, a place full of memories of his family.

When we explained to the survivors that we would have to leave Conrad, many could not hide their despair. Nonetheless, they were quick to assent to the decision; their homes had been destroyed, and they had seen their friends and family die before their eyes. All that had once protected them—the margrave, the guards, their homes, the domain wall—was gone. Perhaps taking part in the burials of their loved ones helped to quicken their decisions. Some would go on to live in the capital; others were set to meet with relatives on our way.

It had been but one day since the fall of Conrad. I had intended to continue checking on all of our residents over several visits, but in fact those who remained were filled with a sturdy will to go on; I wondered if it were simply the nature of the world they lived in, or the education the margrave had provided them all.

“We must ensure that all the residents are provided with some money to ensure they can provide for themselves for the immediate future.”

This was a decision I had made on my own. In this world, there was no such thing as insurance to cover one who had lost their home. Usually, one could not rely on travel expenses either, but I felt certain that the margrave himself would have made exactly the same decision. I would not be able to sleep at night if I left all of Conrad’s survivors to simply fend for themselves. There was also the dim hope that, should Conrad once again be restored, we might yet rely on those who had once called the place home. In truth, a part of me simply wanted to leave them with a good impression so that they might one day return.

And yet, I had no confidence in my actions.

I longed for the chance to confer with Whateley, but he was still in his coma, asleep in a carriage with Wendel and Ben watching over him.

And with that, let me touch on the topic of Ben for a moment.

In the end, none of the gardener’s family survived. His other relatives were also far from well-off, and Ben spoke as if going to them for help would only further burden them all. For that reason, we took it upon ourselves to look after him. He had faithfully served Conrad for many long years, and it felt as if shunning him would only result in some kind of divine punishment.

Though we had no real idea what fate awaited Conrad in the future, at the very least, the manor in the capital could do with another set of helping hands. The fact that Wendel was fond of the elderly gardener made it all the easier. The survivors of the tragedy were the hope of the Conrad family, and so it was imperative that they find a way to move on and live their lives. I shared this with Elena on our second night after departing Conrad. She responded with an awkward, wry grin.

“Did I say something strange?” I asked.

“Not strange, no. It’s just…you don’t consider yourself among the hope you speak of…”

We had been warming ourselves by the campfire and speaking of nothing in particular. Wendel didn’t want to leave Whateley’s side, and Ben was exhausted and fast asleep. Elena had found some time among her duties to check up on us, and she’d brought some medicine and food with her. She also gave

me a detailed report of how the residents behind us were doing, for which I was grateful.

*Hope.*

I had not realized that I had left myself out until Elena brought it up.

"All I did was run," I said. "The work of the others saw me freed; I was lucky to survive. Even now, I still feel powerless, like a leaf in a storm. The people trust Wendel and Whateley far more than they do me. They'll do what's right for Conrad."

"I really don't think you should think that way, but…look, only a few days have passed, so we still don't know. But even then, even just surviving…even just that is a good thing."

"Yes, I understand what you're trying to say. It's not like I wanted to die."

"And please don't forget that there are people around you who are glad you're still here. Your passing would have left me so sad. And I don't even know if I should tell Ern about it all."

"Ern…she'd be furious."

"You can bet on it. And when that girl gets mad, it's *bad*. So you can't go do anything that'll dampen the spirits of those around you."

Putting aside how smoky the campfire was, I was entranced by the wavering flicker of its flames.

"By the way, Karen," said Elena. "What are you going to do about that young guard? I heard that his sentencing has been delayed."

"Oh…him. Yes, I'm still at a bit of a loss when it comes to that."

"If you're going to execute him, then it's best to do it soon. We could do it for you in an instant; you need only say the word."

I chuckled wryly.

"If it comes to that, I'll let you know."

While my mind was filled with an assortment of worries, this one in particular was especially troubling. It was the matter of the young guard who was with us until the end, who had screamed out Wendel's location to our pursuers only to be summarily captured by Elena and her fellow soldiers. He'd fled because he honestly feared for his life and was now essentially under arrest, traveling separately from the rest of us. Ordinarily, one would be quickly executed for such an act against their own lord, and yet I had delayed the decision.

One part of it was a hesitation brought on by my own soft,

sympathetic nature. The young guard had seen all of his comrades die one after the other. He was trapped. It felt like there was nowhere to run, no hope of a rescue. He feared what felt like an inevitable death, and he could think of little else but running; I knew these feelings all too well.

And while I could say all of this because we had been rescued in the end, the truth of the matter was that I simply did not want to see another Conrad resident dead. If he were not repentant for his actions, then perhaps even in my hesitation I might have been able to order his execution, but I *had* met him since our escape, and I could feel his regret for his actions. He did not beg for his own life and merely dropped his head low, stating that he would accept whatever decision was made.

The other part of it was simply that another resident among us prayed for his survival. That person was Hil, the guard who had run off with Mrs. Henrik and lost his arm. He was adamant that the young guard's errors were his responsibility, and he begged that we give him a second chance. Hil even went as far as saying that he would accept being executed in the young man's place.

It was an easy thing to simply call a crime a crime. *"Kill him"* were easy words to utter. But I did not think it right to use such words flippantly. As such, I was hesitant.

*What would the margrave have done in my position?*

I had never before had to consider the weight of such a decision. The fate of a person's entire life, it turned out, was a very heavy burden to bear.

I did not have an answer yet; I would need more time to think.

"You've been coughing since yesterday," commented Elena. "Are you feeling okay?"

Her statement seemed to remind my body of my health, and I coughed.

"I'm not well, no," I admitted. "I spent most of today asleep, as you know."

Since our escape from the manor, I'd been running around in the cold, wet weather. Traveling in such a large group was also stressful, and I'd broken out in a mild fever. I accepted that my own failing health was something beyond my control, but Wendel was starting to fall ill as well. I felt it was only a matter of time before he'd be bedridden.

People were kind and considerate, but as the days passed, the

real toll of having lost our homes began to echo through our minds and bodies. This was not a surprise, and it was clear to me that we'd been running on pure adrenaline that first day.

"In my case, I still have a home to return to in the capital," I said. "When I see my family again, I'll make sure to properly rest and relax."

I was downhearted, yes, but I had my emotions in order now, and talking to Elena in this way was something I had the energy for. It was Reinald who had allowed me the space to recover as such, and I was grateful to him—though I hadn't seen him since. Elena, too, seemed to know that I wasn't pushing myself too hard at present, so she was satisfied.

"When it really feels like it's getting to be too much, tell me, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"Please, I mean it. His Excellency seems unusually saddened by it all, so even if we take my own personal feelings out of the equation, I want you to be well."

For a moment, my heart raced. It was as though Elena had read in my face that I'd been thinking about Reinald. Which, of course, was impossible.

"Unusually, you say?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, hmm...? Well, that's just what Haring and I have sensed. I mean, when His Excellency is around you, Karen, he's a little easier to read. It's like you two click."

"But he's always been easy to understand, hasn't he?"

All I had to do was look. His face, his eyes, his gestures; Reinald was a surprisingly open book to me. Elena didn't agree.

"His Excellency holds fast to a set of principles, which I suppose makes things simpler; in any case it's my job to serve, so I don't really worry about it. Still, he's second only to Abelein in terms of inscrutability."

"In Moritz's case, I totally get it..."

But was Reinald *really* so hard to read? He had a wealth of emotions in his person. In Moritz's case, I agreed with Elena wholeheartedly. The man was Elena's superior, but being that he wasn't present we talked about him to our hearts' content.

"Abelein doesn't see eye to eye with Cap and Haring *at all*... And you've heard for yourself how cold he is when he speaks," said Elena.

"That I have."

“He’s like that with *everyone*. That has earned him a lot of enemies, but nobody can say anything because he’s a man who gets the job done.”

“Good at clerical work? That kind of thing?”

“If that was it, we’d all feel more comfortable about raising our voices. But the guy’s got a sharp set of eyes. He can see where we’re lacking in battle, and he’s quick to act on it. He had us move swiftly and in position in the blink of an eye.”

Moritz was from a good family, and his personality wasn’t getting in the way of his work; rather, it was what put him in such a powerful position. Elena called him “cold,” but I wasn’t particularly mad at him for his attitude. I had presented myself as the margrave’s representative, and so he had simply expected me to act accordingly, even if it *did* rub me the wrong way.

“In any case, what exactly are Reinald’s guiding principles?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, you’ll see for yourself in time, so don’t worry about it. More importantly, is it okay if we talk a little longer? I’m happy to leave if you’re starting to feel sick…”

“I overslept during the day, and I’d be glad for the company.”

I felt like Elena had dodged the question I asked, but I didn’t want to hound her about it.

“Elena, you’ve talked to all of Conrad’s residents, yes? Surely some of them have told you something about the bandits that attacked? I’ve heard rumors that a few of the carriages are holding captured prisoners.”

“Prisoners?” repeated Elena, crossing her arms and tilting her head. “First I’ve heard of it. When we encountered them in Conrad, they fought with such ferocity we had no choice but to simply cut them down. Are you sure you didn’t hear wrong?”

“No. Somebody said that they refused to talk…”

“I’d have told you right away if we captured anybody. Surely you must have misheard things. So please, don’t let it get to you.”

I had asked about something Ben told me. Something he’d overheard completely by accident. Elena brushed it off. I got the feeling that she was withholding something, but it was probably because I was sick and exhausted from all the runaround. Still, it wouldn’t do me any good to push her about it. I had it in mind to go directly to Reinald or Moritz, but even if I requested a meeting, they were so busy I was certain that they’d turn me

down in a heartbeat. And, as I mentioned earlier, I was in bad shape; I spent most of my time in bed anyway.

“Oh, anyway, about the residents…” Elena began.

All of a sudden, the topic shifted to the residents and then whatever it was that Elena was recently grumbling about. I mostly let her whining go straight in one ear and out the other, but I thought it was good for her to get things off her chest.

A day later, there was a change in our otherwise monotonous journey. Namely, Wendel came down with a high fever. While I was taking care of him, Whateley finally regained consciousness. He was very hazy at first, but I kept talking to him and his gaze began to focus.

“Thanks to your help, Wendel is safe,” I said. “He’s asleep next to you.”

He looked relieved as he slipped back into slumber, and from then he recovered steadily. As the royal capital drew nearer, he was able to speak. I had intended to wait before informing him of the fates of the margrave and Mrs. Henrik, but Whateley was far too sharp for that.

“I had mostly come to terms with what might become of the margrave,” he muttered. “And yes, Liz too…”

He knew they were gone the moment he realized they were nowhere nearby. He covered his eyes with an arm and gritted his teeth. Though he’d never said as much to me aloud, I knew that there existed a special bond between Whateley and Mrs. Henrik. I did not know if it was friendship or love, but I knew that Mrs. Henrik was a person for whom he cared deeply.

“She made herself a decoy to buy time for Wendel and me to escape,” I said. “Neither Wendel nor I would be here if not for her actions.”

“And I’m sure that all she wanted was to see you two to safety,” said Whateley.

All the same, the truth was not an easy thing for Whateley to bear. The loss of all the servants in the kitchen, in particular, hit him very hard.

“They were the ones with futures still ahead of them,” he said. “Why is that an old man like me is the one who survived…?”

He touched the very edges of endless despair, but what brought him back was the existence of the young boy by his side, sweating through his fever. He clasped the old steward’s hand tight and scolded him.

“No, I can’t bear to lose you too,” said Wendel, his voice weak. “So please, don’t say such a thing.”

The boy’s tears were perhaps the very medicine Whateley needed most. He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer to his lord and all the residents who had been lost, then asked for food and water so that he might start regaining strength. It was the start of his path to a full recovery. The medicine that Elena brought for him, courtesy of Reinald, also seemed to work a treat.

“Now that he’s recovered to this point, he’s on his way,” said Elena. “When we arrive in the capital, I’ll introduce you to a healer. By that time, there’ll be no need to worry as to whether or not he can physically handle it.”

“There aren’t any ordinary mages in Falkrum, are there?” I said. “Oh, the Institute of Magic?”

“No, no, here in Falkrum you can do all the preparations and be waiting your whole life for one to come. We have someone; they’re not as skilled as Six, but they’re a good person. Speaking of which, how is your shoulder?”

“The painkillers have kicked in, so I feel fine,” I replied. “Though I may need to keep taking them for a little while.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t take them at all, honestly; depending on the person, they can be *very* addictive.”

When you think of the constant travel and the rocking of the carriage, you can imagine how much strain this put on the injured, like myself and Whateley. For that reason, Reinald’s forces had shared some of their military-grade painkillers with us. I could understand Elena’s worry and the sigh that came with it; after all, I knew the reason for her concern.

Basically, the herbs central to the medication were, at their most basic form, drugs. This was something I had learned through my studies with Doctor Emma. They say that medicine and poison are two sides of the same coin, but...as a Japanese person, I felt something of an ethical dilemma; a desire to refuse them outright. But once I was taught more about the plants, I could understand how effective and fast-acting they were. Most herbalists prescribed the equivalent of what in Japan we would call *kampo*, or Chinese medicine, but the effects of such medicine came slowly. They did not erase harsh pain from the body, and it was well known that acute pain over prolonged periods could sometimes render death through shock.

Still, for the time being the painkillers were a savior of sorts. For people who needed to keep moving through injuries, their immediate effects made them near indispensable.

"You mentioned Six," I said. "Where is he at present?"

"He's traveling all over the place on a different matter," replied Elena. "Reinald is probably the only person who knows where he is."

I had learned some time ago that magic was not all-powerful. I used this opportunity to ask Elena more about magic, and I discovered that healing—which is to say, the treating of the human body—was a very difficult area within the realm of magic. In fact, the number of mages who could do so were quite limited. Magical healing, as far as I knew, sped up one's own healing functions, but at the cost of one's strength. In games and manga I was used to this being an instantaneous thing; that the reality differed here came as a surprise.

You might think it odd I was mistaken, being that I lived in a world of swords and sorcery. The truth, however, is that I wasn't all that knowledgeable when it came to magic. I did not know any mages. I knew that Ern—who was on the empire's radar—showed potential in the field of magic, but I didn't know anything about the more essential part—which is to say, I was clueless when it came to how magic was actually used. I hoped to visit the Institute of Magic in the future to fill in those gaps, however.

"Even when someone has an aptitude for magic, there are very few who can *actually* call themselves mages," said Elena. "No matter where you go, few like to make a big show of it; becoming a mage is a very difficult thing."

Light wounds could be treated quite easily, but anything more and the process suddenly became a far steeper challenge. If the caster of the healing magic made even a single misstep with regards to the rate of healing, the patient would quickly fall unconscious; Elena said this was just common sense, given that their natural healing rate was so suddenly and sharply increased.

"So if we're talking extremes, then arms and fingers can't be reattached to bodies?" I asked.

"It seems that's impossible," said Elena. "Instead, we do what's always been done; we cauterize the wound to close it. Magic can only heal the scars that remain afterward. Six says that once a limb is detached from the human body, that's the end of it."

I had been hoping all this while that something could be done

for Hil and his lost arm. He did not have anything in the way of relatives and declared that he would continue to serve Conrad. Without an arm, however, life would not be easy for the man. It was yet another thing I had to keep in mind.

From here, let me move on to the discussion I had with Whateley. The first thing I asked him about was our attackers, but alas, he knew nothing in any great detail. He shook his head sadly as he looked back over his recent memories.

"After I closed the door to the secret passage I went upstairs. At that time the servants in the kitchen were still alive. It was my plan to free them if it looked like the bandits weren't coming, but…"

Whateley's plan went like this: if enough time passed that it was likely Wendel and I escaped, then he would have the servants take the same route as us. He had wanted to save everyone, but like Ben, he had been spotted while trying to look for a hiding spot. He had no memories of anything after receiving the wound to his head. He could not comprehend how he had survived. He knew himself that he should have been killed.

At this point, Ben joined the conversation, saying that he believed it was the margrave who had saved Whateley. His reasoning for this was simple: the place where Whateley was attacked was different from the place where Ben found him.

"When I found Whateley, I almost thought he was just another corpse among all the others," said Ben. "The margrave must have hidden him among the fallen to make sure he wasn't found."

"Ben…" uttered Whateley.

"Do not cry, Whateley. He died so that you could live on; it is your duty to do so."

The margrave had left the manor, yes, but his corpse had been discovered inside of it; Ben's theory was not entirely outside the realm of possibility. I hadn't noticed it at all at the time, but apparently the number of dead bandits in the manor had increased while we'd been on the run.

"In his old age, the margrave was half the man he used to be, but he was nonetheless strong for his age, and he was still a hardened veteran. He knew his way around a blade. The fight may well have drawn more enemies. Goyo died at the margrave's side, but he knew how to fight too, and the margrave

had offered him work personally. No doubt the two of them gave it their everything to ensure that they dragged every bandit they could to the afterlife with them."

The exact truth remained unclear, but this was what Ben believed. We all hoped that his words were true, and in any case, none were left to disagree with him.

"The bandits made it clear with their shouts that no faces were to be damaged beyond recognition," Whateley told me. "They would not get their rewards if the targets could not be identified... This makes it clear that somebody had hired them."

"You mean to say that it wasn't the Latorians?"

"No, there's no doubt the Latorians were involved."

He lowered his voice and explained that it was unlikely any imperials were involved. There was no reason for the empire to go out of their way to launch an assault from the opposite direction; which is to say, through the forest from near the Latorian border. Even if they wanted to pin the blame on Latoria, it was Whateley's belief that they would have made the attack more obvious with the use of Latorian military uniforms.

"The bandits were well equipped and came in significant numbers," said Whateley. "But just like the margrave said, they were not members of the Latorian military. They were hired guns. Mercenaries."

"If they needed someone to identify the dead, does that mean the person who hired them was there during the attack?"

"It is possible. However, we simply do not have enough information to know anything further."

We discussed a number of different things on our journey, and one topic among them was the reason Mrs. Henrik's head was never found. If a person was among the bandits who could recognize the margrave, then it stood to reason that there was no need to take his head, nor Sven's and the others'. But Mrs. Henrik turned out not to be Doctor Emma... It was possible, then, that after the bandits had identified the woman as not being one of their targets, they had simply thrown her head away. I could not actually bring myself to mention this to Whateley and Wendel, however.

Regardless, we had left Conrad with Mrs. Henrik's head still missing. It was said in Falkrum that all the dead ended up in Heaven's Flower Garden, and all I could do was hope and pray that in reaching it, Mrs. Henrik might be reunited with her

daughter.

There was more I wanted to talk about, but at that point a soldier arrived, calling my name.

“A messenger from the castle has arrived,” they informed me. “Sir Reinald is asking for you.”

I followed and found myself facing officers and horses I had never seen before. I was preparing myself for the worst, but one of them looked clearly relieved to see me as they knelt down.

“You must be the Margravine of Conrad,” they said. “Thank goodness you’re safe.”

This person was the king’s messenger. They informed me that my presence was called upon to inform the king of the situation in Conrad. The entourage was here to escort me to the capital, but Reinald was noticeably hesitant.

“While I want nothing more than to answer the king’s call posthaste, Lady Karen is wounded,” Reinald said. “I’m not sure she could handle such a long ride on horseback.”

The king’s escorts had not come by carriage, which meant I was expected to go on horseback. And while it’s true I was on painkillers, my wound was deep, and my arm was still essentially useless.

“While I understand how you feel, if the news we’ve received is indeed true, then the fall of Conrad is a national incident. The king has asked to hear directly from the margravine.”

The messenger clearly wanted to move fast. I, too, had a letter I needed to pass to the king; a letter that had to be given to the man directly, from my hands to his. I made up my mind; I would have to grit my teeth and bear the pain.

“Why don’t you go on ahead, Sir Reinald?” I offered. “I will arrive later, of course, but I’ll still be right behind you.”

A full gallop over an extended period would be far too much for my body, but I was mostly sure I’d be more or less okay at a relaxed pace, or by carriage, as we were. The messenger did not accept this suggestion, however.

*Are Reinald and I expected to greet the king as a couple?*

I was about to comment with this little quip, but then it turned out that Reinald and I *were* both expected to be present for the audience with the king. Reinald thus proposed a new idea:

“Putting a wounded lady on a horse by herself is far too cruel, so allow me to take Lady Karen on my horse. It will be less strain

on her than a long journey via carriage."

It seemed he intended to get us to the capital at top speed.

The talk was wrapped up so quickly that before I even knew it I was put on Reinald's horse and we were off. It was only once I was on the horse that I realized why I'd been put with Reinald; his steed was the least exhausted among those available. There was also the fact that his posture was like a wall I could lean upon without fear of it crumbling in the slightest.

Reinald's horse was the type one expected of a general; even at a glance you could see that it was well-bred. It was a black horse with a white stripe on its face, and the very lines of its face brought to mind the word "powerful." It was muscular in a way that could only be called beautiful, and its sheen was so bright as to reflect the sun. I couldn't help wondering if one even *needed* horse riding skills for such a steed, but as soon as we were moving I realized immediately: Reinald was an *excellent* horseman. I had nothing on him.

"I'm sure you wouldn't have been very excited to ride with some messenger you've never met before," said Reinald.

Reinald looked like the very portrait of calm, but I, unfortunately, didn't find it nearly as easy to speak. The rocking of the horse had me feeling that if I wasn't careful I might bite my own tongue. And while I *was* on painkillers, the motion of the horse had brought with it the return of a heavy, throbbing pain. Reinald's initial worries had proved right. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I gritted my teeth. I knew that the painkillers had an addictive pull to them, and so I'd been giving myself as small a dose as possible; nonetheless, I regretted not having taken more.

We must have been riding for an hour or two. I couldn't even focus on the scenery, nor the city as we passed through it. In the end, I simply shut my eyes. I felt bad for the extra burden I placed on Reinald, but when he finally let me know we had arrived, it felt as though I had been released from a torture rack. Reinald was kind enough to help me down from his horse.

"You must have known that Lady Karen was in pain," said Nika, wiping the sweat from my face. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Out of respect for her will," he said bluntly.

*Do you have any idea how much this hurts?!*

...was what I wanted to scream. I also wanted nothing more

than to throw myself to the floor and do nothing. My wound had reopened, and I could feel the blood soaking into my shirt at the touch. For a moment I thought about getting changed, but I knew I couldn't let myself rest; if I gave myself even the tiniest of breaks, I would not want to move again.

The messenger entourage were shocked at how worn out and gaunt I looked, but now that they had come this far, none looked ready to stop. The castle looked different under the rays of the sun, but as the dull pain of my wounds pulsed through my body, I had only one real impression of the place.

*It takes so long to get anywhere…*

*I feel like I'm going to have to walk halfway around the world just to get to this audience with the king…!*

Nika left us as we neared the king, as only Reinald and I were allowed into the depths of the castle. In the farthest hall was none other than the king himself. By his sides were the two princes, and with them were some twenty or thirty aides. I almost felt as though I would be swallowed alive by the tension in the air.

Reinald gave me a light push in the back. I looked at him and saw only his calm, steady gaze. It helped ease the tension I felt. I took a step forward. I told myself that all I had to do was simply tell them what I had come to tell them. In hindsight, I must have looked like a right fool, or perhaps the very portrait of tragedy as I stood there in front of all those men and women, each of them playing some part in Falkrum's military.

*Now… Where to start?*

I was never very good at this kind of thing, and I felt hesitant to ask Reinald to get things started. But as these thoughts flitted through my mind, I cursed myself for my own failings.

*No, it's not about* that *at all.*

Introductions meant nothing. There was a task that needed doing, and *I* had to do it. I strode ahead of Reinald, fell to my knees, and lowered my head. Pain throbbed through my body, and the rusty stench of blood filled my nose, but this too was part of it all.

"As one entrusted with the safety of the Conrad Domain," I said, "I have failed in the task of keeping your subjects protected. My husband Kamil and his immediate heir, Sven, are both dead."

Playing the act of the suffering widow was all the easier when I actually *was* suffering terribly. Call it sly or cunning or whatever

you like; I don't care. The truth of the matter, regardless of the circumstances, was that Conrad was in ruins. It was my job to apologize for our failure and protect the honor of the Conrad name…which in turn meant defending the home that Wendel might one day return to.

"We lost a great many residents," I continued, "and it is our fault that the enemy emerged triumphant. Whatever judgment you choose to pass, there is nothing I can do to atone for what has happened. It shames me to have returned here alive, but I stand here humbly before you to carry out my duty of ensuring you receive a full report."

I did not lift my head. I could not bring myself to look upon the king's face. Were I just some girl who had lost her home, tears might have earned me forgiveness, but I had come in my role as the margrave's wife. We had been attacked. We had no available recourse.

In truth, there was so much more I wanted to say. I longed to plead the margrave's case and tell everyone that it wasn't his fault, but my instincts told me otherwise; anything else I said would only be taken as excuses.

"Conrad has fallen," I said. "And the responsibility for that falls now to me. I ask only that you are generous with those who survived…"

"How shameless of you to return here *alive*."

The voice that echoed through the room was not that of the king, but it was all the same one I knew well. There was a hint of rage in the words, spoken by First Prince David. I heard someone try to stop him, but he went on as if he had not heard a thing.

"Do you realize how contemptible it is, how *disgraceful*, for you to return here with your husband and son dead? Margravine, we were informed by messenger that the attackers invaded Conrad by the cover of night."

"Yes."

"How did they go unnoticed? Surely you understand why the Conrads were allowed to settle in such a location. You were there to be ready in the case of any threat from the Latorians. Did the old man forget that fact?!"

I was so very glad to have my hair covering my face as the prince's words were showered upon me. I shut my lips tight and told myself that I had to endure.

It was then that another person spoke up.

“David…”

“Yes, Your Majesty, please say something, by all means. This wretched wench des—”

“Silence! When did I give you permission to speak?”

I heard the prince gasp. The king had been quiet, but the low, heavy sound of his voice rumbling through the air was like lava, and its heat would set alight any who were not careful. I felt a chill race down my spine, and that was when another voice in the room chuckled.

“Brother, it is *so* like you to speak out of line,” said Prince Demyan. “Do you have any idea where you are?”

“What?!” spat David.

“Demyan, enough,” said the king, who sounded sick of both of them. “Are you a man or a gossiping child?”

“Huh? No, I…”

“Well, which is it?”

“My apologies, Your Majesty…” he uttered, his apology reluctant.

The king let out a sigh of disappointment, then called for Reinald. They then went through the report the castle had just received, confirming the details and occasionally asking me for my input. There were no discrepancies in Reinald’s report, and thus I was able to speak my own answers clearly.

“Were you able to capture any of them alive?” asked the king.

“We were up against bandits, but they were loyal to their orders. Those who knew they had lost took their own lives.”

“But you’re certain they were from Latoria?”

“They had all the physical characteristics. I must assume so.”

Reinald stated that no bandits had been taken prisoner, but something about the statement itched at me. Elena had said exactly the same, but when you pitted bandits against experienced military forces, the latter almost always won. I had been told that Reinald’s cavalry were exceptional, and I had seen with my own eyes how loyal they were to his command. Even if one posited that the bandits fought tooth and nail, how was it possible that the military were unable to capture even a single prisoner?

I had only seen two groups of bandits during the attack, but none had looked like the types willing to take their own lives. Rather, they seemed like the types who would do whatever they had to—no matter how underhanded—to cling to the life they

had. Something didn't feel right, but I was in no position to give voice to my doubts, and instead I focused on what Reinald said next.

"While we were unable to capture any of the attackers, what little information we were able to get out of them points to the potential use of poison on the Conrad residents."

I had heard nothing about this. I knew that people had died while frothing at the mouth, but I had learned nothing of the particulars. According to Reinald, the poison had been put in the bonfires, the toxic smoke of which then spread through the domain. The Conrad manor had escaped the effects thanks to it being at a slightly higher elevation and upwind. Almost everywhere at a lower elevation had been hit, however. The soldiers on lookout in the towers had all been sniped, and the remains of a great many suspicious fires were discovered throughout the domain. Reinald suspected that, based on how well organized the bandits were, they had entered Conrad before the attack as merchants or travelers, after which they had gone about their preparations.

The identities of those who had burned down the homes and destroyed the Conrad wall were unclear, but most of the particulars were lost to me. I felt a cold chill run through me at the thought of what he'd said before that; and while it was all conjecture, when I thought that perhaps I might have walked right past the people who had massacred the Conrad people, I wanted to curse myself for being so blind to it.

*But if they were staying in Conrad as merchants, then it was also possible that they were already acquainted with the margrave.*

I knew it was unwise to simply assume speculation as truth, but I tucked this possibility away in the back of my mind.

"I was able to confirm for myself that the margrave is dead," continued Reinald. "I believe he fought valiantly right until his demise. He was covered in wounds and had been impaled to the wall on swords. They likely did this in response to the pressure they felt from the man's bearing. They were scared."

A part of me hated Reinald then, for so easily speaking of matters I had no wish to remember. I was only vaguely aware of my tightly clenched fists and my fingernails digging into my palm.

"As you can see, the margravine also bears wounds; wounds she bore at the potential cost of her own life. She fought to

protect the margrave's last remaining son, to whom the man left everything."

"I see."

Reinald's report ended with the information regarding his military support. When the king had heard everything, he spoke.

"Latoria has remained quiet for a great many years, but now they have acted in a way that defies all of our expectations. It is the fault of Conrad, who was entrusted with those distant lands, that the attack could succeed, and that no adequate defense could be given."

"Well then..." started Prince David smugly, but his comment was promptly spoken over.

"However, Kamil has atoned for such sins with both his valor and his life. To force his defenseless wife and his child to bear such crimes would be an act unjustified for a loyal retainer. My ancestors would not think well of such cruelty."

With each word, the king's manner grew softer, and perhaps it was just my imagination, but I felt the weight of pity in his tone of voice.

"Margravine," he continued, "you are to rest and recover from your wounds. On my name as king, I assure you that the honor of Conrad shall be upheld."

And at that, I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. The flush of respite must have made me weak on my feet, as a lady came running to support me. She was a high-ranking military official, and as she walked me from the audience with the king, she whispered to me.

"Please do not be disheartened by the words of the prince," she said. "The majority of us do not believe that Conrad was at fault. The king, too, likely sides with us."

"Thank you," I uttered.

It was likely she'd come to offer physical support so as to share this message. We followed Reinald outside, and the official was just about to call a doctor when I stopped her.

"Could you please ask His Majesty if I might have a little of his time? I only need a moment."

"The king? But he has a meeting with the generals..."

"It won't take long. Tell him that I have something for him, from my husband. If he cannot come out to see me, then I shall return again soon..."

This was yet another duty that I needed to see through. In the

chaos of our escape, I had stuffed the margrave's letter into my skirt pocket and completely forgotten about it. It was important, however, and it had to be delivered. The official must have seen the desperation in my eyes, because she returned to the audience hall with a skeptical look.

"I have some business to see to, so please feel free to leave, Sir Reinald," I said, then paused for a moment to think. "Oh, but you have to meet with the other generals. Is it okay for you to just leave like this?"

"I'm out here by the king's order," he replied. "I must meet with my aides and organize my forces."

Before I could mention that he, too, was in fact a general, Reinald smiled.

"All they'll discuss in there is what's convenient for them," he said with a shrug. "I can speak more freely away from such places."

Perhaps he felt out of place among such people.

*I feel like I can relate to that.*

Reinald intended to see me home, and while I was grateful for how dutiful he was, I had some dissatisfactions to air.

"Sir Reinald," I said, "there's something I want to ask you. Did you run me all the way here without rest because you knew the situation I was in?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say."

"I'm asking if you did what you did intentionally so that the state I was in would draw sympathy from those around us."

"Unthinkable. I did only what you asked."

*You totally did it on purpose. You absolutely, definitely did.*

"While it shames me to admit it," I said, "my mind was entirely blank until we were actually standing before the king."

"All the more impressive, then, that you handled yourself as you did as the circumstances dawned on you."

"I really *was* very flustered," I said.

"But you managed to pull words of kindness from the king, which is good. You did not make any excuses. You spoke only the truth. I was relieved that I did not need to step into the matter myself."

Which was to say, he was also prepared to back me up if such a situation arose. Though that said, if he'd had a plan like that, I would have appreciated him mentioning it to me beforehand.

“Getting mad is only going to open your wound further. I wouldn’t recommend it,” said Reinald.

“Well, whose fault was it that it opened in the first place?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

I wasn’t done with Reinald yet, but I shut my mouth because the official from earlier returned.

“Margravine,” she said. “The king will see you, but he doesn’t have much time. Please hurry.”

Reinald watched us go as the official led me to a room with a very impressively wide window. The king sat on a sofa but stood from it the moment the door was closed and the two of us were alone.

“My apologies for earlier,” he said.

“No, I… I am grateful for your generosity.”

“Your choice of words tells me you understand. Good. But I was told you have something for me from Kamil.”

“Yes, I’m aware you don’t have much time…”

I brought out the crumpled envelope.

“I am so very sorry for the state it’s in. I was so focused on getting to safety that it’s a miracle I still have it.”

“No, I would have been pleased just to know that some of you survived. But…what is this letter?”

“The margrave intended to stay in Conrad, though he wanted for some of us to take refuge in the safety of the capital. He entrusted me with this letter as we were getting prepared to leave. It is a reply, addressed to you, Your Majesty.”

The king’s breath caught in his throat.

“He also requested that I bring you some wine of a vintage that matched the birthday of his heir, Sven, but…alas…”

As the memories flooded back, the words refused to come. The king bit his lip as he took the letter from my hands. He did not bother to hide the rushed manner with which he opened it. His eyes went wide as his eyes raced from word to word, and just like that his lofty regality from earlier disappeared. I did not know what the margrave had written, but the king suddenly turned away from me.

“Your Majesty,” I said. “My husband…what words did he leave you with?”

“He asked that…should the worst come to pass…I look after you and the others.”

That was all he would say. The rest of the letter remained

blank, and it was not my place to ask for more.

“My apologies, but…please give me some time alone,” uttered the king.

His head drooped between his shoulders. His shoulders trembled.

“I thank you,” he said, “for bringing me this letter…from my brother…”

I had lost a savior of sorts, but I knew nothing of the weight of suffering that the king carried as he bore the pain of losing a friend he had known for decades; a friend so close that he was no different from a brother.

These were the thoughts that crossed my mind as I left the room, shutting the door closed behind me.

# 4: A Boy’s Resolve

Reinald was leaning against a pillar, and the corners of his mouth rose when he noticed me. There was something frivolous about it, though perhaps it was just my imagination.

“Have you seen to your business?” he asked.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” I replied.

“Don’t be silly. You’re injured. I wouldn’t be able to look my aides or your family in the eye if I didn’t ensure you were taken care of.”

“Well, yes, I suppose there’s that…”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page. Do you need any help walking?”

“I think I’ll be fine. Though, when I think about it, you’re the reason the wound reopened in the first place.”

“Oh? Would you have preferred me to go more slowly?”

“Would you please knock it off with that already? It’s a *wound*. It still *hurts*. Why do you insist on toying with me?”

With home just around the corner, the pain flared up again with a vengeance. It was the worst. Could Reinald not see the sweat beading on my brow? Eventually he must have, because he passed me a handkerchief. I wiped away the sweat, but it didn’t make me feel any better.

“The official from earlier said she would call for a doctor,” Reinald said. “One will likely arrive soon.”

“I’d much prefer to go home,” I replied.

While I appreciated the woman’s kindness, I wanted nothing more than to leave the castle as soon as possible. When I told Reinald that I wanted to rest elsewhere, preferably wherever Wendel and Whateley were going to arrive, he draped his jacket over my shoulders.

“Ouch!” I squealed.

“If you want to go home, you’ll grit your teeth. Nobody’s going to simply let you do what you want while you’re walking around in your state.”

It was true; I couldn’t seem to keep straight. I did my utmost to stay out of sight, but it was the castle; people were coming and going, and Reinald and I stood out. When the official called

out for me I was suddenly flustered, but Reinald turned her down for me.

"As I was saying earlier, before I met with the king, the next time you have something planned, I do hope you'll at least give me a heads-up," I said.

"I'll do my utmost to try and remember."

*Well, an answer like that doesn't inspire much confidence, does it?*

Still, something was off about him. We were still a ways from the castle doors, and the whole situation was a bother, but he seemed in good spirits.

"Well, *someone* looks happy," I said. "Do you really find the injured so funny?"

"It is not my intent to toy with you, but…yes. Though 'funny' is not quite the right term, the truth is I find this all quite strange."

"Strange, you say?"

"Miss Karen, you are always pushing beyond your limits, and I find that intriguing. When I see you and Sir Arno together, I can't help thinking that perhaps that's how siblings are supposed to be; caring for one another."

"Siblings… Do you perhaps speak of Marquis Rodenwald?"

"Actually, it *does* look like you need my help. Can't have someone so hurt doing all the work themselves."

Reinald ended up acting as a kind of walking stick for me. I felt bad for how many times people had helped me to stay upright and keep walking, but honestly I was just relieved for how much easier it made things.

"I don't do any of that because I want to," I retorted.

"My apologies if I hurt your feelings."

"This isn't the first time I've thought this, but you're not much for kindness, are you, Sir Reinald?"

"I get told that a lot. More importantly, you look to have a fever. When did that start?"

"Who knows? It's been a while. I can scarcely remember."

The fever was a mix of exhaustion and the sudden release of stress and tension. Why was he even bothering to mention it now? I'd had a mild fever for quite some time now.

"Perhaps you've wanted a younger sibling in the past?" I asked. "I hear that a lot from younger brothers."

"'Wanted' isn't quite it, no…"

It really *was* easier to walk with support. In any case, I'd asked my question rather flippantly, but in hindsight it had lacked

subtlety. Reinald didn't seem to pay it any mind.

"Actually, I already *have* a younger sister," he said. "It's just that we don't really get along."

"Huh?"

I was so surprised that my voice pitched high. Reinald flashed a smile.

"Oh, she's not like the kind of sister you're likely imagining," he said. "We have the same father, but we were raised in completely different environments. We're practically strangers. The family is one rife with blood spilled during battles for succession, so I don't even really think of us as siblings. I imagine she thinks likewise."

That was why he spoke of the relationship between the Kirsten siblings as if it were so distant. And at the mention of the word "father," I felt my head cool somewhat.

"You're not talking about the Rodenwalds, are you?"

"Indeed. You know who, then."

"I do, but I'm blank on the particulars."

"Regardless, it's not important. You need not worry yourself with my younger sister. I've very little of worth to say about her."

*I wonder what sort of person she is, though...?*

I had never actually heard exactly who Reinald's father was. Based on the circumstances, I had some inclinations, but they were anything but conclusive. Nevertheless, it was not a subject I wanted to delve into; I wanted to avoid anything too serious.

"You've always called me Karen, Sir Reinald," I said.

It had always struck me as odd. In front of people he referred to me as margravine, but in conversation he addressed me as Miss Karen. It wasn't like I had anything against it, and while I'd mostly shrugged it off, it had always itched at me. At my statement, Reinald gave a sort of shrugging nod.

"It's nothing particularly complicated," he said, "It's simply..."

*Simply what?*

I didn't get a chance to ask my question because a woman's scream filled the air. She was screaming my name and, more to the point, it was a voice I recognized. I turned and saw my sister running toward me, on the verge of tears. Behind her were Arno and Achim.

"Karen, oh my goodness...!"

Based on the looks on all their faces, my family were aware of what had happened to Conrad. I was brought into a soft, gentle

embrace, and then Gerda's features warped as tears flooded from her eyes. How many years had it been since I'd seen her cry like this? Arno, however, wore a decidedly stern expression.

"Sir Reinald," he said. "Why in the world is my sister in such a state?" he asked.

"That is a long story. More importantly, her wound has reopened. Please take her home immediately; she has refused to stay for treatment here."

"Wound? In that case, we've no time to waste!"

Achim lifted me into his arms, my brother and sister by his side. Finally, I felt like it was okay to sleep, and my eyelids grew heavy. My brother insisted on having me treated, but as my eyelids closed, completely of their own accord, I gently shook my head.

"I've already been treated," I said. "Please, brother, take me home."

Today I had given it my best. I had given it my everything. And while it still wasn't enough, I felt I had at least earned the right to sleep in the comfort of my own home. I wanted so desperately to meet Wendel and Whateley upon their arrival, but I did not think I could last any longer. Reinald would ensure everyone got to where they needed, so surely I could rest my eyes for a short spell.

"I'm sorry, but I'm just...going to...nap..."

And then the sandman had me, so to speak. When I next opened my eyes, I saw Emil sleeping by my side. Arno was on the other side of me, slumped in a chair and drooling, with a most stupid look on his face. I felt a flash of exasperation.

*You'll catch a cold like that, you idiot.*

The cloth that had been placed on my head fell when I sat up. It was damp. I remembered then that I must have fainted. It turned out I'd been asleep for a whole two days, during which time Wendel and Whateley had arrived in the capital. The two were, like me, staying in Saburova manor.

"And what of the Conrad residence?" I asked.

"The steward arranged for a number of Conrad's surviving residents to use its rooms," replied Achim. "It's an unprecedented measure, to be sure, but your steward was certain that the margrave would have done exactly the same. They don't have enough staff, however, and so you and Wendel are here."

Those who intended to continue working in Conrad were leading the charge, so to speak. Whateley was working together with Arno, and he had taken up the pen in place of the usual teapot. He'd made a detailed report while I was asleep and left it for my perusal upon waking.

In just two days, he'd prepared far more than I ever could have imagined. The man was still bedridden, and yet his clerical abilities had left Arno astonished. Achim peeled an apple for me as he informed me that I was the last to recover and the last to wake.

"Knowing you, you gritted your teeth and insisted on pushing through it all. Keep all of that tension locked up inside and you're bound to break. Would you please learn the meaning of the word moderation?"

Achim was among those who had objected to my returning to Conrad in the first place. I'd steeled myself for a harsh scolding, but all he could muster was a tired smile.

"You can bet I had a whole plethora of things I wanted to say, but none of it mattered the moment I saw that you were just…safe," he said. "I'm simply glad to see you alive, here in front of me."

"You were worried, weren't you? I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You gave it your all."

"I'll have to thank Arno too."

"Conrad and Kirsten are relatives. Even before the king's order, Arno was rushing around trying to see to things himself."

Though Wendel had recovered physically, the quiet and calm of his environment had only further poked at the wounds in his heart. He remained in his room with his family's keepsakes, sunken into a depression. Achim and Emil were checking on him often.

Gerda was banned from entering my room while I was recovering from my injuries and feverish cold, so when she did finally see me, I'd lost a significant amount of weight.

"Oh, dear, you *must* eat something," she said. "Excuse me! Somebody prepare Karen some food!"

"I *am* eating…" I muttered.

"She can't handle meat at the moment, so anything other than that," said Emil.

"I don't need you to tell me what I can clearly see for myself!"

Gerda shrieked whenever she looked at me. I must have

looked awful, given how quickly she had food brought out. I felt bad for Gerda, but her noisy tantrum was a salvation of sorts; from that day forth, my room always contained fruits and snacks. The kindness of my siblings was a salve for both my body and mind.

Still, it would be some time before I could really open up about the fall of Conrad. When I met with Whateley, we shared grim smiles.

"I'm repeating myself, but I'm so glad you're still alive," I said.

"I should be thanking you," he replied. "You kept Master Wendel safe. I have nothing but gratitude for you."

There were volumes of emotion in that exchange that I did not have words for. In one sense, I was glad to have someone with whom I could share my deep sorrow. However, neither of us were in a position where we could simply let ourselves wallow in the emotion. We thus dove into the details of the situation and the paperwork.

"Of the remaining residents, only a small few have said that they want to stay in Conrad," I said. "The majority chose to leave with financial support. We've opened the capital's coffers to them, a decision I'm sure the margrave would have agreed to."

"The amount we're giving them should prove sufficient," nodded Whateley. "Still, not even ten people wish to remain in Conrad. So much less than I had hoped, and yet entirely understandable. We can do nothing but pray that they do well for themselves elsewhere."

We would have been lying if we said we weren't crestfallen, but Whateley's words spoke for both of us.

"Every night, I see that day in my dreams," I said. "I don't even remember what it feels like to wake well-rested anymore."

"It's no different for me. I wake often from my nightmares. They refuse to cease."

Sleep offered us no refuge. It was trauma. I had never had to live with any such things, and I fumbled for some way to deal with them.

"Emil tells me that he has heard screaming from Wendel's room. He's been good to Wendel, though, and so it hasn't gotten any worse than that."

Emil had yet to return to the Kirsten home. He refused to, constantly saying that Gerda needed his care. When Whateley, Wendel, and I had arrived, he'd clung to that as another reason.

He went to school from Saburova manor and balanced his studies with watching over Wendel. Whateley had his own injuries to deal with along with all the necessary arrangements that came in the aftermath of the attack. I had mostly recovered but was nonetheless swamped. Emil was a godsend in this respect, looking after Wendel while we couldn't.

We'd all originally gathered at Saburova manor to look after Gerda, but since the fall of Conrad she'd found an all-new vitality and was quickly returning to full health.

"I want to talk to Master Wendel, and yet…even now I'm not sure what to say to him," admitted Whateley. "This life has blessed me with a wealth of experience, but… Well, I couldn't feel more ashamed."

"That's how we all feel," I said. "I was such a burden to everyone while I was asleep and recovering."

"During it all, perhaps nobody had it harder than you, Lady Karen. I merely did as I was supposed to."

He did not let anyone in to see us when we looked over the records of Conrad's property and fortunes. I had turned the margrave's study inside out looking for all of them.

"I haven't had a chance to look over all of it," said Whateley. "The remaining aides have been running about, seeing to things, but it will be some time before we have a clearer picture."

"Let's tackle everything slowly and steadily."

With Whateley by my side, the work was easier to handle. Had I been alone, even assigning everything would have taken a good deal of time.

"Just to be sure, it *is* okay for us to trust the aides, yes?" I asked.

"Of course. The margrave left only those he trusted here in the royal capital. All of them have served Conrad for decades now. They were the only people I reached out to."

"I'm relieved. I apologize for doubting them."

"We'll set up a meeting for you to meet them in time. You'll understand then that they are worthy of your trust."

"I look forward to it. I want us to get along well."

Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but it was a blessing to have something to occupy my time. It saved me from the nightmares that awaited me once my head hit the pillow and allowed me to keep going when I was reminded of the horrid stench of that day.

“Well then, let us begin,” said Whateley.

We both knew what we had to do. Whateley and I had but one goal: to lay the groundwork that would ensure that Wendel, second son of Kamil, the Margrave of Conrad, received his inheritance.

The path there, however, had its bumps and roadblocks.

“As you are well aware, the margrave had a younger brother and sister, and along with some others, they have their eyes on the Conrad fortune.”

I had learned of this during my first year in Conrad. The margrave had called upon me to inform me that his relationship with his siblings was by no means a good one. At the crux of it was Sven. Though he was the margrave’s own child, the fact that his mother was a commoner left many believing him an inadequate heir. These people wanted their own children adopted into the margrave’s family. Sven’s birth had resulted in a great many arguments, and in the end, the margrave had essentially paid his siblings for their silence.

“In more recent years, when the margrave announced Master Sven as his heir, there was little in the way of opposition. I assume you understand why.”

“Because if *I* were to give birth to the margrave’s child, that child would be the legitimate heir.”

“Indeed. Your youth also meant it extremely likely that the margrave would pass on before you. His siblings could then use you—his official wife—and that heir as a reason to easily remove Master Sven from his deserved position.”

“In other words, they’d work to coax me into giving them control.”

“They might also have tried to impress upon you the importance of bloodlines and looked to have you take one of their relatives as a new husband.”

“Putting their methods aside, all of that would have been easier said than done. When the margrave and I were first married, they made their objection clear by not even coming to visit.”

“Likely because they believed you would quickly divorce.”

No doubt it came as a shock to all of them that I got along just fine in Conrad. In any case, even if Whateley’s hypotheses were true, it didn’t bother me. While the margrave and I shared a familial love, it was not in the slightest romantic. They could get

their hopes up as much as they wanted; they'd be withering away while they waited for something that would never happen.

However, that was not how things worked out. The problem now was that in the fall of Conrad, the margrave's only blood heir had died. Wendel was of course the margrave's son, and he was a member of the family even without that direct connection. Whateley and I would not see it any other way; Wendel was the margrave's son. Period.

However, on the face of things, though Doctor Emma *was* married to the margrave, she was nonetheless his common-law wife. On top of that, Wendel wasn't even her actual son to begin with.

"The margrave intended to officially adopt Wendel when Sven was appointed the head of the family, yes?" I said.

"Indeed. He and Sven decided this would be the smoothest way to go about things."

They had wanted Wendel adopted in such a way as to avoid conflict, but only now did that decision come back to bite us; Wendel could not simply be assigned the next official heir.

"His Majesty has ensured the honor of Conrad will remain upheld. Will relying on such words prove difficult?" I asked.

"He will do his best, I'm sure, but relying on that alone could prove dangerous. The aristocracy places a great importance on lineage. You and I know Wendel well; we have no doubt he will make a good domain lord, but that will not be enough for the margrave's siblings. The nobility around them likely feel the same."

"And if they make a big show of it, the king cannot simply ignore them."

"Wendel is not part of the Conrad bloodline. That alone is a crime as far as they're concerned."

As far as *I* was concerned, however, nobody was more like the margrave than Wendel. I wanted nothing more than to leap upon and tear apart anyone who dared object, but doing so would only hurt Wendel's standing. If the margrave had only officially adopted Wendel as his son, we could have declared definitively that we were carrying out his dying wish.

"Whateley," I ventured, "given the state of Conrad, where do *I* stand?"

"The margrave's siblings are likely hoping you'll return to the Kirsten family. They're quiet now because the dust still hasn't

settled, but it's only a matter of time before they start poking their nose into matters."

I was still just a teenager, and I had no child with the margrave. It was only natural for them to think I'd return to my former family. And yes, it's true about my age; I'd already turned eighteen some time ago.

"If I were to return to the Kirstens, what would happen?"

"Wendel would be adopted by a relative. They would raise Wendel as his guardian, and in doing so own the family's rights. From there, you could expect they'd wait for the opportunity to remove him from any chance at his inheritance."

"But even if I remain, they will meddle."

"You must consider the very real possibility that they may have you moved back to the Kirsten family."

I'd hoped that maybe they might just leave us alone, but Whateley spoke true. For the aristocracy, marriage was about tactics and bargaining; a young daughter was a piece on the board with considerable value. I stirred my tea vacantly as Whateley looked upon me with a somewhat confused expression.

"I realize how rude it is for me to ask such a thing, but...am I right to think you wish to remain with the Conrads, Lady Karen?"

This was a matter of great importance. I had always intended to take off and live my own life. Remaining with Conrad put that dream further away still. Returning to Kirsten, however, only meant getting even *more* wrapped up in the vines of noble society.

"There will be many chances for me yet," I said. "I like to think I am not so cruel as to completely abandon Wendel."

The margrave had left everything to the boy. He had spoken the words himself. He had said that as much for us as he had for Wendel. After all, the margrave knew better than anyone that Wendel was still not his son in an official capacity. In his words was a message for me, and for Whateley, and I was not so coldhearted as to ignore it completely.

*"I am counting on you."*

"That comes as a great relief," said Whateley. "As a mere steward, I lack the power to face the margrave's relatives. The only person who can meet them on equal footing at this point is you, Lady Karen."

Unfortunately, I didn't have any friends among the nobility.

And thanks to my time outside of the Kirsten family, I didn't have any real acquaintances either. I flicked the records sitting in front of us on the table.

"I've thought it over, and it strikes me as good for us if I maintain control over Conrad and raise Wendel, no? That said, I'm not in any position to become his guardian, am I?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no. Your position isn't stable, so we'd be wise to arrange for someone else to become guardian. Wendel is still young, and truthfully, he needs a family."

Whateley did not try to sugarcoat his words, but there was no helping it, really; it was the truth. My first idea had been to act as Wendel's surrogate parent and guardian, but when I considered my standing in society, I was nothing more than a widow. I did not have enough to my name for anyone to trust me to manage the family's finances. I was too young, and too much about me was uncertain.

"It would be best if we could leave Wendel in the care of someone who could both raise him *and* act as his guardian…"

This was my own preference speaking up, but I wanted Whateley and me to be involved in Wendel's future. That meant finding someone who could balance both.

"Given your position as the margrave's wife, I don't think it will prove an issue to propose you as a caretaker for Wendel."

"The only people I can ask are my older brother and sister. Would either of them suffice?"

"Undoubtedly. However…"

We could trust both as Wendel's guardian, and no doubt both would allow Whateley and me to be a part of Wendel's upbringing. We could rely on Arno, the current head of the Kirsten family, but I knew Whateley's misgivings even without him speaking; Arno gave voice to them just a few days later, when we went to talk to him about it. He titled his head to the side and closed his eyes, a solemn look on his face.

"If you remained a Conrad, then yes, it's a reasonable request," Arno said. "I doubt any would object to it, and none would mind bringing Wendel into the family. We'd have no trouble acting as his guardian, seeing to his upbringing, and managing Conrad's affairs. However, by asking this of the Kirsten family, you must understand you are taking on a *great* debt."

If he were to be put in charge of managing Conrad's affairs, Arno would also be forced to act not as my brother, but as the

lord of the Kirsten family.

“You’re young,” he said, “and I’m not speaking with any bias when I say that you’re a charming, beautiful woman. Families will be asking about you with an eye for marriage, and among them may be families the Kirstens are in no position to refuse. You may wish for a life on your own, but there’s no telling how things may shake out.”

“You’re telling me to be prepared, then?”

“If you entrust this to our family, you will not be able to leave it. I know you had a special understanding with the margrave, but things will not be so simple with other families.”

We were siblings, yes, but Arno was making it clear that not everything would go the way I wanted. Even then, when I thought of Wendel I knew that I should go through with it. I was just about to give my assent when Whateley spoke up.

“Let us think on it for a while,” he said. “This is not a matter to be handled lightly.”

And so, the decision was put on hold. That evening, new problems came to light.

Though I suppose it would be more accurate to say the problems “visited.”

I was informed that guests had arrived, and met with an elderly man and woman; the margrave’s younger brother and younger sister, who introduced themselves as Sir Guido and Lady Griem respectively. They informed me that they had rushed here upon hearing the news that their brother was dead. In one of Saburova manor’s reception rooms I told them about the fall of Conrad and the passing of the margrave and Sven, at which both began to weep.

“I did not believe the news of his passing when we were first told,” said Lady Griem, her eyes puffy and red. “We were away, and so it took some time for the news to reach us…”

“He was a valiant lord, and surely he must have realized that at the very least he must ensure your survival.”

“That I am here now is thanks to my husband,” I said. “He risked his life so that Wendel and I could live.”

At the mention of the margrave’s second son, Sir Guido and Lady Griem’s brows furrowed as if they’d been poked by something.

“How terrible it must be for the boy, for him to have lost not just his real parents, but those who raised him too. And how is

Wendel at present?" asked Lady Griem.

"It was all very sudden, and he still has yet to recover from the wounds left upon his heart," I replied.

"But he is uninjured?" asked Sir Guido.

"A few scrapes and bruises, nothing more," I said. "He suffered a fever as well, but he has since recovered."

I felt something more like irritation in Sir Guido than worry for his nephew. They were the margrave's relatives, so I explained the current state of things to them, but the information appeared to go through one ear and completely out the other. When I was done, Lady Griem spoke up hesitantly.

"Did our brother leave a will?"

"The will was confirmed, and the document states that everything was to be entrusted to Sven. This will be made public at a later date, in a more appropriate location."

A year earlier, when the margrave had found himself falling ill and bedridden more often, he had had a will drawn up and carefully stored. That will was buried among the documentation we had brought here to the capital, and its contents detailed exactly what I informed Sir Guido and Lady Griem. With Sven now dead, however, it was fairly safe to call the will useless.

"However," I said, noticing the look of relief on both of their faces, "before the margrave left us, he shared with us his final wishes. My husband stated his desire to see the entirety of his assets go to Wendel."

This came as a great shock to the margrave's siblings. Their eyes went wide, their lips trembled. They could not believe what they had just heard.

"We-Wendel...? You mean he's to be given the Conrad name...?"

"I believe it only appropriate that he be the one to inherit Conrad," I replied.

My words resulted in a most brilliant panic.

"But he's that wen...! Ahem, excuse me, he's the common-law wife's child...!"

"And not even her *actual* child!"

It was clear to me then that neither Sir Guido nor Lady Griem had considered that Wendel might become the margrave's heir.

*I see... So perhaps they were playing nice with me because they thought I'd swipe the margrave's inheritance?*

"That is well understood," I said. "However, those were the

margrave's very words, and there was no mistaking them."

"Surely my brother was delirious! Deranged! He would *never* say something so ridiculous!"

"The family steward, Whateley, was also there at the time he made his last wishes known. I might also add that the margrave did not shirk his responsibilities at any point and saw his duty through to his final moments. He was anything but delirious."

This was turning into a mudslinging match. The margrave's brother and sister doubted my state of mind and were frantic in their attempts to have me listen to reason. I, for my part, was intent on having it understood that Wendel would be left *everything*.

"I would like to have a word with Wendel," said Sir Guido. "We must confirm what *he* wants...!"

"The boy has just lost his entire family. He still hasn't fully recovered, and you would plunge him into a discussion of inheritance?" I retorted.

"But it's *important*. We've no time to be making excuses!"

"Nothing has been decided yet, but it's clear to me that this discussion of ours will not end with all of us in agreement. I believe we've talked enough. Please leave."

"You think we'll just *leave* after hearing something so preposterous?! You bring Wendel out here right this instant!"

"This is Saburova manor! Have you no respect?!"

With the help of the manor guards, Sir Guido and Lady Griem were escorted outside and sent on their way. Whateley, who had listened to the whole thing from behind me, let out a sigh.

"It was my understanding that they were once all quite close," he said. "The margrave must be turning in his grave."

"Well, I at least understand why the margrave wanted to keep them at arm's length. They both shed tears, but neither of them were worried about Wendel in the slightest."

It appeared to me that the margrave's siblings were truly saddened by his passing, but as to whether that was true or not, only they knew.

"They didn't believe what I told them and seemed worried that I'd swipe the inheritance from them. That said, given the optics, I suppose that makes sense."

"You mustn't..." started Whateley.

"We were a couple with a considerable difference in age," I said. "I know how it looked."

We were, nonetheless, in a spot of bother. For all that the margrave's siblings had said, Whateley and I still hadn't talked to Wendel, the key figure in all of this. We'd been looking for an opportunity when things calmed, but it no longer seemed like we had the luxury of time.

"If Wendel says he wants to be the Conrad heir, he'll need a guardian of firm standing," I said. "Someone of such a strong position that nobody can offer a word of criticism."

"Indeed. However, I do not like the idea of you sacrificing yourself for such a thing, Lady Karen."

"Outside of the Kirstens, I can think of only one other."

"You have an acquaintance who might be open to accepting the position of Wendel's guardian?"

"Not only do I have someone, but they're somebody you're acquainted with, Whateley. It's a complicated relationship, to be sure, but with everything that has happened recently, a link has emerged. We at least have reason enough to ask."

Which meant it came down to whether or not they would accept. Whateley was left reeling.

"Well, let's start by having a word with Master Wendel," he said.

For a moment, I was worried that Wendel might not even let us in, but my feelings were completely unfounded. He had lost a considerable amount of weight and there were dark circles under his eyes, but in the eyes themselves was a light that had not extinguished. Wendel listened to us in silence, and when he spoke his wish, it was simple and to the point.

"I want to succeed the Conrad name," he said, his words filled with a depth of swirling emotions. "I know that I am not father's son by blood, but… But he told me to live the life I wanted."

He searched his heart carefully for each word and spoke them in a halting manner. He was still lost in his agony, and I pulled him close to me and pressed my cheek against the back of his head. Whateley was steadfast, intent on not missing a single one of his master's words.

"I was at such a loss," Wendel said. "I really was. I didn't think it possible for me to succeed my father. But that's what he said, wasn't it? He said he wanted to leave everything to me, didn't he?"

"He did."

"But if it goes to my uncle and auntie, I won't get anything."

“So you want to succeed the margrave?”

“I think it’s the best option.”

“If there’s something in particular of his belongings that you want, there’s still time to do something about that, right, Whateley?”

“Everything is still up in the air and still being sorted, yes. When it comes to the margrave’s and Sven’s belongings, we still have access to them.”

We had to be certain of what Wendel himself wanted. Whateley and I both wanted to fulfill the margrave’s wish, and we were acting accordingly, but we would not force Wendel to do anything he did not wish to. In succeeding the margrave, Wendel was guaranteed to face hardship. We would do the best we could, but I could see the mountain before him, and only he could climb it. It was a cruel thing to leave such a decision in the hands of an eleven-year-old, but we were not about to abandon him and make the decision on our own.

“I know it’s unfair of me to say it like this, but you don’t have to make your decision based on any sense of duty,” I said. “I will look after you and the remaining Conrad residents, so it’s okay to think more about what *you* want.”

“Thank you, but I want to see Conrad restored. I want to make proper graves for my family. And I don’t want anybody else to do it. I want to do it myself.”

“Can we take this as your word, Master Wendel?” asked Whateley. “Is this your decision?”

“Ever since we got here I’ve been thinking about what will happen to what my father left behind. But…I’m just a boy, I can’t do anything without your help. So…” said Wendel, pulling himself from my arms to look both me and Whateley in the eyes. “So please, if you two will help me, I want to succeed my father.”

In the boy was a resolve all of its own, and as he dropped his head into a bow, Whateley trembled. In that moment, I got a sense for how he must have felt, having watched over Wendel for so many years.

“You will have all the help we can muster,” I said. “On one condition.”

“What?”

“If, in the future, you discover something you want to do more than succeed the Conrad line, I want you to tell us. Either of us is fine; just don’t hide it inside yourself. Let us know.”

At present, he might still not know, but I had to say it.

"You're going to school," I continued. "You're going to meet lots of different people, and maybe while you do that you'll find that something you really want to do. If you do, I want you to tell us. That's my condition."

"Yeah, but...I don't think it'll happen."

"And you're right, it might not. So all you have to do is simply agree. Promise you'll tell us."

"If all you want me to do is tell you, then okay."

"You promise?"

"Yes..."

Conrad was gone. It had fallen, and so with so few options before us this seemed like the only path forward. However, leaving Wendel the inheritance was just the process of seeing through the margrave's last wishes and making sure he could pick the life he most wanted to live.

"The margrave wished only for you to live freely, as you like," said Whateley. "I know it may prove difficult, but please try not to burden yourself."

"Burdens are for adults," I said, "so leave the hard stuff to the grown-ups."

"But you're still young too, Karen," said Wendel.

"Both of you are still children, as far as I'm concerned," added Whateley.

And so, Wendel's answer was clear. All that was left now was for Whateley and I to move things forward, but in that lay our bottleneck.

"Who's in line for the position of my guardian, anyway?" asked Wendel.

"Sir Reinald," I said.

Wendel was clearly not expecting that.

"Whahuh?" he uttered.

This marked the point where Whateley put his full powers behind me as an assistant. As much as I actually wanted him to take the lead with things, *I* was the one who had been brought up a noble; my reputation and lineage would prove more helpful in direct discussions.

It was at this time that I finally made a decision about what to do with Humphrey. I discussed it with Whateley on our way to see Reinald.

"I heard that you're going to let Hil handle Humphrey?" he

asked.

“I think it’s most appropriate, no? Hil says he’ll keep watch over him, and Wendel is worried about him too.”

I was dressed a little nicer than usual and was resting my elbow on the window frame when Humphrey was mentioned. I had continued to postpone the fate of the young guard who had abandoned Wendel and me and screamed out our location to our pursuers.

“And you intend to keep the truth from Wendel?”

“The loss of his family is already painful enough; I don’t know if he could recover if he learned that one of the family’s own guards betrayed him.”

“Indeed. Wendel is a kind boy, and though I’m sure he would say he was fine, such a truth would indeed eat away at his spirit.”

One of our surviving guards, Hil, had lost his arm during the fall of Conrad. However, even then, he had chosen to continue living by the sword, as a guard. There were other, quieter and calmer options available to him, but he refused them all; it was his belief that if he had an arm, it could wield a sword, and in a worst-case scenario he could also just sacrifice himself to save us. His pleas to show mercy to his young charge Humphrey were still fresh in my mind, and I allowed them both to be part of the Conrad restoration. I had but one condition: that Humphrey not be assigned as one of Wendel’s personal guards. Hil declared that should Humphrey betray us again, he would cut him down personally. Humphrey, too, agreed with the arrangement.

“Let us hope that he earns back his trust with his future efforts,” said Whateley.

“He knows that he will not get another chance, so I think it will be fine… Humphrey also lost his entire family. There is no punishment we could give him worse than that.”

“Master Wendel trusts him. I pray he lives up to that trust.”

We sent Hil and Humphrey to the Conrad residence. Though Humphrey was racked with guilt, I ordered him not to speak a word of his betrayal to Wendel. Fortunately, Wendel did not remember any of what the bandits had said in the forest; in his mind, Humphrey had staked his own life to rush off and face the bandits alone, attempting to save us by drawing their attention.

I was being lenient—generous, even—but we were alive, and that was enough. I did not have it in me to see another Conrad resident dead or driven from their home. I had made my

decision with the hope that a second chance might allow Humphrey to make up for his mistakes.

"By the way, Lady Karen," said Whateley, "do you believe Reinald will accept our request?"

"Fortunately, approaching him about it comes at no cost," I replied. "If he refuses, we'll find another way."

Reinald was a busy man, and so instead of staying at his residence, he instead spent his nights at a lodging located closer to the castle. He'd wanted to have our meeting later, but I'd pushed for an earlier date. Word around town was that the empire was dispatching troops to Falkrum; if that were true, the nation's generals would have to prepare for a possible war against Latoria. This would leave me almost no chance to meet and discuss things with Reinald.

"I must say, there certainly are a lot of people coming and going from the castle," I commented. "It's completely different from before."

"With war potentially looming on the horizon," said Whateley, "many are flustered and panicked."

It felt like we were caught in a stream of carriages and people. A portion of them were lined up and waiting, and Whateley informed me that these were people who were requesting an audience with the king.

"Those without the right connections may find themselves waiting for as long as two to three days," he said.

We alighted from our carriage and made our way to the area in which Reinald was waiting for us. On our way, we came across a growing crowd of people. This was decidedly rare around the castle, but even more so due to the fact that it wasn't just commoners and guards gathered around, but nobles too. As we neared, we overheard people gossiping.

"Apparently it's Prince David and Prince Demyan."

"Those two? What is it this time?"

"Prince Demyan made fun of Prince David, they say. Usually Prince David would simply turn his nose up at such insults, but it's the state of things... This time he took the words seriously."

It seemed that word of the two princes' relationship—or lack thereof—was well known among the public. My ears then pricked as I heard familiar voices. I had no desire to dive into the crowd myself, but it was clear that David had laid hands on Demyan.

“Father begged me, so I appointed you as my aide, but then you go on to ignore me and plot schemes behind my back?!” shouted David. “Who do you think you are?!”

“Plot schemes?!” spat Demyan. “You’re supposed to be the next king, but you’re so completely unaware! You don’t *think* about anything! You leave everything to your subordinates, and all it does is cause *me* suffering!”

“How dare you take such a tone with your older brother!”

“I am concerned for our nation! I am working hard for it! How dare *you* go and foolishly call my efforts plots and schemes?!”

Whatever calm the two might have once had was gone. I heard people on both sides trying to pull the two apart and speak sense to them, but the pleas went entirely ignored. The princes’ argument continued for some time, but it seemed that in a battle of words, Demyan held the upper hand.

“Damn you!” shouted David, clearly at his wit’s end. “Are you saying you disapprove of me?!”

“What else could I be saying?! If the likes of you are crowned our next king, all that awaits the people is suffering!”

“Bold words! And so you would look to defy me, would you?!”

“You are shameless! I simply cannot accept the crown being placed upon your head!”

Without anyone to stop them, the argument grew even fiercer.

“A duel!” shouted Prince David. “It is an embarrassment for my opponent to be such a complete and utter fool, even if that fool be my own younger brother. But we will make it crystal clear, before our father and our ancestors, just who is the rightful heir to the throne!”

“I’d like nothing more, you simplistic, thoughtless piece of shit!”

The word “duel” had the crowd erupting into chatter. The two princes stood with their chests puffed as they left the crowd, and I spotted a man in his forties chasing after Prince Demyan.

“Prince Demyan, please, you must reconsider…” he said. “You must understand that even the king would be infuriated to hear your brother speak as he has…”

“Oh, shut it, Geoffrey!” replied the prince. “I am sick and tired of that prick!”

So his name was Geoffrey, and by the looks of things, he was Demyan’s aide. He looked every bit the part of valiant knight; a

far cry from how he'd appeared when he'd stopped Reinald's carriage on the way to the ball. I turned to look at Whateley and found that he had gone completely pale. A scan through the crowd showed that many of the elderly nobles had reacted to the argument in a similar way.

"Is it possible...that the two princes are serious in what they say?"

"Whateley, what is this duel they spoke of?"

"It's an old custom. A practice in which the king's heir is decided..."

"I was of the understanding that the heir was decided by date of birth."

"Yes, ordinarily the elder brother inherits the throne, but in Falkrum there exists a practice to ensure that the most suitable heir is selected."

It was a public duel, held in the presence of the royal family and select nobles. Only those of the king's bloodline were allowed to partake in a duel for the throne, but such a thing had not been held for many long years. The last one in recorded history had occurred two generations back.

"They may be brothers, but the loser of the duel will nonetheless be showered in near unbearable humiliation..." said Whateley.

What appeared to be a simple argument had exploded into something else entirely. I found the whole thing disgusting, but given how poorly they got along, it wasn't surprising. It made me worry for the future of my sister's yet-to-be-born child, and I hoped that the king or queen would see to things swiftly.

"Oh no, we're going to be late," I said.

Our carriage had arrived early, which was a plus, but our destination was some distance from where we'd parked. We hurried along and when we arrived, we were met by Haring.

"You're just in time," he said. "Sir Reinald is free, and he has been awaiting your arrival."

With Whateley's help, we'd narrowed down our list of potential guardians, but in terms of a guardian who would leave the margrave's relatives unable to voice a single complaint, there was only Reinald. Given the rumors, he wasn't really someone I wanted to depend on, but we'd weighed the pros and cons and decided to take the chance.

"Sir Reinald, the Conrad Margravine has arrived," announced

Haring.

It had been some time since we'd seen one another, but Reinald looked relaxed in his chair. He gestured for me to take a seat opposite him.

"It is nice to see you," he said. "I am glad to see you have recovered from your injuries."

"I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to see me," I said.

"I was just thinking that I'd like to take a break anyway," he replied. "I heard that you were bedridden for a time. How are you feeling?"

"Though I'd love to take things easy and properly rest, I've been incredibly busy... I want nothing more than for all of this to settle, and soon."

Whateley and Haring took their leave while Reinald and I shared pleasantries. As soon as I was seated, tea was served; the mellow scent of it tickled at my nose.

"But you seem to have been stuck here of late," I continued. "Have you been particularly rushed off your feet?"

"Wherever I go, there is only the wailing of the fall of Conrad. The margrave may have left the royal capital, but some decades ago he was a most important presence. The older people, in particular, feel forced to get their acts together."

He shrugged. I got the sense the elderly were speaking up and having the young do all their running around. He did not look as bored as he had in the past, however.

"Speaking of wailing, we happened to catch the two princes arguing on our way here," I said. "Perhaps that was proof that we are all on edge and agitated of late. They seemed oblivious to the crowd surrounding them and didn't shy away at all from airing out their grievances with one another in public."

"The princes?"

"Indeed. They even spoke of having a duel. I have to imagine that somebody will stop them, but even speaking of such a thing is sure to make the citizenry anxious."

"A duel... My, my... Actions so unbecoming of the royal family."

"You know of such duels, Sir Reinald?"

"Of course. One of Falkrum's sillier traditions."

I didn't know what intrigued him so much about it, but it was clear to me that he enjoyed the idea. I wondered why. His mirth, however, only caused me to grow all the more uneasy. I thanked

him once more for his help supporting Conrad, to which he nodded kindly.

"Now, what business brings you here today?" he asked. "I've opened my schedule for this meeting, but I'm sure you must be rather busy. I assume you aren't here merely just to chat?"

"I'm glad you're happy to get right to it," I replied. "However, before I get into that there are a few things I must ask you."

"Go ahead. I will answer whatever I can."

I let out a short breath. The main reason we were here was the matter of a guardian, and that was what I had told Whateley, but in truth I sat before Reinald so as to get an answer to a question of my own.

"This is but a scratching within my own mind, and not a matter I have discussed with anyone."

I made sure to lead with this; I wanted it known that Whateley was unrelated to the matter before I continued.

"Sir Reinald, did you know that the Latorian attack was going to occur?" I asked.

*Well, now you've done it, Karen. You've gone and asked* the *question.*

I was sweating. It wasn't even warm. I didn't even feel hot. And yes, I was well aware of how dangerous it was to ask Reinald this question. I shouldn't have even asked it in the first place; he had acted to save Conrad, after all. And yet, I could not shrug it off. I was practically shaking, I was so nervous. In contrast, Reinald didn't even flinch.

"Did I know? In asking such a question, exactly what is your intent?"

"I'm not going to mince words. I am asking if you knew that Conrad was going to be attacked. Before it happened. Before you received word from the king and from Marquis Rodenwald."

"I received a request for aid, and I moved my troops to act. We agreed this was best for both of us. Why would you ask such a question?"

I really needed to work on choosing my words more carefully. His response told me that I'd slipped up. I raised both of my hands in a show of peace; I wanted him to know that I had not come to argue or fight.

"Please don't misunderstand me," I said. "It was not my intent to start an argument, nor am I here to criticize you. I came here with a matter to discuss, and to get to that matter, I must ask

this question of you. That is all."

I could feel his gaze, searching me for purpose. It was frightening, and I was reminded that it was best not to think of his usual bearing as his natural state.

"I am truly sorry to be asking something so rude of the person who saved so many of our lives. But please, try to see things from the other side: you arrived in Conrad before the attack, and you showed a great interest in the area that links Conrad to Latoria. Your troops were placed conveniently close to the Conrad domain, and you even had a scouting party at work."

If it were simply a case of good fortune, then that would be that. However, it was not so easy for me to just clap my hands and praise the gods above for their intervention.

"I am grateful to you for saving our lives, but I am by nature a deeply wary person…" I said. "And the circumstances seemed far too convenient to be a matter of coincidence. I cannot help but doubt them."

My question was one I could ask because Reinald's roots were not entirely based in Falkrum, and because—to some small extent—I had come to know and understand him.

"I understand you to be a person with ties to the empire," I said. "Did you not hear something about this matter?"

It was a question that could have resulted in a fierce rage, and it would come as no surprise were I to be driven away entirely. And yet Reinald showed no anger; his mood did not shift in the slightest.

"And if I tell you that I *did* know? What then?"

"Then…that would not be a pleasant thing to hear."

I could not approach him about Wendel's guardianship, were that the case. The dead simply would not stand for it. I would have no choice but to simply leave, dejected. I struggled for what to say next as Reinald took his cup of tea in hand.

"I jest," he said.

"Which is to say you didn't know?"

I was relieved. I had misunderstood things.

*He simply saved us, which means we too…*

"I *did* hear that Conrad would at some point be attacked," Reinald then said.

I was painfully aware of my heart freezing in my chest. I did not want to believe it, but my hunch had been right. I had been so foolish to ask, so stupid; there were some things in life that

were better left unknown. Some part of my heart had perhaps hoped with everything it had that I was wrong. My mouth was dry, and though I wanted to cease thought entirely, I pushed through.

"You mean to say you knew…and you let it happen…?"

"The key word in my statement is 'at some point.'" Reinald replied. "I had heard that Conrad might be attacked, but no details were clear. We had not anticipated that Latoria would move so quickly."

"In which case, when did you expect…?"

It hit me before I even finished my question. I had talked to the margrave about Latoria in the past. He'd told me that the chances of them launching an attack in the winter were very unlikely.

"In the spring?" I uttered.

I noticed the slightest twitch in Reinald's eyebrow. I'd hit the nail on the head. I took a deep, deep breath and lowered my gaze. The beating of my heart rang in my ears. I had dug up a potential truth I did not want to know. My head tried to sort through it all, but all it met with was confusion. I knew that I had to stay calm, that I could not allow my thoughts to cease entirely. The margrave had taught me so much, and I would not allow it to go to waste.

"I, too, would like to ask *you* something, Miss Karen. You came here with your question, but depending on how far our discussion goes, I may not be allowed to let you leave. Do you understand the predicament you are putting yourself in?"

"Are you saying you'll silence me?"

"I have little interest in killing those who offer no resistance. It is more likely that you would be kept in custody for a time."

In which case I would live, which was something of a small comfort.

"I understand now the extent to which you knew," I said, lifting my head to meet Reinald's gaze. "So please allow me to confirm something. What exactly was your intent when it came to the attack on Conrad?"

Did he act so as to save us when we requested aid, or did he let it happen? He was in the region on the pretense of "military maneuvers," but what reason did he have to place his troops so close to the domain?

"My answer is exactly as I once told the old man," said

Reinald, avoiding a direct answer.

I thought back to Reinald's conversation with the margrave.

*"It is enough that you simply wither away, left to your own misery."*

Those were the words Reinald had spoken. "Left to your own misery" might have indeed pointed to him being fine with the Latorians murdering the margrave, but…it didn't feel right to me. Reinald had spoken his words from the heart, and I did not think he would have allowed the margrave a death like the one he received.

"You told him to wither away and die," I said. "In which case, am I right to assume it was not your intent to allow the attack on Conrad?"

Reinald did not reply, though I hoped he would forgive me for my tears. Had we been able to pass on his knowledge to the king, or at the very least the margrave, then perhaps all would not have been lost. There was so much I did not know, and perhaps Reinald had also had his own circumstances to deal with. Putting that aside, however, I wanted to give that calm, tranquil face of his a good slap.

*But…*

Conrad was in ruin. That was a truth that could not be denied, and I was not about to accuse someone on the basis of nothing more than "what-if" scenarios. I would feel no better for it, and it would do nothing to bring Wendel's parents back. Our beloved servants and those two young lovers, too, had vanished to the realm of memory.

I had to accept reality and more clearly understand Reinald's position.

"My apologies," I said. "I realize that you had your own circumstances. I assume you can speak no more on the matter than you already have."

What marked me as different was the extra life experience I'd gained on account of my previous life. I therefore knew that I was little more than a girl with the tiniest of voices among the nobility; I had something of a right to speak, but a tantrum would get me nowhere. Such a thing was anything but a show of power.

I could not get things twisted. What I wanted was to get to the heart of the matter; the truth. I did not want to point fingers or let my emotions run rampant while I wailed and screamed. In

this sense the world was no different than when I had lived in Japan; simply uncovering the truth did not suddenly grant you the favor of the gods. It was not my intent to use my tears as a weapon against Reinald, and so I wiped them away, sat up straight, and sorted myself out.

"Let us get down to business, then," I said. "I have come here today to make a request of you."

# 5: Ruin Looms

No man alive looked better with his legs crossed than Reinald.

“I would like for you to become Master Wendel’s guardian,” I said. “Will you please consider it?”

“His guardian…you say?”

No doubt the request came as a surprise. Reinald’s eyes narrowed as he tried to grasp my thoughts. I was usually quite good at reading Reinald’s emotions, but understanding the inner workings of his mind was nigh impossible.

“Yet another unexpected request,” he said. “Why have you chosen to ask me?”

“Do you understand the situation Conrad is in at present?” I asked back.

“I understand that the last survivor of the family line is in fact not the margrave’s actual son… Wendel is his second son. I would have assumed you would go to the Kirstens.”

“That you know that much makes this all quicker. And yes, that might indeed wrap things up quite peacefully.”

Trying to hide anything here would only put me at a disadvantage. I explained that we were considering Wendel the family heir, and the difficulties that presented. Naturally, I also told Reinald about the potential issues that could arise over his future upbringing, and how I was essentially powerless, having made no name for myself in noble society.

“My brother is trustworthy,” I said. “He can be a little hardheaded, but it would be fine to entrust him with Wendel’s education, and there would be no concerns with regards to the use of Conrad’s capital. Had we consulted the margrave when he was alive, no doubt he would have also recommended Arno.”

“Indeed, your brother is like the walking, talking incarnation of integrity. No doubt he could be trusted with Conrad’s future.”

“Yes, he would do his utmost.”

This I could declare with the utmost confidence.

“However,” I continued, knowing full well that Reinald already knew where I was going, “you mentioned the future, and whether or not Conrad has one is a different matter to that of my brother’s sincerity.”

I had worries. It was of course possible that they were little more than the overactive workings of my imagination, but nonetheless they could be separated into two distinct categories. The first was entangled with my own desires, and I did not mention it to Reinald because it wasn't necessary to do so. That, and I had insurance of a sort anyway.

So instead, I took to explaining my second worry.

"In truth, whether or not we can set about rebuilding Conrad immediately is anything but certain," I started.

The family domain had crumbled. The remaining aides were doing their best but were being held up by the chain of command. We had also heard recently that the soldiers dispatched to the villages under Conrad's governance had not returned. If that were true, and the soldiers had fled, it meant that the villages would have to lean on other families to ensure their own protection. They would do this because the nation already struggled when it came to military strength; it was unlikely they would dispatch further support. The king could issue orders, but the villagers would feel more and more distant from Conrad; all the more so when the lord of the lands—a man they trusted—was dead and gone.

"We do not know when the Latorian threat will ease and dissipate. Should the worst occur and war come to pass, it is all too easy to see the Conrad lands turning into a battlefield. Even just in terms of geography, Conrad has little say in what might become of its lands in such a case."

"It goes without saying that no lord would appreciate their lands being desecrated. The lords surrounding Conrad are certain to be nothing if not anxious."

"No doubt they would be happier to make Conrad the battlefield than their own homes. But if they did, many would have to flee, and the lands would be ravaged. The people would only grow more distant."

If the whole Latoria issue just went away, then there would be no issue to speak of. If they just left and vanished, then we'd all cry out with joy. Wendel and the others could return to Conrad, and I could aid in the rebuilding of it. However, almost the entirety of its population had been massacred; and how many people would want to live in a place that had suffered such a fate?

How long would it take to rebuild Conrad? And, more

importantly, who would be financially supporting that restoration? Whateley said that large sums of money were already moving around in the aftermath of the fall, but he worried that Falkrum would not cover all of it. The bulk would come straight out of Conrad's stockpiles or would otherwise be borrowed from other families. I could provide my own capital too, but that would be little more than a stopgap solution.

"Conrad's finances are finite. Though it will maintain *some* income, its reserves will be in constant decline as of now. New investments or ventures will be anything but easy for a domain that has lost so much of its population."

As I have mentioned previously, the nobility managed their own markets. Though Conrad still retained its own aides, starting any new ventures in its weakened state would prove incredibly difficult. Put simply, if we did not acquire solid financial backing, we would be done for.

Though the frontier was distant and not especially popular, that was not to say people didn't want the lands. The king had given us his word that he would support us, but there was no guarantee that he would still be healthy by the time Wendel became an adult. Should Prince David rise to the throne before then, there existed the danger that the Conrad lands would go to another noble family.

The support that Conrad had retained until now came largely thanks to the margrave himself and his own abilities. The arrival of a youngster as the new domain lord would no doubt cause some of this support to wither and disappear. We had received no reports of such things thus far, but Whateley made sure I was aware of an important fact: some relationships existed on the basis of money and the strength of their future.

"It is imperative that we select a guardian capable of building new relationships and acquiring future support," I said. "With that in mind, you're the perfect candidate."

Reinald's gaze fell as he dropped into thought. His finger tapped his knee rhythmically. After a time, he slowly raised his head.

"You hope to conduct trade with the empire through me, then?" he asked.

"I do not believe it will be a simple endeavor, nor one that sees success quickly. But a doorway to that possibility may yet open in the future, and we desire access to it."

What I wanted was the potential Reinald gave us. *That* was what I was betting on.

"I understand now why you decided to come to me instead of your older brother," Reinald said. "However, you do understand how much you are asking of me, yes?"

"Of course, and I am well aware that we cannot simply request this of you for nothing."

Reinald was no fool. He bore the responsibilities that came with his family name, but he had no obligation to take on the baggage that was the Conrad family just because he and I were acquaintances. In fact, it would have been troubling were he to offer us his services for nothing at all. And by troubling, I mean it would have made me suspicious and, as a result, especially cautious.

"I would like you to explain to me where I benefit from this request of yours," Reinald said.

"Though I would love to offer you a substantial payment…"

Such a payment was impossible. As I've already mentioned, Conrad simply did not have the wherewithal. Reinald certainly wasn't struggling with his finances anyway. After all, one of his officers, Moritz, was so wealthy that five thousand gold coins meant practically nothing to him. I could only assume that Reinald, too, was a very wealthy individual. And so Whateley and I had discussed the matter for a long time, eventually deciding that there was only one thing we could offer to draw Reinald's interest.

"…I will instead offer you exceptionally skilled people, along with their personally trained staff, their networks, and the reputation that comes with the Conrad name."

"Oh? And just how useful are these exceptionally skilled people of whom you speak?"

"The steward who accompanied me here, as a single example, was one of the diplomatic aides who visited the empire and worked to bring an end to the war some thirty years ago."

The words had their desired effect. And while Reinald considered what I'd just brought up, I hit him with another bargaining chip.

"Then, there are the Conrad aides and secretaries who were in the capital when the tragedy occurred. All of them are loyal, conscientious, and detail-oriented. This is especially true when it comes to gathering intelligence; their reputations give them

access to an impressive web of connections. This is, of course, assuming they still have a benefactor."

"I am honored that you would give me such consideration. However, you know that I am the second son of my family and thus not its face. My brother may well deny your request. He, too, has connections in the empire."

"But he won't. And besides, I am here today because I believe *you* see the true value in what Conrad is offering you."

I did not know what Reinald was planning. However, I knew that his circumstances were complicated, and I knew this meant difficulties when it came to the nobility, and Falkrum's most distinguished families in particular. Whateley was extremely well connected across the entirety of Falkrum, and that alone would be huge for Reinald.

"But I have no especially strong bond with Conrad," Reinald stated. "How do you intend to handle that?"

"Oh, but you do," I replied. "At the very end, my husband reached out to you, and in truth, you saved my life. If that did not create a bond between us, what would?"

"It will only worsen your reputation, but it will not prove a problem in terms of optics, at least."

I was not so weak that I would let swirling rumors defeat me. I would gladly choose rumors over death. All the same, something still gnawed at Reinald.

"Miss Karen, why did you select me as a candidate for guardianship?" he asked.

I did not think it was a question worth asking, but he asked it anyway.

"If Conrad went to Kirsten, it would be the move everyone expected. It would seem exactly as you yourself mentioned; that I had little other choice."

"The Kirsten family is nothing if not stable at present."

"Indeed. And let me be completely honest; I have no idea what you might be planning. I sit before you here with a feeling in my heart that I am walking on very thin ice."

Reinald was not a secure bet, by any means. And yet, I saw something in him. I had thought long and hard about giving control of Conrad to Arno. I envisioned Wendel coming of age and his struggles as he rebuilt the Conrad domain. Over and over, I thought through the details, but a persistent doubt lingered in my mind.

*Would our nation even last that long?*

It was an anxiety, rooted in the depths of my heart, that I could not speak to anyone. It felt impossible to simply laugh off. I could not brush it away as a mere figment of my imagination. It was an anxiety that I could not rid myself of, no matter how much time passed. I had continued to ponder the thought all the way up until this meeting today, and fortunately Whateley seemed to understand my feelings. He did not want for me to be in the Kirsten family's debt; he had said himself that we should exhaust all the possibilities available to us.

And so, we had chosen Reinald.

"I believe you are a person who can succeed well into the future," I said. "I want to bet on that potential."

I didn't care if he laughed at me. I didn't care if he belittled me either. If my hunch was right, then Reinald was a figure of some importance in the empire; after all, he had a person working under him who could issue Imperial Treasury Trade Rights at almost a moment's notice.

In any case, our conversation came to a pause.

*Well, naturally this is not a decision he can come to in the course of a single discussion. Fortunately, I assumed that Reinald would need time to think things over and…*

"Very well, I accept," Reinald said.

"Huh?" I uttered.

"I'm telling you that I would like to accept your offer to act as Wendel's guardian."

The sheer speed of his decision left me reeling. The last thing I had expected was that he would decide on the spot.

"But I want you to be mindful of something," Reinald continued. "I put more weight on the actual results one achieves in their position than bonds of blood. I am taking your offer today on the basis of the margrave's staff; if his second son cannot live up to the expectations placed upon him, he will get no help from me."

A rather harsh condition, to be sure. And one that brought to mind the incident in the guardhouse basement. Reinald was cold. Calculating. But I knew that this was the man he was, and that made his statement one I could accept.

"Understood," I replied. "We are entering this agreement with the understanding it will only be necessary until Wendel comes of age. From there, the duties of the domain will fall upon his

shoulders, and we intend to prepare him for it."

"Very good. Then the particulars can be worked out at a later date. Is there anything else?"

There was: the matter of Wendel opting out of his rank in the case that he was not capable of becoming the lord of the family. Still, when I brought this up Reinald had no issues. I could scarcely believe it.

"In closing, we shall prepare the official documentation as it pertains to what we've spoken of today."

"Understood. I do hope we can build a worthwhile relationship."

At the mention of the official documentation, there came a brief pause, at which point new cups of tea were brought out. The timing of Reinald's secretaries truly was impeccable. I put the matter of him knowing about Conrad aside so I could bask in this feeling of accomplishment.

"Miss Karen," he said, letting his negotiating mask slip with his words, "you've decided to remain with Conrad, even though you realize how difficult things will be."

"I've decided to help where I can, and that means staying. Do you find it odd?"

"No. It's just that you had a way out. Conrad's future is uncertain; you could have avoided being part of a potentially horrible outcome."

"I of course considered the option."

I hadn't meant to say that. The truth just slipped right out of me. And I confess I *had* considered abandoning Conrad and fleeing if things got to be too much. But in the end, I hadn't, and I hope we can all overlook that moment of weakness. I was no experienced veteran of troubled times; I was just another human, albeit one who had a little more life experience than most my age. It was embarrassing to have my own weaknesses on display, but I tried to shrug it off with a chuckle.

"But how would I sleep at night? Surely it's better to do what I can now and live without regret than to forever wonder if things could have been different."

*Oh no, he's seen right through me, hasn't he?*

Reinald smiled slightly.

"Such a way of life is impossible for me," he said. "I pray you do not make yourself your own worst enemy."

Though, I suppose we'd been lucky with Reinald. Yes, we were

providing him our connections and our people, but the deal fell vastly in our favor. I asked him about this outright, to which he only chuckled.

"My position is uncertain no matter where I am," he said. "And yet, even then, someone says they want to bet on my potential. Perhaps I want to believe that myself too."

*So, all my thinking, reasoning, and convincing had some meaning after all.*

"One more thing," I said. "Will you be allowing me to leave today?"

"Not doing so would only cause trouble. Promise not to say a word to anyone of what we spoke about and you're free to go."

"I won't go crying and screaming about it. But…just to be clear, you won't tell me why you were so close to Conrad at the time?"

Reinald gave me no definitive answer.

"The fact remains that we still didn't make it in time," he said. "That is all."

By the way he held himself, I did not think he was merely making excuses.

"You'd be wise to consider what it means to have chosen me, Miss Karen," he continued. "You still have time to back out of this agreement before the papers are readied and signed. It will be a little inconvenient, but still."

"Oh, that?"

His wry grin struck me as a show of consideration on his part. But I would feel some regret either way. No matter whom I chose—whether the Kirsten family or Reinald—I would always find myself wondering if I would have been better off going the other way. Even when it came to the attack on Conrad, I was filled with regrets.

"That day, that night…" I said, "I was saved. And it was then that I decided I would see the margrave's last wish fulfilled. In that sense, raising Wendel is as much for me as it is for anyone else."

"A troubling trait of your personality."

"And one I'm well aware is a pain. But it's better than doing nothing. I choose the path of fewer regrets."

"And that means me?"

"Are you displeased…?"

"I'm honored."

I'd rolled the dice, and none could say where they'd land. Reinald and I simply sipped our tea. It was a strange bond we'd formed, and one where we went from mere acquaintances to partners in crime. Reinald thanked me for mentioning nothing to the king of the forged letter written in his name. It was only now that we sat here that I was glad I hadn't; at the time, I had labored over whether or not to say something.

"Though it was just a single letter, there were much broader circumstances at play. You did me a service."

"Did you assume the letter was a lie?"

"No, but if it was known that somebody was up to something, then as one of the king's loyal servants, I would have had to look into the matter further and see it addressed."

*"King's loyal servant." I can't believe you just called yourself that.*

But now that we were in this together, I had to ask.

"And am I to assume that you won't tell me what's on your mind? Where your thoughts are taking you?"

"It is a simple thing to put into words, but whether to tell you is another issue entirely."

"You mean to say you don't trust me?"

"I trust you as an individual, Miss Karen, but whether I can put my trust in you with regard to this…"

"Fine, I will not push the issue. You want me to see for myself, yes?"

"I wouldn't toy with you like that, not after you've come here seeking my cooperation," replied Reinald.

And it was here that he brought up the princes, their arguments, and the duel they had agreed to.

"This is not the first time that Prince David has been unreasonable," he said, "But Prince Demyan is vain, and over the years his displeasure with his brother has only grown. In recent years their relationship has only further complicated. It is horribly strained. I do not doubt that the duel will proceed. The duel will, by its nature, also pull in Lady Saburova."

"My sister…? Oh, yes. You mean her child."

"Indeed. It's likely that the victor of the duel will have the loser renounce their right to the throne."

Though it still wasn't clear whether Gerda would have a boy or a girl, they would nonetheless be born with a right to the throne. Their rank would therefore be elevated by the loss of one of the princes.

“The pregnant Lady Saburova will have to be present for the duel. You, too, will have permission to attend. If necessary, you can use my name to do so.”

“Are you telling me to go and watch the spectacle of blood and violence?”

“You don’t have to, but things will be clearer to you should you see it in person.”

There was a subtle hint in his words and an appraising look in his eyes. This was where I could earn his trust.

“I haven’t mentioned this before…” I started.

I had to say it—Reinald was often particularly harsh on me. And I wasn’t just imagining it. I was irritated and I felt my fists clenching as they sat in front of my stomach.

“I grow weak at the sight of violence,” I said. “I’m a fragile young woman, so I’ll expect you to take responsibility should I faint.”

I was just a girl… I was still just a girl here. Reinald had used that girl as a hostage in front of her past husband, and he had aggravated her injuries by dragging her to the royal capital on horseback. And yes, I understood that to a certain extent I had brought it on myself, but it wasn’t like he was guaranteed some kind of divine punishment just for showing me a hint of kindness once in a while.

And yet, in the face of my clear irritation and anger, Reinald covered his mouth with a hand and cleared his throat.

*He was hiding a chuckle! Just how rude can you get?!*

“My apologies,” he said.

“But I really *am* just a fragile young woman?” I tried.

*Now he won’t even look me in the eye.*

No matter how you looked at it, I was the very portrait of a fragile young woman. Or otherwise a beautiful one.

“I daresay that a truly fragile young woman wouldn’t enter negotiations with people as their bargaining chips,” said Reinald.

“One appreciates a flavor more when there’s a touch of complexity,” I replied. “A girl can’t get by on her looks alone.”

“In your case, that complexity is like a poison; it may seem safe on the face of it, but drink it unsuspectingly and your stomach is in for a world of suffering.”

“I don’t mean anybody any harm,” I shot back. “I’m just trying to protect myself. Think of it more like the thorns of a rose.”

“Unfortunately, mere thorns do little to interest me. And if it’s

the restoration of Conrad you seek, you'd best get used to handling poison."

"How very terrifying. All I want is to live a life of peace and quiet."

Once again, my true thoughts seemed to blurt from my mouth. I felt out of sorts, and had for a while now. I had wanted to push for more about Conrad, but seeing as Reinald had already agreed to become Wendel's guardian, I felt like I'd done enough for the day. It was time to take my leave. Speaking any longer with a man like Reinald would only further spin me into disarray. He was perfectly relaxed, his elbow on his knee and his jaw resting on his knuckles as he smiled.

"Though I don't know if it will provide much comfort, let me tell you something that might, just in case you need it," he said.

He was done with serious discussion, it seemed, and his eyes met mine as I was about to stand.

"It's about our previous discussion," he continued.

"What...?"

"The reason I call you by your name."

*Oh, yes. We did talk about that briefly, didn't we?*

But Reinald had dodged the question. I'd assumed I wouldn't get an answer.

"It just feels to me that the ring of your name fits you better. The name Karen is one of such elegance. It's quite charming."

"*That's* the reason?"

"You'd prefer a different compliment?"

"No. I must admit I'm surprised, but it does strike me as just like you."

Was he lying to me? No... I didn't sense that. Rather, as strange as it sounds, I was cognizant of the fact that he was, in his own way, being entirely sincere.

*No, wait, but still...*

*Damn it. I'm not used to being spoken to that way. My cheeks are flushing.*

"I don't want to take up too much of your time," I said, "so I'll take my leave. I must inform the family that we've had a most fruitful discussion today."

"I pray the trust we have in one another remains firm."

"As do I. Now that we've come this far, I believe we'll only tread further in the right direction."

"Indeed. Safe travels on your way home."

We hadn't even talked for an especially long time, yet I felt completely exhausted. I met with Whateley and informed him that the negotiations had gone well. Whateley had already sensed as much, and his mind was already on the topic of the future.

"Once we've reported the news to the Kirstens, shall we relocate to Conrad?" he asked.

"It will depend on how my brother reacts, but I'm also worried about Wendel. Having Emil around has been good for him, and I'm not sure I want to separate the two so quickly."

"I don't mean immediately. Naturally we'll keep an eye on how things play out, but I believe the time has come to talk with Master Wendel about it all."

We'd already ascertained what Wendel wanted in terms of his future, so Whateley was referring to how we'd had yet to have any kind of deep discussion with the boy about the day of the attack and his family. Though we hadn't actively been aware of it, it was possible that on some level both Whateley and I had been avoiding it.

I could stay calm and composed when I had something else to think about, but when I was given quiet and time to myself, I was useless. I stared out of the carriage window and sighed.

"I know it might be improper to say such things, but at times like these I have the most indecent thoughts and feelings run through my mind," I said.

"Indecent?" asked Whateley.

"It's nothing especially horrible, but if the margrave were to spring back to life, I feel like I'd have to stop myself from slapping him. And yes, I realize violence against the elderly is abhorrent."

"If he were here before us now, I might well do that same thing," Whateley admitted.

"I want so badly for him to be here, and yet he doesn't even have the heart to haunt us."

The Margrave of Conrad was a good husband and a fine teacher, but in his failure to return to us—as ghost or otherwise—he was lacking. I won't say it was a failing, exactly; more like a minor demerit. Complaints bubbled up in us like water from a spring, and I felt that those of us who survived would see the days through while we shared our grievances, reminiscing on those we had lost. I hoped that one day Wendel might join us in

such minor grumblings, but none could say exactly when such a day might come.

We ran into Arno just as we were entering Saburova manor. Given that there was no better time than the present, I called him to the terrace. He was with Achim, and he had been quite out of sorts after I'd consulted him regarding Conrad's guardian.

"I never meant to say anything quite so harsh," Arno said, "but I apologize for putting you through that earlier. I consulted with father on the matter afterward, and he had some harsh words of his own, this time for me. He told me our family is all you have left to rely on now, and so…I want to consider a way to do things without causing you any harm or grief…"

"That's so thoughtful of you," I said. "And I must apologize, seeing as you've clearly put lots of thought into the matter, but the guardianship is exactly the matter I want to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Conrad's guardian has just been confirmed."

It came as a great surprise to me that my father had talked Arno around. He was no longer the face of the family and was firmly positioned as Arno's consultant. Nonetheless, I couldn't work the man out. Perhaps it didn't help that I avoided having to see him…

"I asked Sir Reinald to take the responsibility," I continued. "I called you here to let you know that he accepted."

Arno's and Achim's responses were like crystallizations of their very personalities. Arno's eyes went wide with complete and utter shock, while Achim looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. The one who snapped back to his senses first was the one who technically wasn't my brother, but may as well have been.

"What?! Wait… Karen… What in the… What were you thinking?!"

"What do you mean, 'what'? I went looking for potential candidates for guardianship, and Sir Reinald fit the bill."

"That's a problem! Do you even remember what I told you?! I said it clearly, I told you *not* to get mixed up with the Rodenwald family!"

"I remember. And I didn't ask the Rodenwald family. I approached Sir Reinald as an individual. I don't know Sir Zakhar nearly well enough to approach him about such a request."

“That’s even worse!”

Achim was furious…as expected. I’d already had an inkling of how Achim would react when Reinald’s name was brought up. He’d told me not to get mixed up in battles for power, and his anger here was proof of that. I was grateful to him for how he felt, but the die was cast and the bets had been made. There was no backing out now.

Achim took a step forward, but Arno stopped him.

“Now’s not the time for rage,” said Arno. “Karen, given that you’ve already discussed matters with Reinald, I have to assume that you’ve thought this through. Will you share with me your reasoning for your decision?”

Arno had been shaken out of his shock by Achim’s shouting. I was struck by the way in which the two of them so perfectly balanced one another.

“I can’t speak about everything, but I came to this decision because of worries regarding Conrad’s future. I went the way I did because I can’t simply burden the Kirstens with such problems.”

“And Reinald has already agreed to it, yes?”

“We haven’t signed anything official yet, but the plan is for him to help us rebuild Conrad.”

“I see. I gather you also know who he has behind him, then.”

*So Arno knows too.*

“Please don’t misunderstand,” I said. “I was worried about you, really, but this was not a decision I made on my own. It was a decision the entire Conrad family agreed upon.”

“I assumed so,” said Arno. “It’s not something you could have done alone, and I also get the feeling that Reinald is not a man motivated to acts of charity for charity’s sake.”

That was why Arno was doing his best to understand where I was coming from. He sensed a method to the madness, and dropped into silence for a time before posing me a question:

“Is your worry the royal family?”

“That’s a part of it, yes. I thought long and hard about putting Conrad in the care of the Kirsten family, but I ultimately decided that we should form a network of our own.”

If Conrad—and by extension, me—were to fall under Arno’s care, then we would always be under Kirsten protection, even if something were to befall Arno. If we had our own connections, however, then we could stand on equal footing, supporting one

another side by side. This struck me as a more beneficial state of being; in times of emergency, Kirsten could aid Conrad and vice versa as the need arose.

"While there's so much more I'd love to say on the matter, it's clearly already been decided," said Arno.

"Young master...!" cried Achim in disbelief.

"Putting aside whether or not it turns out to be a disaster, we've no choice but to accept it. Falkrum has already requested the empire's military support; the empire is only going to get more involved in matters from here on out. When we consider Reinald's connections, we cannot say for certain that this is a bad move."

"So you're okay with it?" I asked.

"More to the point, I've no reason to demand that you don't go through with the arrangement. I want our family to survive just as much as you do yours, and I've no choice but to accept what I'm capable of at the present moment."

It made me happy that he didn't flatly refuse my decision out of nothing more than rage. Still, Arno's attitude only caused Achim to storm away.

"He just wants for you to live a quiet, peaceful life," Arno said. "On top of that, the attack on Conrad left him in horribly low spirits. To him, you've just gone and made things all the more complicated for yourself."

"I can understand that. You're a big softy when it comes to Achim, aren't you?"

"I'd barely make it through the day without him by my side. He'd only get a big head if he knew, however, so keep that between you and me."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he felt entirely the same way..."

Arno and I needed people like Achim; people who would share their anger with us face-to-face. Arno knew this, and so he always kept Achim near.

"I don't want to see the two of you on bad terms," said Arno. "Would you go after him?"

"I'm way ahead of you."

Achim was on his way out of the manor. I hurried to catch up, but even when I called out to him I was ignored. He didn't pay me any mind as he walked out the doors; perhaps he thought that if he made it outside I'd simply give up. The guards *did* try to stop me, but once I pointed in Achim's direction they let me go,

at which point the chase was on.

"Don't just leave me here!" I cried.

"Why are you following me?" Achim barked.

"*Why*? Because you bolted!"

As he spun to glance at me, it was all too clear by the look on his face that he was far from happy.

"Go home," Achim said. "A noblewoman shouldn't leave her residence without a guard."

"But I've got you."

"I just want to be left alone. I don't have time to play bodyguard."

"Then I'll just follow you."

Achim didn't stop walking, so I didn't stop following. He kept his eyes straight ahead, the irritation clear in every line of his face.

"I can't play the part of the kind older brother right now, okay?" he said.

"If we go back to the manor, you can say whatever you like. I'll take it. Then we're done."

"But you don't even listen when I talk to you!"

"I might not back down from my decision, but that's a different matter entirely than not listening."

"So what, then? You came out here for a scolding? How very admirable."

"You can say whatever you like, if it makes you feel better."

Achim took long strides. It was a struggle to keep up with him. I was practically jogging, and when I started to get short of breath, Achim stopped. He looked down at me, unimpressed.

"You're an idiot," he muttered.

He just came right out with it. But it was too late for such words now, and in any case, I didn't feel any real hatred in them. I looked up to meet his gaze.

"You're only here because Arno sent you," Achim continued. "Just go back to the manor already."

"Surely I didn't chase you all this way just for you to say *that*."

"Look. I'm in the mood for some company in the gentlemen's quarter, if you catch my drift. I can't have some young noblewoman tagging along."

"Oh, is that so? I'll just accompany you partway and take a hansom cab home. Easy."

Achim responded with a heavy sigh.

“You just want to buy something to eat, don’t you?”

“Not in this outfit. I’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

I figured I’d go somewhere a little nicer, do some shopping. Achim trudged ahead, but his shoulders were noticeably slumped. He shoved his hands into his pockets and began grumbling as he walked.

“Sometimes I can’t stand my own good nature. Especially today. It irks me, to the very bottom of my heart, that I’m here looking after a girl who I think of as my own sister, and she won’t even listen to a word I say…”

“That’s who I am, it’s who I’ve always been. I know you’re mad, but sometimes I, too, have to stand my ground. I can’t just fall back on Arno for everything.”

“So you’re not going to listen to my scolding, then?”

“You never said anything about not speaking back.”

*How many years has it been since Achim and I last argued like this?*

Without warning, Achim spun on his heels and headed back to the manor.

“What about the gentlemen’s quarter?” I asked.

“Not in the mood anymore.”

So he wasn’t going after all. What a pity; it looked like all we were doing was taking a stroll.

“And by the way,” I said, “you stormed out back there without a word. What about Arno’s protection?”

“You really think I’d just leave without a second thought? He’s trained other very capable guards; I’m just the one he trusts the most.”

“I never notice anyone but you, so I suppose they simply don’t leave much of an impression.”

I mused over the thought aimlessly, then realized that Achim had matched his pace to my own. Perhaps he’d cooled down a little.

“You’re not coming back to the Kirsten family, are you?” he said.

“I’ve thought a lot about it all, and I think for now it’s best that I don’t.”

“So you’ll spend the rest of your life serving a duty to Conrad?”

“Not the entirety of it, no, though I intend to watch over things until they settle. A decision you’re against, I gather.”

“I’m against the idea of you becoming the face of Conrad,”

Achim replied. “I know what the young master said, but…”

I could not fathom the entirety of Achim’s anxious worries. However, I did gather that he was at least a little vexed, frustrated.

“I’m not saying that you shouldn’t lend Conrad a hand,” he continued. “But can’t you come back? To the Kirstens? The young master’s going to do his utmost for you, and I’ll give everything I have to see you protected. There’s still time to stop things going through with the Rodenwalds.”

“I already told you my opinion on the matter. *I’m* against the idea of putting all the burden on Arno’s shoulders.”

“Do you really get it, though?”

“Get what?”

“Conrad has *fallen*. All you’ve met with are horrible experiences as a result.”

Achim’s face was twisted in discomfort. It was so rare for him to reveal what he was really thinking. He really did care for me, and so my attitude rarely mattered; he couldn’t stay angry at me for long.

“You still have nightmares, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes…”

“It’s *okay* to be supported. Why do you insist on thrusting your own feet into the mud? There’s an easier way. Let us protect you.”

“You already are. It’s enough.”

“It’s *not* enough.”

Achim practically spat the words out. He was sulking, and I couldn’t help but giggle at the sight; he really was an excellent bodyguard. A guardian, really. My reaction only further ruffled his feathers.

“What are you laughing at? Is it wrong to be overprotective?”

“It only makes me happy. Don’t take things the wrong way, brother.”

“You always call me that at times like these. That’s not fair.”

“Oh, it’s fine. These are the times it simply *fits*. Come now, don’t slouch like that.”

“Stop it. The last thing I need is people thinking a hug is all I need to mend my mood.”

He didn’t really hate it; he just had to push back. If I didn’t pester him for it, he’d lose face. But there was nothing else for it; I reached out and wrapped my arms around Achim’s neck,

squeezing tight. I realized then that I'd yet to actually thank him. I'd been so busy, but that hardly felt like an excuse.

"You're too solid to be worth hugging," I said. "And you're too big."

"I implore you, call it muscle. I've grown up, you know. I'm big enough to protect you all."

Achim wrapped his arms around me in turn and squeezed. He was someone I could trust. Another sibling who'd promised to look after me. Our hug was like a message: we weren't children anymore, and we didn't have to avoid speaking our feelings aloud.

So I apologized.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say that. I hate regrets, and I'll only feel worse that I didn't reach out sooner."

"But even now, you watch over me. I can feel it."

"That's rich. When did you last have an inkling as to how I felt?"

I laughed.

"Ouch," I cried. "Ouch!" He was squeezing me so tight I thought my bones might break. I tried apologizing again and again, but it was some time before Achim finally let me go.

When I returned to the manor, Wendel came out, having just spoken to Whateley, and the three of us gathered for another discussion. Little by little, we explained to Wendel what he needed to know about the Conrad guardian and our thoughts on the future. Thanks to Whateley's patient explanations, Wendel quickly accepted it all. It would still be a while before the three of us could talk about those who were gone, but all we could do for now was make the most of things.

"When everything calms down, let's go to Arno's house to get Sven's things," I said. "Arno has left his room untouched, and we've his blessing to take what we like."

"Okay..." said Wendel. "If his pens are still there, I'd love to have them."

Emil and Gerda were also a source of strength for Wendel. Emil was someone he could talk to, while Gerda...gave him tasks with which to stay busy. Or to put it more bluntly, she had terrible morning sickness.

"Everything makes me feel ill... Food, smells, and I don't even know how to explain it, but even sound too... Ugh..."

Gerda was being hit hard, both physically and mentally, and spent most of her time lying in bed. Fortunately, the tea Doctor Emma had once sent her seemed to help ease her suffering, and so Wendel took the remaining tea leaves, checked them against the book he'd brought from Conrad, and was able to mix another batch.

Having his hands full seemed to be good for Wendel, and we were happy to leave him to a job he could really throw himself into. Whateley and I thus made a trip to the Conrad villa so as to help Conrad's survivors find work. Ben was there, as was Hil, and with them was a decidedly nervous Humphrey. Humphrey was covered in scratches, and I gathered he'd been through some tough training, but I didn't have any words for him.

According to reports, he was as trustworthy as Hil, and spent his days silently honing his swordsmanship, chopping firewood, and happily taking on any heavy lifting around the place. Everyone believed it was action driven by regret and the powerlessness that came from being unable to protect the place he called home.

Only Hil, Ben, Whateley, and I knew of Humphrey's betrayal. Nobody else seemed to have cottoned on to the truth; on the way to the capital, we'd said he was simply recovering from his injuries, and everyone took it as fact. There was no way for me to know how much extra weight this misunderstanding might have placed on Humphrey's shoulders, but this was another kind of punishment he had to bear.

Reinald's list of conditions for guardianship was nothing to speak of, really. The most memorable thing about them, in fact, was Whateley's sigh of relief upon seeing them; he'd worried that Reinald might make things difficult for us.

The state of the country was relatively calm, though rumors of Latoria still drifted about. And yet, there was movement of a sort, and it was with a most serious expression that Arno informed me of what was going on.

It had to do with the princes, David and Demyan.

A duel between them had been officially set.

# 6: A Battle of Brothers

Arno had already heard the rumors regarding the duel between the two princes, but he'd never imagined that one would ever *actually* come to pass.

"The king and queen stepped in to mediate, and Prince David took back the remarks he'd made," explained Arno. "Demyan, however, showed no interest in reconciliation of any kind, and instead he expressed his clear dissatisfaction at his elder brother being heir to the throne."

Arno looked pale. He held his stomach while he spoke. He took the rumors that swirled through the castle, picked out those closest to the truth, and broke them down for me into comfortable, bite-size pieces.

"This was a huge blow to the king's reputation," Arno continued. "The duel will settle things."

"And just as the dust is settling and the nation is beginning to calm," I said. "What happens once a victor is decided?"

"Should Prince David win, he'll make it so Prince Demyan can no longer voice his dissatisfaction. I imagine he'll also make Demyan renounce his heirship and pledge to serve the king in the position of viceroy."

"And if Prince Demyan should win?"

"In the unlikely event that he emerges victorious, which I highly doubt, he'll have Prince David step down as the next in line to the throne."

"But both outcomes will sway the foundations of the country. How could a duel so monumental be finalized so quickly?"

"It happened quickly *because* it's so monumental."

Arno went on to explain the speed of it all coming together. It was connected to his stomachache, naturally, and came down to the battle for succession. While Falkrum was keeping a close watch on the movements of Latoria, it was imperative that it show a unified front. A split between the princes would result in a split between Falkrum's subjects, and the country simply did not have time to deal with such problems. It had already requested military support from the empire, but there had been holdups; rumor had it the forces would arrive somewhere in the

next week and a half. Falkrum did not want to be putting its internal weaknesses on show for its visitors, and so if there *were* any buds of revolt growing, they had to be dealt with swiftly.

"Brother, you speak as if Prince Demyan doesn't stand a chance. Why is that?" I asked. "Is Prince David that much stronger and more skilled?"

"The strength and skill of the princes has nothing to do with it," replied Arno. "While in the past there *have* been examples of heirs doing battle, they now have representatives fighting on their behalf. Prince Demyan does have soldiers, of course, but he's always put more effort into studying the arts. The vast majority of those with any fighting prowess stand among Prince David's ranks."

"Which is to say that he has the advantage."

"Undoubtedly. He's also well-connected, and I have to assume he's keeping a close watch over any who might side with his younger brother."

"Then why are they even talking of a duel in the first place? I don't think anyone wants to get on David's bad side if they know he's got this in the bag."

David was destined for the throne. Demyan had to know this better than anyone, so why push for a duel? Was he so enraged that he would not even listen to the advice of his counsel?

"Going back to your original question, I think *that's* the very reason that the king and Prince David were so quick to agree to the duel."

"So the duel is just a superficial show to confirm an expected victor?"

"I wouldn't say that, exactly...though it's very likely this is a one-sided fight that Prince Demyan is picking. Prince David treats both the military and civil officers well. He's got the makings of a future king."

Everybody in the country had mostly gone along with the understanding that Prince David would be the next king. I knew but one side of him, and it seemed that he was not necessarily a bad choice as ruler.

Still, it gave me a headache, albeit not one quite as bad as Arno's.

"We can't let Gerda hear any of this," I said.

"Indeed. I've already made it clear to her servants that they're not to let her hear a thing, but I'd like you to remind them all the

same.”

“Of course. We can’t let anything happen to her child.”

“To think that she’s finally able to devote more time to just staying healthy… If her heart has to take another serious blow, she might break down.”

Gerda’s child was the child of the king, yes, but for us they were a nephew or niece. A child that shared our own blood.

“And it’ll be no laughing matter if her child is moved up in the line of succession.”

“It would be best for Prince David to ascend to the throne sooner rather than later. That, or for him to have his own child.”

Though it may come as a surprise, Prince David was, in fact, married. As he did not have any children, he also did not have any heirs; but were he to have a son, the child would then be considered the next in line. If all of these problems could just be solved and done away with, my brother’s stomachache would vanish just as quickly as my headache.

And while being made a potential successor to the throne was something to be happy for, this was not the case as far as the Kirstens—which was to say, Arno—were concerned. That was one of the reasons we were having this conversation in a separate room, hiding away from Gerda, and whispering just in case.

“Brother, I suppose you won’t be celebrating should you learn that Gerda’s child could become king, then?”

“Me? No, not in the slightest.”

I was certain that others had already been whispering about it.

“I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been thinking about it,” Arno continued, shaking his head and unable to hide how exhausted it all made him. “But any more responsibility than I already have to handle will just be far too much for me. I’m not good at ordering people around; I’m much better suited to being on the receiving end.”

“You know yourself so well, I’d expect you to be much better suited than most.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but you’re family; you’re clearly biased. I’m well supported on all sides, that’s all. I’m the one making all the blunders.”

Arno let out a sigh laced with a heavy gloom. Clearly, he was thinking back on all the mistakes he’d made in his position;

mistakes he'd never told me about. I got the sense then that the act of having to be the dignified lord of the Kirsten family was something of a source of suffering for him.

"As for the duel, Gerda is not entirely unconnected to proceedings," Arno continued. "The chancellor reached out to see about her attendance, but given that she has to be very careful during this period, I'm having her sit out. I'll go in her place."

"Oh, but you're so deathly afraid of blood. Will you be okay?"

"I…will not."

"That goes without saying."

"So quick to judge me, aren't you? In any case, I'll have Achim to carry me should I faint."

Achim raised a hand. He'd been in the corner, quietly listening to our conversation.

"I'll be ready," he said. "I'll have all the excuses prepared so nobody will even know you fainted while I carry you out. Even now, I've a choice selection depending on who we might run into, so faint to your heart's content."

"Knock it off, you idiot. I was joking."

"As was I. I don't think for a second that you'll actually faint."

If you asked me, Achim actually *did* have a number of excuses at the ready. Nonetheless, I had to find a way to see the duel myself, having discussed the matter with Reinald not so long ago.

"Er, brother?" I started. "Are women also allowed to observe the duel?"

"In the past, no, but we live in an age now where women can be made knights. There are no rules regarding gender…"

"As I thought. It's fine. Wonderful."

"Karen…?"

"I know what you're thinking: *Really?* Well, the answer is yes, really. I'm curious about something, so I'm going."

"Though the princes won't be fighting themselves, there could still be blood, you realize?"

He couldn't quite believe it. I could see it in his eyes. That said, if I'd been in his shoes I might very well have worn the same expression. After all, the wounds I'd been dealt from the fall of Conrad were still a long way from healed; and yet, now I wanted to see a potentially bloody duel in person? It was preposterous. And yet, there were things that had to be done, preposterous or

otherwise. This was all the more so when the duel was set to determine the future of our nation. And unlike the empire, Falkrum boasted no coliseums of its own; there was bound to be a limit on attendance numbers.

"I want to use Gerda's name, or otherwise the Kirstens', to get in. You'll allow that, I presume?"

"It's not a question of… No, I know how this goes. Even if I said no, you'd still try to find a way in, wouldn't you?"

"But of course. There are other ways in, I'm sure of it."

"Could you please *not* just admit to things like that so swiftly? Ugh, fine. Use my name, if you must."

He could sense it already; I was dead set on going. He was quick to grant me permission and quickly moved into some explanations for me.

"Attendance unaccompanied is strictly prohibited. You will either attend with someone you trust implicitly or otherwise stay with me."

"I can't attend with Whateley?"

"You can, but there are a great number of people in the castle that I want to keep you away from. He lacks the authority to turn them away, no?"

"Fair enough. I'm happy enough just to be able to go. Thank you. I'll use your name as you allowed."

And with that, my attendance at the duel was confirmed. The duel itself was to be held in three days' time; the rumors that swirled throughout the city streets were almost exclusively about the two princes. Even the servants couldn't hide their interest; Whateley told me that they too were just as excited to eat up every new rumor.

I didn't do anything of note in the time leading up to the duel, and I mainly just threw myself into the problem that was the Conrad domain. That along with helping my ailing sister on a daily basis.

The king visited Gerda often, and on one particular evening he even called for me. He'd shared pleasantries every now and again, but it was decidedly rare for him to arrange time to properly speak with me.

When I entered Gerda's room, she was on the sofa, leaning on the king, fast asleep. He had his arm wrapped around her shoulder, and I could see just how comfortable she was in his presence. He smiled as he carefully stood to his feet, laying

Gerda softly on her side and covering her with a blanket. He motioned for me to follow him and took a seat in the far corner of the room, then gestured for me to take a chair nearby.

"She called for you, but she fell asleep while she was waiting," the king said. "If I'd tried to talk to you in another room, she would have started sulking. We're lucky she fell asleep."

"She's been so tired of late," I said. "I'm sure she was relieved to see you."

"You think so? I do hope that, in some small way, I'm doing my duties as her husband… I'm sorry to put you through so much. You only just lost your husband, and yet here you are, always by your sister's side."

"I appreciate your deep kindness, but please, do not let it bother you. I am grateful simply to be able to stay occupied."

When the king talked about Gerda, something in his expression softened. He appeared different from the last time I'd seen him, though fatigue still drew deep wrinkles on his face as he sat back in his chair.

"I must talk to you about Gerda, and the child she carries," the king said. "I have already heard from Arno…that you have named Reinald as the Conrad guardian."

"Yes."

"Please, relax. I do not intend to berate you for your decision. I do not have the time to meddle in your affairs."

It was true that the king had barely a free moment to spare. With the empire dispatching troops, there were a great many he had to meet and talk with. He found brief moments in which to visit Gerda, but Arno wondered when the man found any time to rest.

"I lack the time to speak as king, but you are not attached to the world of politics. And so I wish to ask something of you, with regard to your sister's child."

"Yes, of course. Her child is sure to be a treasured gift for me as well… I will do my utmost to see them raised well."

"Yes, there is of course that. However, in choosing Reinald as the Conrad guardian, your plot is to make use of his connections to the empire, no?"

"Your Majesty, in no way is it my intent to conspire or scheme…"

"Then allow me to reword it a different way: in looking to regain the strength that Conrad has lost, is it not fair to say that

you will look to rely on…outside assistance?”

There was absolutely no way for me to deny it now. I assured the king that I had no ulterior motives, and he nodded.

“All I want to ask of you, and of Conrad, is this: should the worst come to pass, please take care of Gerda and her child.”

“Yes, of course…”

“I speak with no regard to the succession to the throne but request this of you simply as a father. Do you understand?”

There was something strange about his tone of voice; it was difficult for him to maintain his composure.

“Your Majesty, what you are asking of me is a most…”

“Yes, I know. However, I only speak in terms of possible futures.”

These words were extremely dangerous for a king to even utter, and I felt myself on the verge of drowning in the anxiety that swirled around them. All the more so when he said, in no uncertain terms, that I was to use whatever means, even my connections in the empire, to see Gerda and her child safe.

*He should be surrounded by people who can do this for him. Does this not imply that he has nobody to rely on?*

“When you reach my age, you realize that you cannot outrun everything through sheer youth alone. You must consider all the possible circumstances and prepare for them. My children are no different. I intend to do my utmost to see them protected, but the world will not always bend to my will.”

“You mean to say…”

“I speak to you just to be safe,” said the king. “You, in particular, have made inroads with the imperials as an individual, and so I must speak to you as a father, no?”

*As a father.*

I do not believe he was lying when he said it. He looked especially kind when he spoke of my sister, and it was here that I understood, for the very first time, that he had not selected Gerda to be his wife for her youth and her looks alone.

“I did my best to educate my sons to be bastions of the state, but I want Gerda’s child to live freely.”

“Your feelings on this matter have reached my sister’s heart, I’ve no doubt.”

My sister had told me that when she first became the royal concubine, she did not feel any love for the king. But since then, a love *had* bloomed. He had not been deriding my sister earlier

when he'd used the word "sulking."

There was much I wanted to ask. Would the princes be okay? Was there an issue of national power of some sort? But I swallowed the words down and left them unspoken.

"You have my word," I said. "I will do my utmost to ensure the two are protected."

But I did not tell him that I could not put an end to the unease that raced in my heart.

It was overcast on the day of the duel. It was the kind of weather that made one gloomy. It was horribly cold, and as soon as I woke and opened the window, I was met with gray. It did not feel like morning at all. I wondered if it was going to snow, but it never came. The wind was quiet and gentle, and even the chirping of the birds felt distant. It wrapped one in a lonely mood.

Gerda wasn't well, and Wendel, too, had a cough. I had them both rest. Whateley had intended to join me on my outing, but we hastily changed plans, and I set out from the manor alone.

"How terribly depressing," I muttered to myself.

I wanted to blame it all on the workings of the natural world, but it wasn't just the weather that was getting me down. On my way to the duel site, I watched from afar as several groups were heading to the castle to offer prayers. They were all civilians, but they varied widely in age from children to the elderly. It struck me as decidedly strange.

"Prayers for a victory for Prince David, I imagine," explained my guard. "There's a lot of children out because so many are coming from the orphanage."

"The orphanage?" I asked.

"It's not widely known, but Prince David is very passionate about seeing children who have lost their parents raised well and educated. It's not something he was told to do; he's simply donated large sums of money to the orphanage since he was young. He also visits frequently. He's very popular among the children."

Now here was a truth that I had a very hard time wrapping my head around. I almost couldn't believe my ears. Nonetheless, it seemed that the side of the man that I knew did not paint the entire picture of him. In truth, he was multifaceted. If I hadn't been so closely related to him, I might have thought it

interesting; at present, I only felt horribly conflicted.

The duel site I mentioned earlier was in fact something of an annex attached to the castle proper. In terms of construction, it was built from stone, and not entirely unlike Rome's Colosseum, just a much smaller version. In the past, it had been used for various duels and battles, with attendance limited to nobility only. It was nothing on the level of similar sites in the empire and was now more often used as a place for training soldiers.

Everyone was subjected to a strict check and search upon entry, and many nobles looking to get inside were turned away at the entrance. It was likely that they simply couldn't help themselves, being that the duel was set to potentially shift the future as they knew it. Given the size of the coliseum, however, attendance was strictly limited.

As for me, I was let in the moment I gave the guards at the entrance Arno's name. I passed through a thin, dim corridor. It was lit only by torchlight, and the rough walls were an intimidating sight; anything but elegant. Clearly it was constructed with only practicality in mind. It made one think that in the past, Falkrum had been far more acquainted with war.

Just as I began to feel like I was drowning in how oppressive it all was, we exited the tunnel, and a new sight spread out before my eyes. There was a stage dug into the center of the place, surrounded by raised seating for all the spectators. Many people were already in their seats.

"They're all here earlier than I expected..." I uttered.

I was here to watch over the proceedings with Arno, and though I had gone back and forth as to whether or not to say hello to Reinald, I remembered the rumors of my supposed "one-sided love affair" and gave up on the idea. There was no need to throw any oil over *that* fire. I walked the rows, looking for my brother, when someone spoke to me.

"Why, hello there, fine young maiden. Am I right to think you're looking for somebody?"

I heard the chuckle in his voice, and the way it looked to charm and enchant. I turned to it and was met by a familiar face.

"Si—" I started.

"No, no," he said, cutting me off, "I'm here as a duchess's humble painter. Would that you might call me an artist."

*The heck are you on about, fool?*

He wore a very high-quality jacket made generously with

leather. His hair was neatly arranged, and he made no attempt to hide any of the jewels that adorned his person. He was every bit the part he was playing as he shot me an easy smile and fanned the lady's fan he carried.

"Wh—" I began.

"What am I doing here? If you want an answer to that, join me for a spell to kill a little time? Oh, come now; yes, given that I'm the one doing the inviting, I'll even throw in a token of my thanks."

"I haven't even said anything. How can I say a word when you jump the gun like that?"

"My apologies. It's just, well, you see, there are girls out there who will scream the moment you even approach them. They're like bundles of tightly packed suspicion, just waiting to burst. My heart is a delicate, sensitive thing; I simply can't help approaching cautiously."

*Excuses, excuses.*

I had half a mind to rip that fan out of his hands and slap him right across the face with it. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to deal with the aftermath of such violence. In any case, though Six looked awfully strange, he also looked awfully *rich* and, more importantly, he was here after having made his way through the check at the entrance. He had as much right to be here as I did, that much was certain.

"My brother is waiting for me," I said, "so I can only join you until the formalities begin. I hope that's acceptable?"

"Fine by me. I'm only looking to kill some time anyway; I'm waiting for someone too. So please, relax; all I expect is a pleasant chat."

Six then spun on his heels and began to plod away. I'd brought two guards with me; I sent one to inform my brother that I would be along shortly and had the other accompany us. Six headed for an area where people stood around talking among each other. He held himself with such pomp that I almost believed he was a real noble. I couldn't help wondering what strings he'd pulled and tricks he'd played to disguise himself as such.

I kept a safe distance between us and the other spectators, to which Six offered a cynical smile.

"It's fine to assume that our conversation will go unheard," he said. "Anyone who tries to listen in will only remember us having

an ordinary, everyday conversation."

"That's quite a convenient spell," I commented.

"Naturally. That's exactly the reason I put such spells to use."

*How casually he says such things…*

"So, what are you doing here, Six?" I asked. "You're a mage working under Sir Reinald, and an imperial. But this? An artist? I *know* you're not just some pompous nobleman."

"Oh, you mustn't call artists pompous. Painting is a well-respected art form."

"It's not the artists I'm calling pompous, it's *you*."

"Not a lick of trust in you, hmm?"

Six's shoulders slumped, but the gesture felt put on. I regretted my choice to follow him.

"There's no especially grand or important reason for my being here," Six said with the wave of a hand. "When I said I wanted to see the duel, everybody had some reason to oppose the idea. So I decided I'd just use my own connections to get in, and I asked a favor of the duchess I'm friendly with."

"Is it a…healthy relationship?"

"Well, if there's a woman out there who can remain rational when a healthy and beautiful young man like myself is put in front of her, I'd love you to point her out."

"Wouldn't it more accurately be called duplicity on your part?"

"Not when I'm painting the pictures and giving them to her. I love her, I truly do. I hate everyone, after all, so my love is spread equally."

"What does that even mean?"

It sounded like anything but a sound relationship. The duchess could more accurately be called the former duchess, given that the current lord of the family was single. The duke died due to a disease of some sort, and the duchess, now a widow, had passed the rank of lord of the family onto her son.

*But wouldn't that make her forty? Perhaps fifty…*

I opted to stop thinking about the matter. I was not here to be regaled by Six's tales of romance.

"So with that in mind," he continued, "I'm not here as a mage, but rather just for fun. I happened to see you and simply thought I'd say hello. Nothing more. I'm very much an outsider when it comes to matters of the kingdom."

"An outsider, you say?"

"Indeed. Just here enjoying the show."

I didn’t know what he wanted. Six then pointed past the stage, to the other side of the stands.

*Arno?*

The moment I recognized him, the strangest and most unexplainable thing happened; his voice suddenly rang in my head. He’d been talking to Achim, but he noticed me with Six and looked surprised at the sight. A moment later, his voice simply vanished.

“Just another one of my tricks,” said Six, his nose raised high. “I told Reinald I’d let him listen in on any conversation he liked if he’d just bring me with him, but he shut me down.”

“Eavesdropping is, admittedly, a most repulsive pursuit.”

“What? But that’s exactly why it’s so much fun, no?”

He looked entirely serious. The two of us had so little in common.

“And why do you have so much interest in Falkrum’s duel today?”

“Why? Because it’s a quarrel between siblings in which the whole nation’s fate is a hapless passenger. It’s beyond foolish; how can you *not* be intrigued?”

“My family and I aren’t attending this like it’s just some show,” I said.

“But what do I care? None of your circumstances matter to me. Though that said, should both of the princes die, control of the nation falls to your family, doesn’t it? Perhaps *that’s* why you’ve come?”

There were certain things that were not to be said, and this was very much one of them. When I replied to Six with only silence, he offered a theatrical shrug.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? I only wanted to taste a little vengeance; no need to be so sensitive about it.”

“You really took my screaming that night to heart, didn’t you?” I countered.

“What did you expect? I hate leaving questions unanswered, and you left me without any answers.”

“Speaking of which, exactly what reason drove you to resort to breaking into my room that night?”

He then told me he’d been watching me the whole day. Naturally, I was horrified, but that was what it came down to.

“So then, what was it?” I asked. “What did you want?”

“I don’t think we need to linger on the matter any further,” he

replied.

"Excuse me?"

"It's no longer necessary."

I couldn't believe it. We'd dragged it out this long and he was just going to shut it down like that?

"More importantly," continued Six, "there's something else I'd like to ask you. When you and Ern were talking, I heard some words that were foreign to me. Nippon ji... Japa...neez. What are those words? What do they mean?"

"Oh, those? That's a secret."

It was some time ago, but if he'd been watching me all day, then I thought perhaps he might have overheard something like this. Six didn't look pleased, but it wasn't like I was going to just tell him, "Oh, *that*? Yes, well, actually we'd lived in a completely different world in our previous lives." That was the path to being treated as insane, and in any case it wasn't something I wanted him knowing anyway. I felt this the moment I realized that Ern clearly hadn't told him what the words meant either. The two of us thought similarly.

"It's all the rage among the young," I said. "Kids going through puberty always test the limits of language with one another. Nothing to think twice about."

"And yet my senses tell me the two of you feel anything but young."

He'd picked up a few odd words and they itched at him, apparently. Given that we weren't speaking about anything of importance, I stood to my feet.

"Leaving already?" asked Six.

"Surely you see the optics; I'm here, on my own, chatting with the duchess's lover boy."

"I see. Well, I suppose it can't be helped. All the best out there, my lady."

Six seemed reluctant to have me leave me soon, but I was done. The conversation wasn't exactly pointless, but I didn't feel I'd gleaned much use from it either. As I made my way back to the other side of the duel site, I found myself thinking about Sixtus. More to the point, something was bugging me that I couldn't put my finger on. I lingered on it for a short time before it suddenly hit me.

Six hadn't said a single word about Conrad. Until now, everybody I had met had expressed mourning, rage, or sorrow

at the loss of so many of Conrad's people. Though it was true they may have been hiding their actual thoughts and feelings, they nonetheless reacted in a way appropriate given that I had lost my husband and the vast majority of people who had called Conrad home.

Six, however, did not even attempt to wear such a mask, and he hadn't uttered as much as a single word about Conrad's people. His attitude did not strike me as one taken out of kindness. Rather, I couldn't help thinking that the residents didn't even register in his mind. All the same, he'd maintained a charming smile throughout our conversation.

"Is that what it means to lack humanity, I wonder?" I muttered to myself. "Or is he simply heartless?"

I turned around for a moment and spied Six taking the duchess's hand. He wore that alluring smile while he did so, and I felt my brow crease as if by its own accord. It was as though he were looking down on and belittling us humans as he did so. I felt disgusted and picked up my pace, and though I wondered exactly what manner of beings mages were, it was not the only thing on my mind.

The bigger question of the day was whom the goddess of fortune would smile upon to end the day's duel.

Everyone who had gathered here today had come because they needed to see, with their own eyes, which road we would soon take into the future. Some waited with fists clenched and faces pale, while others looked to accept the flow in a more jovial manner. Everyone approached the impending duel in their own individual ways. My brother, Arno, was one of the pale-faced, but he hadn't simply sat around for the last few days praying to the gods. He'd looked into the state of both princes, and while we were waiting he updated me with regards to Prince Demyan.

"Given that winning is all that matters in the case of a duel, one would usually spend whatever they could on an experienced warrior. However, it seems that Prince David blocked that particular path. If the rumors are correct, then Prince Demyan has likely elected his teacher, Geoffrey."

I knew the name. It belonged to the man I'd seen talk to Reinald on the night of the ball. He'd also tried to calm Demyan down after his fierce argument with David. I knew he was the prince's aide, but it surprised me to learn he was also Demyan's teacher.

“And this Geoffrey is someone that Prince Demyan trusts?” I asked.

“He’s been by the prince’s side since he was a young boy. He’s one of Demyan’s most trusted aides, if the rumors are to be believed. He was also a warrior of some renown in his youth, so it’s almost a certainty.”

Something about the idea that he was among the prince’s most trusted drew up suspicion in me. I found myself looking across the stage to the stands on the opposite side. There were three floors, with the king’s booth on the second floor and no spectator seats behind it. The Kirstens were seated opposite the king, to the right. The first floor was for military personnel, and it was there that Reinald stood with his troops. Though it was not my intent, he seemed to notice me, and for a moment I thought I saw the hint of a smile. There was no doubt, however, that I would have looked troubled.

“And who has Prince David elected as his representative?” I asked.

“I looked into it, but couldn’t get a hold of any worthwhile information,” replied Arno. “He’s got something lined up, though; of that I’m absolutely certain.”

Arno seemed to believe it would be a general with a wealth of combat experience, but we would not know until the duel was to commence. The seats continued to fill as the duel neared, and when the king arrived everyone stood to greet him.

The two princes were by the king’s side, both wearing equally stern glares. There was no sign of the queen, but there were rumors that her heart was broken at the rift between her sons. It seemed a given that she would not be in attendance.

“Today will be the last day you wear that arrogance upon your face, older brother,” said Demyan.

“Oh, shut up. First, you refuse to see what state the country is in, then you go and cause our father all of this stress,” spat David in response. “You’re an imbecile and a right prick, and I will see your vanity mended by the end of the day.”

I was immediately hit by an odd sensation. Though we were seated in relatively close proximity to the royal family, there was enough distance between us that I couldn’t possibly be hearing the princes speak. And yet, each word they spoke came to me as clear as day, and I felt suddenly suspicious. I looked at Arno, but it was clear to me that he couldn’t hear the princes’ conversation.

*“Over here.”*

The words were like the sense of a voice, and when I followed them I found myself looking Six in the eyes as he sat next to the duchess. He wore a look of supreme satisfaction.

*Now it makes sense. It’s all because of him.*

“It is *your* conceited thoughts that will see the nation plunged into fear, older brother. Father, if you leave the country in David’s hands, it has no future.”

“Ignore Demyan’s slander, father. They are the words of a fool; one who does not know what it means to bear the burden of a nation. With him steering a path to the future, the people will have no voice. Anyone who would go to these lengths all because of enmity toward their only sibling has no right to call themselves a future king.”

“Say that again, you son of a—”

How did the king feel about his two sons? His eyes showed little faith in them as he shot them both a glare.

“I believe that the royal princes have the makings of future kings,” he announced when they were both silent. “Though I am the one who wears the crown, with what wisdom I have I am unable to ascertain either of their principles. And so, we have no other choice but to make them clear, here today, by the method of our ancestors.”

The king made no effort to shout, but his voice was clear, and it echoed through the coliseum.

“As such, through this sacred duel, my successor shall be decided,” he stated.

It looked to me then as if both princes gasped. This duel would, by its end, determine who would inherit the throne. The princes would not do any of the fighting, however, and it was their elected representatives who would do so in their place.

Many thought it too extreme and behind the times for a king to be decided based on something so beyond simple. But these were the ways of Falkrum. The grimace on my face might have looked like worry, but before I could say a word, Achim spoke up softly.

“If you can’t bear to watch, don’t hesitate to simply close your eyes,” he said.

“Achim? What are you talking about?”

“I asked some people with a wealth of knowledge on past duels what to expect. It’s likely going to be even bloodier than

the younger spectators here are expecting, including me. I think that's why there isn't much in the way of elderly females in attendance; they knew what they were in for and opted out."

Achim was not joking. His expression was dead serious.

The king continued to speak, his voice resonating.

"Though this battle will determine a rightful heir, our ancestors would be dismayed to see brothers, bound by blood, take each other's lives. It is for this reason that the duel will be fought by representatives. Princes, bring forth the warriors to whom you have entrusted your fates."

The king's gaze was grave, and he would not allow for any more slander between his sons. The princes were for a brief moment overwhelmed by the imposing figure of their father, but they quickly called upon their fighters.

In the stone-constructed ring at the center of the coliseum stood a man of about forty. It was Geoffrey, the man everyone had expected Prince Demyan to elect. Next into the ring was Prince David's warrior, and the crowd erupted at his entrance. Even from the distance at which I sat, I was shocked. The man was dressed in military attire, but he stood more than two meters tall. He was a giant of a man, as big as a bear, and his clothes threatened to tear at the fierce muscularity beneath them. Before I could ask who it was, Arno spoke.

"Prince David elected Lindemann as his representative," he uttered with surprise.

"Who's that?"

It was Achim who answered my question.

"He's a noble, but look at him. That guy's a bear."

The spectators were so riled up and excited at the sight of the two warriors onstage that none took any notice of Achim's words.

"He's a famed bandit killer, and is said to have taken on a gang of more than twenty on his own. They say that in the past, he fought imperial soldiers at the border. A monster dressed in human clothing, in other words."

"Going a bit far there with that last bit, aren't you?"

It was decidedly rare for Achim to go so far.

"He's well known for being so brutal that even his allies can't watch him work," he replied. "Even small fry like me have heard the stories. I'd flee at the very sight of him. I wonder if Geoffrey's serious about taking him on?"

“Well, if what you say is true,” said Arno, “he has no other way out of this but to win.”

“Hey,” I said, noticing something. “I see they’ve got more than just swords, but is *that* allowed?”

“What do you mean, that?”

Lindemann’s gigantic body was a weapon all of its own, but he also held in his hands a gigantic battle-axe and had chains wrapped around his waist. Geoffrey, by comparison, had avoided heavy armor in favor of something simpler and easier to move in. He had a long shield and a longsword as his weapon of choice.

“Lindemann seems to be carrying a lot he can use as weapons…” I uttered.

“Calling it a ‘duel’ gives it an honorable air, but at the end of the day, it’s a fight to the death. All that matters is winning. But a single sword? Geoffrey’s not going to stand a chance with just that.”

“Achim,” said Arno, “watch how you speak. What if someone hears you?”

“Amid the roars of *this* crowd? I doubt it.”

I realized then that I’d been caught up in the ideas of an isekai fantasy. I’d imagined knights, military men, both armed with nothing more than swords. A fair fight, if you will, its combatants not unlike Achim or Nika.

Geoffrey and Lindemann glared at one another, and the tension between them expanded to fill the stands. A gong was rung, and the two men readied their weapons and faced off. Before I even realized, I’d clenched my fists and brought them in front of my chest.

Let me be clear: A duel in which lives are staked is no easy thing on the heart.

“If that stupidly big axe hits even once, it’s all over,” said Achim. “Geoffrey’s going to have to find a way past it, or he’s going to go flying.”

“Achim, I’m fine with you doing a play-by-play, but don’t frighten Karen, please,” said Arno.

“I’ll stop, if you’d like.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said. “I won’t follow most of what happens, so I appreciate the commentary.”

Achim was simply interested in the duel; he wanted to see how the battle would play out. I wasn’t particularly well-versed

when it came to combat, so I found his descriptions and explanations most helpful.

I was nervous, but not as much as I'd expected. Still, I felt so drawn into the air of tension drifting from the ring that I gripped a hold of Arno's arm and pulled myself closer to him. Besides the fact that he was so pale he looked more likely to faint than me, I was grateful I could lean on him.

The two warriors inched forward, gauging the distance between them with each moment. Lindemann opened his mouth without warning and let out a roar. It set a shiver through the crowd, and for a brief moment, silence fell. Lindemann strode forward and swung his axe. The blade was bigger than his own head, and though any ordinary person would have struggled to simply hold the thing with both hands, Lindemann wielded it with ease.

It was a moment in which head might have separated from body, but Geoffrey was a valiant warrior in his own right, and he raised his shield, deflecting the axe's blow. The crowd roared, and Achim let out an awed gasp. I was no different. Even though I was only watching from afar, I knew that I could never take such a blow.

Geoffrey had succeeded in staving off Lindemann's opening attack, but when he tried to counter with his sword it was knocked away by the handle of Lindemann's axe. He'd tried to step into range with his right foot, but Lindemann was far too strong, and Geoffrey found himself on wobbly feet.

Lindemann noticed his opponent's reaction and swung his axe again. This time Geoffrey flew through the air and tumbled across the ground. Lindemann gave chase and brought his axe down as if to break through the floor itself. Geoffrey slipped out of the way as the axe threatened to split him in half and leaped to safety with such agile movements it was hard to believe he was wearing armor. His sword, however, was gone, and so he reached behind his back and brought forth a dagger, which he held in an ice-pick grip.

Lindemann jumped in, but Geoffrey moved quicker. He weaved out of the way of the wide swing of the axe and struck Lindemann in the shoulder with the butt of his knife. Lindemann seemed not to feel a thing. I asked Achim why he didn't use the blade.

"If he stabs the knife into muscle that thick, he might not be

able to pull it back out."

Watching the back-and-forth of attack and defense was terrifying, but it drew us all in.

"Achim, if it came down to it, could you beat an opponent like that?" asked Arno, his eyes on Lindemann.

"You must be joking. The best option when faced with a monster is to run."

It was as honest an answer as he could give.

The sounds of battle echoed through the coliseum. Though Geoffrey had deflected another blow, he had abandoned his shield. Perhaps he knew it would be useless against another attack. Geoffrey's knife flashed through the air and Lindemann growled. Blood spurted through the air, along with the clang of metal as Lindemann's axe hit the ground. I squinted as something caught my eye and watched in shock as human fingers fell to the floor.

"Eww," I said, unable to stop myself.

This was no ordinary fight. I assumed that the duel was over, but Lindemann didn't even look down at his own fingers. Instead, his bloodshot glare was focused on Geoffrey, and he swung his arm with all he had. Geoffrey landed a few slices on it, but the wounds weren't deep, and in the next moment, he caught Lindemann's kick right in the ribs.

Geoffrey was wearing armor, yes, but he was also up against an opponent who could handle a battle-axe as if it were nothing. The power in Lindemann's legs must have been tremendous, because Geoffrey expelled all the air left in his lungs. He took a few punches in the face, spitting blood and mucus with each blow, then launched a kick of his own at Lindemann's shin before the two warriors split and put some distance between themselves.

"Now *that's* a nasty trick," uttered Achim. "Geoffrey's boots have steel caps, I'll bet. They'd hurt like hell. You have to wonder why Lindemann still hasn't fallen. A kick like that would usually break the leg. That's not even considering the state of his fingers. But he's still going?"

Was it the adrenaline rush that kept Lindemann on his feet? He'd let loose a growl of pain when his fingers had been cut off and his movements had dulled, but he stood squarely on his feet as he took the chain around his waist and wrapped it over his hand. He even swung it in a circle to make it clear to Geoffrey

that he was still in the fight. Now I knew exactly why Achim had called the man a monster.

Geoffrey, however, did not panic. He spat a mouthful of blood on the floor, then raised his knife, readying it by his face. It was unclear to me whether Lindemann took this as a challenge, but regardless it only had the effect of infuriating the giant. He roared a second time and launched his fist at Geoffrey's calm visage. And though Geoffrey had taken his opponent's fingers earlier, Lindemann's chains now acted like armor, making the hand and arm a bad target. With no other recourse, Geoffrey dodged and ran.

"Wow, I don't even want to *imagine* fighting someone like that," uttered Achim.

You could hear in his voice that he meant every word.

Geoffrey was managing to escape danger, but only because of the injury to Lindemann's leg. He continued to dodge and weave until an opening presented itself, at which point he leaped into range and sliced his blade along Lindemann's cheek. The crowd let out a collective gasp, but the wound wasn't fatal. Lindemann grasped Geoffrey's arm and launched a knee straight at him.

*If he wasn't wearing armor, that knee would have decimated his internal organs.*

That was the extent of the sheer power in the man's attack. The duel had been nonstop since it started, but now the pace of it struck me as strange.

"Is something strange going on with Lindemann?" I asked.

"I didn't expect you to notice," replied Achim. "There certainly is."

"Did the two of you notice something?" asked Arno.

"Lindemann might be a monster, but he's taken a lot of damage," said Achim. "Ordinarily, that would slow someone down; dull their movements. But Lindemann isn't showing much in the way of that. He's on something."

"And by *something*, you mean drugs?" I asked.

"Right on the mark. Ordinary painkillers wouldn't have this effect, so I think it's drugs of some kind. Something *strong*. Nothing you can find on the market."

"And drugs aren't banned?" I asked.

"Maybe if it were a test of strength, but either way it doesn't look like they were banned for this duel, no."

It was exactly as Achim had said earlier: all that mattered was

winning. I heard David tell his brother something along the lines of “If you’re going to concede victory, now’s the time,” but there I did not have a chance to linger on it.

And besides, Geoffrey showed no signs of giving up.

He had to be insane to stand up against an opponent so gigantic, so strong, and yet the light of determination in his eyes still had yet to fade. He watched Lindemann’s movements closely and used his nimble footwork to stay out of danger. His was a courage far beyond that of a mere mortal.

Unfortunately, in launching his attack on Lindemann’s cheek, Geoffrey had lost his knife. The sight of him unarmed left many spectators on the edge of their seats, but then he launched into an attack. At the very moment that Lindemann launched his fist, Geoffrey caught the chains wrapped around it and pulled them with everything he had.

No matter how good his balance was, Lindemann simply wasn’t ready for Geoffrey to catch him at the moment he attacked. And though he was able to stomp down hard to stop himself from completely toppling over, at that very instant Geoffrey reached out and, without even a hint of hesitation, gouged Lindemann’s left eye out. The roar that came afterward sounded more due to the loss of the eye than the pain the loss brought. As Lindemann swung his arm up to protect himself, blood burst from his arm.

It happened so quickly I couldn’t understand it at first, but it seemed that Geoffrey had yet another weapon, a hidden pocketknife or blade the size of a palm. He used it in an attempt to get to Lindemann’s other eye but was swatted away.

When would this duel end? We watched with bated breath as the two stared each other down, and suddenly Geoffrey’s arms dropped as he changed his stance. Neither Arno nor I could make heads or tails of it, but Arno was different.

“Oh,” he uttered, excitement lacing his every word. “It’s all or nothing now.”

All I could see was that something had changed in the air around Geoffrey. Everybody watching was drawn further in. *Just what would he do next?* we wondered. Lindemann, too, was more concerned with his opponent than the recent loss of his eye. Geoffrey lowered himself slightly and looked ready to spring.

And then came a moment of surprise. This was only natural; we’d all thought Geoffrey was going to take off running, but

instead he began to tilt forward, falling.

“What the…?” muttered Achim.

I, too, knew that something was amiss. It was like Geoffrey had tripped or stumbled on something. Like his body had simply frozen for an instant. All who noticed it couldn’t help feeling that it was odd.

And yet, one of the people who noticed it chose to pounce on the opportunity that was presented. And it was then, as Lindemann launched his fist directly at Geoffrey, that the victor of the duel was determined.

Arno and I could not watch much of what happened next. Lindemann’s fists were heavy as they fell, and fueled by the rage of having had parts of his own body taken from him. His punches bored into Geoffrey, one after the other. If Achim hadn’t been kind enough to shield my eyes, I would have forgotten to close them. A few moments later, I heard a commotion as voices called for Lindemann to cease.

“You’ve done enough!”

“Is the other fellow okay?”

I opened my eyes timidly, but all I could see were Geoffrey’s legs, sprawled along the ground. The rest of him was hidden by the people surrounding him and trying to coax him back to consciousness.

“A mage is going to help with the healing,” said Arno. “Right up until the end Geoffrey was moving his hands, and this allowed him to avoid damage to his vital organs. He stayed conscious throughout.”

I didn’t even know the man, not really, and yet still relief washed over me. I had not liked the idea of it being a battle to the death. Relief was the last thing that Demyan felt, however. The eyes of the crowd began to settle over the king and his princes. Those who had seen that odd instant in Geoffrey’s movements wondered how the king would see things. The king, for his part, looked conflicted as the princes by his side argued with one another; David declaring victory while Demyan cried foul play.



“You saw the way he fell! I know it!” shouted Demyan. “If that hadn’t happened, it would be Geoffrey standing victorious in that ring! I demand this match be ruled a no contest!”

“Inglorious in defeat, aren’t you brother? Geoffrey or whatever his name is made a valiant effort, but you heard the echoing of Lindemann’s fists as he secured victory. As a member of royalty, you should look to take this defeat with grace.”

“What about you? Resorting to the coward’s route of drugging your representative to the eyeballs! What’s to say you didn’t drug Geoffrey too?!”

“Listen to your drivel, would you?”

Neither man was willing to back down. The king watched them in silence as a doctor approached and whispered something in his ear. Then he raised his hand and brought the two princes to silence.

“Rather than showering each other in opinions, we are better off asking Geoffrey directly,” said the king. “The doctor informed me that he is conscious. Bring him here.”

“Father!” cried David. “Geoffrey is one of Demyan’s aides! It goes without saying that the man will lie to bring me down!”

“Do neither of you feel even a single hint of *any* concern for the brave men who staked their lives for your sakes?” the king said, pausing to let out a long, heavy sigh. “You, who will shoulder the coming generation; have you not even *considered* the idea of putting aside your differences? The queen and I both told you how, in deciding things here, we thought it might mend the arrogance filling your hearts.”

“Of course,” replied Demyan. “I will never forget the generosity you have both shown.”

“The future will crumble if the king cannot make peace with and work together with his aides,” said the king. “How happy it would make me for the two of you to remember just that one important lesson.”

“That’s exactly why I haven’t yet abandoned Demyan completely,” said David. “Were he just a cousin, or just some relative, I would have cut him down already.”

The king was intent on hearing from Demyan’s representative directly. Geoffrey soon emerged and, to my surprise, was leaning upon Reinald for support. It came to light then that it was he and his officers who had been first into the ring to stop Lindemann when the fight was considered over. Given the circumstances,

however, the only people to create any kind of stir at his presence were fickle noblewomen and those who had no connection to the situation.

Geoffrey had been beaten to such a pulp that the man he'd once been was nigh unrecognizable, but he was nonetheless conscious and of sound mind. He knelt before the king and bowed his head.

"Geoffrey," said the king. "Do you remember the battle you just took part in?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I was humbly named Prince Demyan's representative and fought for him in the duel just now, but…at the end I…suddenly lost control of my body…"

He likely had cuts inside his mouth; talking looked rather painful for him. Even in just his voice, I could feel how much it must have hurt. The king had asked him about the odd moment in the duel during which he'd frozen, but Geoffrey struggled with how to express what happened.

"Demyan believes you were drugged. What do you make of the idea?"

"Drugs…? I was especially careful about what I ate before the duel. I do not think it possible…"

"So it couldn't have happened, in other words?"

"That's right, Your Majesty."

Almost everybody in the stands buzzed with curiosity. They wanted to know what was being discussed. I, meanwhile, could hear the whole thing thanks to Six's meddling. Those who heard Geoffrey were surprised, likely because they'd shared David's worry that Geoffrey would give only an opinion that benefitted Demyan. However, though he seemed confused, he did not look as though he was lying about the strange moment that had occurred during the duel.

Geoffrey's answer left Demyan furious. His face went bright red. He even looked like he was about to attack the broken, battered man himself.

"Geoffrey!" he screamed. "You would dare betray me?!"

"Your Highness…I would never…" uttered Geoffrey in response.

"Enough, you fool," said David. "Speaking to your own aide like that…would you listen to yourself? He's your *teacher*. He obeyed your every selfish whim and fought valiantly against Lindemann. Surely that's enough."

The words were hard to believe, coming from a man who had drugged his own representative into an apparent frenzy, and yet they sounded sincere. I could not see Geoffrey's expression from where I stood, but I had no doubt that it was anything but happy. The king considered everything for a time, then spoke with his retainers.

"Making a judgment under these circumstances is not easy," he announced finally, and with some reluctance, "but ruling the duel a draw would be as much of a hindrance to you two princes as it would the royal retainers. As such, we deem David the victor of today's contest."

The king had moved to assure David's victory. I couldn't hide my shock.

"It's only appropriate," muttered Arno, leaning down to whisper. "The imperial forces will be arriving in a number of days, and if you consider that anything else might split the nobility in half, the best move is to name a victor. You could be looking at all sorts of internal conflict otherwise."

"But this result will only serve to tear the two princes further apart," I said. "Isn't that going to lead to just as much internal conflict?"

"The king realizes that too. But he had to make a decision."

It was a result none could truly approve of, but the king continued to address the crowd, moving on to offer Geoffrey words of praise.

"Though many may hold doubts as to the outcome of this duel, we must remember the brave efforts of its combatants and praise their..."

Wails echoed through the coliseum, loud enough that magic wasn't at all necessary to catch them. They were the cries of Prince Demyan.

"It can't be! It just can't! You are out of your mind! If *he* hadn't cheated, *I* would be the nation's rightful heir!"

He sounded deranged. All eyes were drawn to Demyan, but the situation immediately worsened the moment he drew his sword.

"You don't see it, father! If you allow this man to become king, then Falkrum has no future! All he knows is how to flatter those around him! He lacks intelligence! And you would let him be king?!"

Worried murmurs filled the coliseum, and around David

wafted an aura of those ready to strike to kill. Among them was one of the guards I had seen before at Saburova manor.

"Demyan! Are you out of your mind?!" shouted David.

Demyan replied with just a hate-filled glare. Geoffrey and the king called out to him, but Demyan turned all his pent-up rage on them.

"You fool!" cried the king, panicking. "You would draw a sword at a time like this?!"

The prince was displaying the epitome of disgraceful behavior, in front of an audience no less. It did not seem as though things would end well. The king continued to cry out, but to his dismay his words fell on deaf ears. To make matters worse, Demyan turned on his own representative, showering him with abuse.

"I *chose* you! I gave you this huge responsibility because I *believed* in you! And look at you! Useless! You said you would die for me! You're a liar! And now you would turn on me?! A future king?!"

Demyan was completely, utterly consumed by his own rage. He was the very image of a child throwing a tantrum, and it only would have made those who backed him feel suddenly more hesitant in their choice. The king must have thought likewise, because he wanted to settle things as quickly as possible. He raised a hand, likely a sign to compel Demyan to cease his shouting, but before he could get there the prince had already swung his sword. David's guards had been ready for this and so they were all fine, but the king was taken off guard.

"Stop this!" he shouted. "Can you not see that you are only making things worse?! How many times have I told you to listen until one has finished speaking?!"

His shouts were that of a parent scolding a young child, and they made the king Demyan's next target. He took a nearby water pitcher and threw it at his father.

"You would dare attack our own father?!" shouted David. "You fool!"

The assault on the king was the last straw. Soldiers moved toward Demyan with their swords drawn, but Demyan clearly had some experience, for he was able to keep them deflected and at a distance. The soldiers, however, were hesitant, either because the prince was wilder than they expected or because they knew that they had to keep him alive. Demyan saw this as

an opportunity and tried to make a run for it, but that was when a spear thrust through an opening and plunged itself into the prince's body.

The tip of the spear opened a hole in Demyan's stomach. The prince was frozen, mouth agape, his eyes on the man who held the weapon. Demyan's attacker strode out from among the soldiers, and we saw that it was David, his face twisted in anguish.

"You damned idiot," he spat. "This never should have been anything more than bickering between brothers."

He pulled the spear free, and Demyan collapsed. The truth of the moment, that David had stabbed his own brother, spread like a wave through the coliseum. I saw the slight flailing of Demyan's arm as he spasmed on the ground. Geoffrey, who happened to be right there, took the prince's hand and stared down at him, dumbfounded. He clasped the hand of a prince on the verge of death.

"Prince Demyan," he uttered.

His voice never reached the prince. The king turned on David in a rage, but the remaining prince only shook his head. To his mind, he'd had no other choice.

"David!" shouted the king. "What have you done?!"

"Father, he was my brother, and so I endeavored to endure his abuse. I would have forgiven him his outrages had he been a loyal servant of the throne. I had promised I would make him aide to the king upon my ascension, but the moment he leveled his sword at you he threw away all the trust I had put in him."

"You think that reason enough to kill your own brother?! Somebody call a mage!" cried the king, dropping to his knees before Demyan's body. "My son! Somebody—"

Nobody could have predicted what happened next.

The man had been slumped on the ground, badly injured, and so none had considered him even a minor threat. He should have been unarmed, but with a sword in hand Geoffrey leaped, kicking David's guard out of the way. No sooner had he landed than his sword flashed across Prince David's body, slicing him cleanly in two. The prince's two halves fell to the ground, and silence filled the coliseum.

The first one to move was Reinald, who until that moment had been just another part of the background. He sliced quickly across the now stationary Geoffrey's back, bringing the man

down.

The crowd was left speechless, but only for a brief moment. Screams soon pierced the air as confusion burst through the stands. The screaming and panic intensified. The coliseum had imploded into chaos. Among it all, four words spilled from my lips.

“What in the world…?”

The king surveyed the sight before him, as stunned and stupefied as I.

*How could this have happened…?*

The two heirs to Falkrum’s throne had been lost almost simultaneously. It was a moment in time that would be forever written in the nation’s history books.

# 7: A Stage Set for a Kingdom's Fall

The princes David and Demyan were dead. The quickest to rise among the chaotic circumstances was, naturally, *not* the king. The man had lost himself in the loss of his two sons, and he could do nothing more than stare down blankly at their corpses.

"Hide the two princes! Hurry!"

The king's aides and a certain handsome blond began issuing orders, surrounding the king as they covered the princes' bodies. Somebody ordered the exits blocked, but another person disagreed, saying there were far too many witnesses. Later I realized they were discussing whether or not they could cover up the deaths, which was why they'd wanted the exits blocked. However, far too many were already scrambling to leave. A huge number of people had seen the whole thing play out. It was impossible to tape everybody's mouth shut, so it was only a matter of time before news of the princes' deaths spread across the country.

"Brother, what are we to do…?" I asked.

I pulled at Arno's arms but got no response. I turned to him when I felt it, and everything fell into place.

"Achim," I said.

"Uh…yes? What is it?"

Even Achim was at a loss for words as he stared blankly at the king's seating area. I gestured to Arno with my eyes, careful not to draw any attention, at which point Achim realized what I was trying to tell him.

Arno was unconscious, but he had deftly managed to achieve the feat while still standing. Achim said nothing as he took Arno's shoulders and gently brought Arno down into his seat. Anybody who wasn't watching closely would have only thought he'd simply decided to sit down.

"Are you okay?" Achim asked me. "Lie down if all of this has left you feeling sick."

"I'll be fine."

I'd been able to avoid seeing the fates of the two princes directly, but perhaps the reason I could still stand was because of how absurd the whole situation was. That, or perhaps it was

that in Conrad I had come face-to-face with death already. For all I knew, it could have been both. Whatever the reason, I was amazed that I hadn't fainted. All the same, I felt myself wanting to be sick as I ran over the particulars, so I tried not to think about how the princes had died.

"You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes, I'm okay," I replied. "Please keep an eye on Arno."

"No, you should sit by his side and take his hand," said Achim. "It'll make hiding his state much easier. I wouldn't recommend trying to leave right now anyway."

"Oh?"

"Look at the exits. See how choked they are with panicked nobles? Try to navigate that and you'll only get hurt."

I turned my gaze to the rather cramped exit passageways. The danger had passed, but people were still scrambling to get out, either consumed with terror at the sight of a man being cut in half or desperate to start telling people about it. Everybody likely had their own reasons.

Six's spell had worn off by that point, though I doubt I would have heard much over all the panic and commotion. As the circumstances dawned on people, the confusion intensified, and soldiers began ordering everyone to stay calm. It was chaos; noblewomen had fainted, and a few of the elderly looked to be suffering from heart attacks.

"This is...not going to calm anytime soon," muttered Achim.

"I agree," I uttered. "But who would have thought...the princes..."

I watched as Reinald's soldiers casually carried a body between them. I was peering at it through the gaps in the crowds so it wasn't clear, but it looked to me like Geoffrey. Someone barked for him to be taken away posthaste, and even with the rough handling the body remained still. I thought about how Reinald had cut him, and how he must have died, but as I squinted for a better look I saw one of Geoffrey's fingers twitch. I wondered if I'd imagined it, but before I could look again the body was out of sight.

"What happened to the man who killed Prince David?" I asked.

"He took a sword straight to the back. He wasn't moving afterward, so I have to assume he's dead..."

Achim hadn't seen the twitching, then. And while it was possible I was mistaken, even then I had no reason to chase

after the body.

"We'll wake the young master while things calm, then we'll have to get back to the manor on the double," said Achim. "We must get back before word of this reaches your sister."

"Oh, you're right. She mustn't find out. It's imperative that we only tell her when the time is right."

The last thing we wanted was to place such heavy, stressful news on Gerda's shoulders. Before now, there had been two princes ready to ascend to the throne, but the pressure to birth an heir, a pressure that now emanated from the entire nation, was certain to be on an entirely other level.

*Ah, I see. So many of the people hurrying to leave now have to discuss and plan for an entirely different future.*

As my thoughts swirled, sobbing could be heard from the king's booth. It was the king himself.

"In any case, nobody knows what the future holds now," said Achim. "And what's more, your sister and the Kirsten family are going to be at the very center of it."

"No doubt."

I gave Arno a light shake, but the shock had been too much for him; he showed no signs of waking.

*And perhaps sleep is the best refuge for him at present.*

I looked out once more at the stands and saw Marquis Rodenwald standing as still as a statue as he tried to take it all in. His eyes were on Reinald and his officers, but I could not fathom why.

The topic of Gerda troubled us on our way home.

"How are we supposed to tell her of the princes' deaths?" asked Arno. "Do we tell her that her child might now be the next heir to the throne? She never wanted that."

"We don't know anything now. Everything hinges on how the king decides to proceed," I said.

"Oh, perhaps a close relative has a child the king might adopt?" Arno mused. "But wait, perhaps I can propose that His Majesty take another wife…or bear another child?"

"Arno, please. Calm down."

Given the king's age and the child who would soon be born, Arno clearly preferred the idea that somebody *else* be confirmed as the king's heir. Achim didn't think it would be nearly so simple, however.

“But most parents would prefer their own child to inherit what they leave,” he commented.

“Yes, you’re right… Of course, you’re right.”

“And Karen is right too; it does come down to what the king wants.”

Of course, the best thing would be for the king to live to a ripe old age, but if he were to die relatively soon, a close relative would likely handle governing the nation until the king’s heir came of age. The most likely candidate at present was none other than Arno, who knew this himself and was unsurprisingly beside himself with anxiety.

“Look, this isn’t something you’re going to be able to neatly solve in a single discussion,” said Achim. “Let’s focus on what you’re going to tell your sister.”

“Good call,” replied Arno. “We’ll refuse all visitors and limit how many servants see her. We *must* keep this under wraps. We’ll play things cautiously while we see how the situation develops.”

“That’s why I told you to calm down,” I said.

Arno let out an anguished sigh. He said that the nobility would be anything *but* calm about it all, but even that exceeded our expectations. The moment we arrived at Saburova manor, the steward informed us with some embarrassment that people were already requesting meetings with Gerda. There were a lot, and the number kept growing. Arno was furious.

“I know there’s no getting around it, but the princes have only just died, for heaven’s sake!” he cried.

Fortunately for us, the steward had realized that something was amiss, and thankfully Gerda hadn’t heard a thing. We quickly decided to turn away all the potential visitors and keep contact with Gerda to a bare minimum until we knew what the king had in mind. We were very strict with everyone—Wendel, Whateley, Emil, and of course the servants—about keeping the news from reaching Gerda, but the woman herself was in bed and feeling under the weather. Even a day later she was in no state to have a heavy conversation, and thankfully that left her oblivious to the tension in the air around the manor.

Achim left for town and, upon his return, gave us a status update.

“The nobles are running all over the place and visiting each other’s manors. The city streets are filled with carriages, and

everybody's trying to get a read on the future."

"Thanks for letting us know," I said. "And what about more generally?"

"As you can imagine, people are mourning the loss of the princes, and their fight is the talk of the town. Rumors about the Kirstens too."

The country had been thrust into chaos. The queen had collapsed in shock, and though the king had remained upright, Arno had gone to the castle first thing in the morning to discover that he wasn't seeing anyone. He was now resting in one of the manor's rooms so as to be ready whenever he was called upon.

"People are also saying that David's killer, Geoffrey, is dead. His family were jailed at dawn."

"You looked into it?"

"There's a lot of talk going around. And you wanted to know more about it, right?"

Achim was nothing if not capable. What would follow after Geoffrey's end, however, left a bad taste in my mouth.

"Geoffrey was single," continued Achim. "No wife, no kids, and his only family was a sick younger sister. No other relatives."

"What will happen to his sister?" I asked.

"A beheading, I expect. He may have been exacting vengeance for his master, but murdering royalty is considered the most heinous of crimes."

"As expected, then..."

It was not just the perpetrator who was punished for such a crime, but also their family and relatives. In that sense, it was fortunate that Geoffrey was without a wife and child. And though I felt something sour in my heart, I still couldn't quite accept the idea that Geoffrey was dead.

"He looked to be well into middle age, and yet he wasn't married?" I asked.

"The rumor going around is that his sister's illness was one of the mind. He didn't have any other relatives to lean on to look after her."

"Thank you, Achim. I realize that acquiring all this information couldn't have been easy."

"Don't mention it. But Geoffrey's sister? She's well-known in the neighborhood; it wasn't much trouble for me."

The fall of Conrad, the death of the two princes; all of this had left many worried about the future. I mulled over the letter Ern

had sent me and what it meant. Still, I was not so cruel as to abandon my family and flee.

As we were watching over Gerda and waiting for our opportunity, a letter arrived for me from Reinald. With the official papers being readied for his acceptance of the position of guardian, he wanted to meet with Wendel in person. The timing was awful and I wanted to avoid the meeting, but it proved impossible; Reinald's letter detailed that his schedule was quickly filling and making time would prove very difficult. He hoped we might meet as soon as the following day.

"Things are so hectic I feel like my head's going to explode," I muttered.

I longed for the days in Conrad when I could sit around sipping tea, my mind a blank sheet of paper. Unfortunately, I barely had time to dwell on the past, and quickly took off to Wendel's room to arrange things.

Before we knew it the following day was upon us, and we left for the manor Reinald specified. A little before noon a carriage came for us, and we proceeded past the gates that surrounded the royal capital to a cozy little house. The roads to it were in good condition, and so it was a smooth ride in the carriage. That said, it surprised me to be leaving the gates at such a time, and Wendel and Whateley were just as shocked.

Nika was accompanying us. Outside was just greenery. There were no signs of any houses.

"We look to be entering the forest," I said. "Does Sir Reinald have a villa there?"

"The plot on which the forest sits belongs to the Rodenwalds, so you can rest easy," replied Nika. "It's maintained regularly and well, and it offers a nice view."

"A nice place to gather wildflowers and herbs," I commented.

I felt Wendel's gaze piercing me: *"That's all you have to say?"* Still, I hoped he would give me a break; there wasn't anything else to comment on. As I gazed out the window, I noticed people walking the paths. They were all dressed differently, and taken one by one they simply appeared to be locals until one considered they were all equipped with swords and there were no fields in the vicinity. I asked Nika about it.

"You've a keen eye," she said, lowering her gaze and flashing a charming grin. "The people you see are all entrusted with Reinald's protection. The villa has no fence or walls to speak of,

so it's imperative we keep a firm watch over the area."

"Not even a fence?"

That was bold. I wondered if it was a show of bravado; one where they cared not if thieves got to their villa. Nika smiled awkwardly; she seemed to find it amusing.

"Reinald threw a tantrum of sorts. 'If I'm going to be surrounded by people all day,' he said, 'I at least want the freedom to live at the villa as I like.'"

"So even Sir Reinald falls prey to the occasional tantrum, then."

"Sometimes he knows nothing of the burden he places on us. He likes his freedom, and that makes for a troubling master."

"Oh? But you seem to enjoy it, Nika."

"You can tell? It's true; he asks a lot of us, but never the impossible. That's exactly what makes it so hard."

*She wears a smile now, but I'll bet he really does ask a lot from those who work for him.*

Wendel chimed in to the easygoing conversation, and before we knew it we'd arrived. As I mentioned a little earlier, the location was cozy and far too small to be called a manor. It would have been more accurate to call it a two-story home. If you were to discover it while out walking, you'd have been surprised by the sight of the open plot of land and the house built upon it.

With its pale brown roof and its white walls complete with crawling vines, the house had something of a rustic, almost surreal feel to it. As Nika had said, there were no fences, nor any walls; it looked rather defenseless, as far as noble homes were concerned. Still, the flowerbeds were well-kept, and the forest would have been a picturesque green had it not been winter. In modern Japan, it was a dream home of sorts.

Withered leaves crunched under our feet as we walked toward the door, our breaths leaving us in puffs of white. We weren't allowed our own guards on this visit, and seeing the place myself gave me an inkling as to why; it would likely be a source of trouble for Reinald if people found out how unprotected the place was.

"Please head inside," said Nika. "He's expecting you."

The home had double doors at the entrance, but they were of a far simpler making than most noble homes. Before we could knock, the doors opened and a boy a little older than Wendel invited us inside.

“Welcome,” he said.

His outfit showed he was the house chamberlain. It was he and he alone who showed us through the house; we saw no other people. The entrance hall wasn’t even a “hall” at all, and it was nothing if not modest. The interior made use of a light, pale timber, and it had a very comfortable atmosphere because it was kept so neat and tidy. Wall paintings were kept to a bare minimum, and there was nothing in the way of excessive decoration. One might have even thought it more impoverished than simple. At a brief glance, I guessed it had no more than ten rooms in total.

Reinald occupied the room at the far end of the house. It had a stone fireplace which had been fed with wood before our arrival. The room was warm and filled with the unique crackle of burning wood. The wavering flames brought with them a sense of ease, peace, and safety. Reinald sat on the sofa, lost in a book. By his side were several others; the sight gave me the impression of this house as a hideout.

“Hello,” I said. “Are we late? I apologize if we kept you waiting.”

“You’re fine,” Reinald replied. “I tend to lose track of all time when I find myself in the company of all these books I’ve gathered.”

Had it just been the two of us it would have been a relaxed greeting we shared, but Wendel brought an air of nervous tension. Whateley was accustomed to such situations, but even he looked unusually formal and on edge. It was with this tension in the air that Wendel bowed his head and spoke as Conrad’s heir.

“We owe you thanks for your aid as we were fleeing Conrad,” he said. “I know we have met before, in the past, but nonetheless I would like to express our gratitude once more.”

“I regret that I was not able to do more. How have you been since?”

“I’ve become a little more able to busy myself with other matters.”

“I see. That is admirable for one so young. Your father would be proud.”

“Thank you.”

I had not told Wendel that Reinald knew that Latoria was going to attack Conrad. Much like with Humphrey’s betrayal, I did not want his thoughts getting too muddled, nor his

suspicions running rampant. I had discussed things with Whateley and decided against sharing the information. Wendel had lost his family, and he was growing up and entering puberty with his eyes toward a positive future. More to the point, I did not get the sense that Reinald had desired Conrad's fall.

We took our seats at the table, at which point the chamberlain who had greeted us at the door served tea.

"I apologize for suddenly calling upon you like this," said Reinald, his legs crossed and his hands on his knee. "I can only imagine how busy the Kirstens and Lady Saburova are, and I appreciate you making the time. I'm going to have my hands especially full in the coming days."

"No, it is we who should be grateful for your consideration," I said, "being that we are the ones who came to you to request your support as guardian. That, and at least on the surface, things are still rather quiet."

"The two princes have only just passed away. To make a commotion now would only look like an act of disrespect. Wouldn't you say, steward?"

"Indeed," replied Whateley.

Perhaps this fact would strike one as odd. But it's true, Whateley was right there, seated with Wendel and myself. This was per Reinald's request; he had wanted to see both Wendel and Whateley, and so they had both come. Whateley was adamant that he was just a steward, but at present he was also Wendel's teacher and the man most in control of Conrad's affairs. He was a necessity for talking to the kingdom's civil servants, and without him, Conrad was done for.

Wendel and Whateley were the key players in today's discussion. I largely sat back and listened, and as Wendel and Reinald spoke further, I found myself even more on the conversational outskirts. That said, while Wendel had prepared himself for a high-pressure interview not unlike an interrogation, Reinald was more interested in talking of ordinary affairs. He did not ask about the plans for Conrad's future, and so Wendel brought up the matter himself. That said, Reinald never treated the boy like a child, and he listened to him intently. When the air was free of its nervous tension and the two looked more comfortable with one another, Wendel turned to me.

"We have something important to discuss, so would you mind giving us some time alone, Kar...er, mother?"

“Oh? Why?”

“Because I asked.”

*Ugh, but did you have to call me mother to make your point?*

But that wasn’t the issue. I hadn’t at all expected that I would be driven away, and I felt ready to stamp my feet and complain. Instead, I felt a certain mischievousness swirl in my heart.

“Very well then,” I said. “Wouldn’t want a woman getting in the way of a man’s conversation. Though I must say that your cold shoulder pains me so.”

“That’s not what I…”

“It’s fine, really. Have your fun and your chat. I’ll be off wallowing in my own painful solitude.”

I pretend to wipe away the tears. I felt an itch to know why I had to leave them on their own, but I also knew that even Wendel likely had a few things he wanted to talk about that he didn’t want me to hear.

“If you’re open to the idea of taking a stroll,” said Reinald as I stood from my chair, “then why not take a look outside? There’s nothing particularly noteworthy in the gardens, but they’re nonetheless refreshing.”

“In which case I think I’ll feel the wind in my hair and do just that.”

I left the others to their discussion and asked the young chamberlain about the immediate area. He informed me that I’d be fine on my own.

“Of course, we can still prepare guards to accompany you if you prefer, and if so I’ll arrange that for you. However, the area is very heavily guarded, and as long as you refrain from entering the forest you won’t run into any danger.”

“How nice to be free,” I said. “In that case, I’ll stay within sight of the house.”

“There’s also a bench by the pond at the back side of the house. I’ll prepare some warm tea for your return.”

“Thank you. By the way, have you been doing this job for a long time?” I asked.

“Yes, about ten years. Reinald took me in when I was young.”

“My. I hope you don’t mind if I ask your age?”

“I’ll be fifteen this year.”

“Amazing. And such a hard worker.”

“Reinald is a master worth serving.”

He spoke with his chest puffed up with pride. He was but

three years younger than me and already serving as a house chamberlain. He also served excellent tea; no doubt he'd been well trained. And though a part of me wanted to learn more still, I knew we couldn't get into anything too deep.

I asked how to get to the pond, but as it turned out, getting to the back side of the house was a very simple matter. That said, the wind had a biting chill to it, and I was glad I wouldn't have to stay outside for too long.

The small pond was exactly as advertised: a small pond. It was, all things considered, the right size for the house. Much like Gerda's manor, there was a path tracing its edges, but this one had more of a relaxed feel to it. The bench the chamberlain had told me about was clearly for one to rest and be at peace while the picturesque pond spread out before them.

I took a seat and listened to the leaves as they scraped along the ground; and despite being a visitor, I felt comfortable and at ease. In spring or summer, the view would have made for an overwhelming beauty, but instead the pond and its scattered leaves filled my heart with solitude. Perhaps it was because, since returning from Conrad, I'd spent the vast majority of my time looking out for somebody else. I was used to it, but nonetheless I think I was always on edge, and so I lost myself to the sound of the wind in my ears.

I don't know how long I stayed there like that, but I know it was at least long enough for Wendel and Reinald to conclude their private discussion. When I turned to my side, Reinald was standing there. He was looking at me with a complicated and somewhat surprised expression on his face.

*How long has he been there for?*

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry. I didn't even notice you," I said. "You should have said something."

I made to stand, but Reinald gestured for me to relax.

"What of your discussion with Wendel?" I asked.

"I spoke with him, of course, as I did your steward too. Neither are out here. I apologize for troubling you."

"Don't," I replied. "It was a good chance to relax, though I'm ashamed you caught me in a moment of weakness."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. I hope you don't mind me saying, but you look a little worn out."

"I'm fine. I get my rest when I need it."

*He's not wearing a coat. Isn't he cold?*

I couldn't help feeling vexed. How long had he been watching me? It was my fault, really; I was the one who simply zoned out, and so I changed topic.

"What do you see in Wendel when you look at him, Sir Reinald?" I asked.

"I felt he was a boy of sharp intellect when I'd met him before, but he's wise beyond his years. Your steward, too, is indeed very competent. Conrad's circumstances are unfortunate, yes, but it is blessed with a fine heir and advisor."

I giggled.

"It is, isn't it? They are both Conrad's precious treasures. In that fact alone I feel they outdo even those under your direct command."

"Your steward in particular. To think he is prepared to serve such a young master with the same zeal as he did the margrave. I envy that fierce loyalty of his. I tried talking him over but was refused."

I couldn't help but pause to consider those words more closely.

*Your steward? Talked over? Refused?*

*The guy just admitted to trying to poach our steward!*

"You really mustn't resort to stealing," I said. "If he were to have left us, I'd curse you the rest of your waking life."

"I couldn't help myself. He's a truly capable and talented individual."

"But you're already blessed with capable and talented treasures of your own!"

"It is so like you to refer to people as treasures."

"We're n-not talking about what's like me or not... Ugh, enough. I've got nothing on you; you're practically surrounded by people who adore you."

"But none who treasure me as others do you."

He wasn't in the least bit apologetic. His odd joke bugged me, and I would say no more on the matter. That said, although us being alone like this was entirely unexpected, I was glad for the chance to speak with Reinald alone, where none could listen in.

"I didn't bring this up because of how grave it all is," I said, "but it must have been hard for you to watch what happened to the princes."

"Indeed. I knew that they did not get along, but what happened was regrettable."

“I saw some of it as it happened. Your skill in stopping and capturing Geoffrey was remarkable.”

“It was nothing worthy of praise. Rather, I feel embarrassed you saw it at all.”

As far as I was concerned, felling a man with a single slice of the blade was the mark of an experienced swordsman.

“You already know his name,” said Reinald. “You keep your ears close to the ground, I see.”

“It is the name of the man who took the life of a prince. Such news spreads fast, as you can imagine. Everybody knows. But his name is not a point of contention; rather, I’ve a question with regard to the manner of his capture.”

I left a pause for thought but decided inevitably to just plunge into it.

“He’s alive, isn’t he?” I asked. “I was hoping I might have the chance to ask whether he’s under your care today. So, is he?”

“You say the most interesting things, Miss Karen. You think I would protect the man who killed Prince David?”

“Am I wrong? It was your soldiers who carried him away at the end, and it looked to me as though he were still alive at the time. That, and…”

I sighed before going on. I couldn’t help myself.

“I can’t think of any other reason you would have told me to go and watch the duel if not for that.”

I looked over my shoulder at Reinald as he stared out at the pond.

“I’m afraid you won’t get any clear answers,” he said.

“This again? I must say, gaining your trust is a rather difficult thing to achieve.”

“I’m just saying that it’s not the time for answers. As for trust, I would like you to understand that the fact I called you here to this house of mine is in itself proof of the trust I put in you.”

“And I’m happy you would do so. It is a most wonderful home, and I am thoroughly enjoying it.”

“Oh? Those around me aren’t terribly fond of it. You see its charms, do you?”

“It feels away from it all. The effects of rest and relaxation are vastly impacted by what you have, or don’t have, around you.”

“Indeed. Very few see things as kindly as you do, however.”

Reinald rarely, if ever, invited anybody from Falkrum to this home of his. Which made perfect sense, really; as far as defenses

were concerned, they were practically nonexistent.

"I took the liberty of keeping an eye on your movements since we last talked," said Reinald. "I'm grateful that you did not look to put me at a disadvantage after we agreed to my becoming Wendel's guardian."

"And exactly what are you worried about?" I asked. "The words I spoke came from a place of sincerity that I have looked to hold myself by. I don't recall doing anything to the contrary."

"It's better that you don't know the answer to that question just now."

So his secretive nature extended this far too. Getting Reinald to reveal himself was the height of impossible. And even though I knew this, I still wanted to complain about it.

"I know that it was I who went to you for this favor, so I won't try forcing you to speak about anything, but all these secrets of yours have me wanting to sulk."

"That would be a problem. We've built such a nice relationship, and now it might all crumble to pieces."

To him, it probably wasn't anything more than a girl blowing off some steam, but at least on the surface he looked troubled by it.

"I want you to understand that I'm not toying with you," he continued. "I realize you are far wiser than your years, but to me you're still a young lady. You said yourself that you have no real achievements to your name."

"I know. That's why I won't push you about it."

"While I don't mean to differentiate by age or gender, you have to understand that in my position there is a need to be sure of the people you deal with. In my dealings with you I have been very lenient."

"So you're telling me to mind my own business?"

"Given your personality, it's better you don't know."

"And you're the one who decides that, Sir Reinald?"

"I'm just saying that it's not the time for it. You're going to find out whether you like it or not."

*It's better you don't know.*

*Was he worried for me?*

"I seem to constantly forget that you're younger than I, but your questions will inevitably find their answers," said Reinald. "It will not take long. If you trust me, I ask that you wait."

"Will I get answers to everything? Even why you told me to go

to the duel, and the reason for the princes' deaths?"

I couldn't help but push a little more. Still, Reinald was nothing if not fond of his secrets. He looked a touch troubled as he smiled. As the wind blew, I wrapped my arms around myself to fend off the cold.

"I'm happy you think so highly of me, but when it comes to the princes you overestimate me."

*So what was that, then?*

"That was merely a fortuitous error of judgment," Reinald said.

As cold began to seep through and reach for my bones, Reinald reached out to me with a hand. *Let's return to the house,* the gesture said. I did not get the answers I was looking for, but even just knowing that Geoffrey was a card in Reinald's deck was a stroke of good fortune.

I reached for Reinald's hand and took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the chilly air. I heard a whisper of the words *"Manners, Karen,"* flit through my mind, but it felt stupid to think of ostentatious shows of formality with such scenery before us.

"While I'm still not entirely satisfied, that aside, you do have a truly wonderful home," I said.

"It's a nice area, and comfortable; I like it very much."

"A good place in which to unwind, perhaps, but a nightmare to keep secure."

"Exactly that. Whenever I announce my intent to come here, my officers are rarely pleased. That's the location's only weak point; they never cease to remind of how difficult it is to patrol the house and keep it safe."

"It's all too easy to understand the challenges it presents. All the same, as a place to call home it's delightful."

That I could think this way was proof that I had lived in an age of peace in my former life. Had I been born with the sensibilities of those in this world, I would have no doubt seen it as an open treasure chest, thrust out for bandits and thieves to do as they liked.

"You mentioned that you will be especially busy in the coming days," I said. "Am I right to think it has to do with the dispatched imperial forces?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But it won't be just me; any general with soldiers under their command will have their hands full."

“I’m grateful to you for seeing us, but are you certain it’s okay to spare such time given the hectic nature of things at present?”

“This is a chance to relax. The last one I’ll get…”

I could not fathom what he meant by those last five words, but I knew that in saying he had a chance to relax, Reinald gave a subtle nod to the exceptional people working under his command.

“By the way, Miss Karen,” he said. “Your brother appears to have a very hardworking bodyguard.”

“Oh, yes. You mean Achim.”

I had never imagined Achim’s name coming up in a situation like this. My first thought was that he’d tripped up; made a blunder somewhere.

“You two appear rather friendly with one another. Are you close friends?”

*Huh…?*

“Yes, well, he’s Arno’s foster brother. We grew up together. It’s no exaggeration to say I think of him as a brother.”

“I apologize, but I had to ask. I was surprised to see the two of you looking so close at the duel.”

Reinald was the one asking the questions, and yet the slight cringe he flashed indicated he was loath to do so.

*It’s not even all that uncommon for Achim and I to spend time together…*

Reinald asked no more about Achim. He spent the rest of the time chatting with Wendel and sipping at tea, and just like that we were done. I had truly hoped to get more out of the man, and so I could not hide how crestfallen I was. Still, I had no choice but to take him at his word and head home.

But at this point in time, I never imagined that my time of realization, of understanding, would come so very soon. Perhaps it was a lack of imagination on my part. Regardless, the truth was that Reinald had played me.

We returned home to find the king waiting for us, and with him Gerda, who had now learned the truth. Perhaps it was because he’d told her himself, but Gerda was far more resolute than I had expected. She stayed by the king’s side, and he stayed the night. It was an evening that would bring a tension all of its own.

It started in the middle of the night. I woke suddenly, to the sounds of a commotion outside the door. I grew curious when I

heard multiple people hurrying along the corridor. I draped a shawl over my shoulders and left my room, where I met one of the king's chamberlains, who told me to go back to my room. He was irritated, but it was not enough to stop me.

Downstairs, the king was dressed in his usual attire and giving out orders while Gerda stood anxiously. Arno was by her side.

"We must confirm the facts posthaste," said the king. "If the report is in fact true, the situation is incredibly grave."

I couldn't believe it at first, but the king really was preparing to leave. Gerda called his name, and he took her in his arms. They shared a tight embrace, but I could make out only slivers of what they said.

"I apologize that things are so hectic, but there's no need to worry. We still don't know anything for certain."

"But..."

"I'm just going back to confirm things. When I'm done, I will return. I promise you. After all, our child's name is yet undecided. Choose something from the suggestions I gave you."

The king left Gerda in Arno's care and looked my brother in the eyes, a strong resolve in his gaze. The king left in a hurry, and my siblings watched him go. When he was truly gone, my sister began to weep.

"Gerda, let's go back to your room," said Arno. "You know that it's imperative you get enough rest, yes?"

"Yes, I know, but... What am I to do, brother? He just...!"

"He said he was just going to confirm the facts. He has extremely capable generals working for him, and in their safe hands the worst will never come to pass. You must rest, so that when the king returns you can greet him with a smile, yes?"

As Arno helped Gerda to his room, he flashed me a glance.

"This way, Karen," said Achim. "I'll explain."

I could barely believe what I heard. A Falkrum military troop were scheduled to meet with the forces dispatched from the empire. They had instead found the imperial forces meeting with soldiers in unfamiliar armor; soldiers who bore the Latorian flag.

"They're also closer to us than they should be, according to the schedule. If that's true, then they're very close. They could arrive within a day or two."

"But there are domains and their lords posted along the path to the capital. Could they not confirm anything?"

"That's the problem; none of them have reported a thing."

This meant they had either been pressured or they had betrayed their king. I was speechless; the empire was one thing, but just hearing the word “Latoria” brought back memories and sights that left me speechless. Achim pulled me close, just like Arno had Gerda, and brought his head close to mine.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “We’re not looking at any conflict in the immediate future, and Arno is here for you. *I’m* here for you. We *will* protect you. I promise.”

“Stop it. Don’t say ‘promise’ like that,” I said.

The word brought to mind a woman, my previous maid, in the moments before she disappeared into the fog. And yet, Achim’s words were a salve for my heart. My voice returned. I thanked Achim and pulled away from him.

“Gerda seems especially disheartened,” I said. “I can scarcely remember the last time she cried like that.”

“I want to believe in her. That she’ll be back on her feet soon. The young master, though, still can’t sleep…”

I wasn’t sure I could sleep either. We were all still awake, and so we gathered around a table while Emil and Wendel lay fast asleep in their beds. Time passed. Dawn began to break. The world outside the windows began to brighten.

It was then that there came another commotion, this time at the manor entrance. We thought it might be the king or otherwise a messenger on his behalf, but the situation was far heavier; the Saburova manor steward was trying to stop whoever it was trying to enter.

As Arno rose from his seat, the door opened. Everyone reacted with disbelief at who we saw: Sir Reinald burst in dressed in full military uniform.

“Sir Reinald, what are you doing here?”

“I apologize for disturbing you so late in the eve… No, it’s almost morning. Pardon the early intrusion, but is Lady Saburova okay?”

Reinald was not alone. He had a number of officers with him, led by Nika. In the corner of my eye I saw Achim rest his hand on the sword by his side, but Reinald paid him little mind.

“I came here as quickly as I could to inform you that the king was attacked by rebels who are planning to overthrow the government. My army has been assigned the task of seeing to Lady Saburova’s protection.”

His words were so clear they hurt. The first to recover from

the shock of the news was Arno.

"Wait just a moment," he said. "What do you mean, attack? How is the king? And why are you here instead of his personal guard?"

"The king's status is still unknown; we're looking into it," replied Reinald. "His personal guard are scrambling to get him back and prepare for the attackers. My forces were stationed nearby and are relatively free; we were therefore requested to act as your protection."

He spoke the lines so smoothly it was like they'd been decided well in advance. I saw not a hint of the kindness that resided in the second son of a noble family. What stood before us was the sharp gaze and aura unique to a man who lived by the sword.

"With all that out of the way, Lord Kirsten, where is Lady Saburova? Is she safe?"

"She… She is. She is currently resting in her room…"

"Then I ask that everybody, including yourself, refrain from leaving the manor. Do you understand?"

"I… Yes, but… Sir Reinald, you mean to say you aren't staying?"

"I will work together with the other generals to ensure the king and our people are protected. But please, rest assured I am leaving some of my finest officers to watch over you."

Reinald introduced Haring, who explained that he was in charge of our protection. Reinald did not want to exacerbate Gerda's worries and was leaving immediately. Emil, who had just woken up, was sent to check on her.

"Please, you *must* save the king," said Arno. "Without him, my sister might never recover."

"I will do my utmost. I will need you to look after her in the meantime."

"You have my word. I wish you the best of luck."

The sky was beginning to whiten, but I was barely even aware of the conversation taking place in front of my eyes…more to the point, I had my eyes out the window in an attempt to block their conversation out.

Why? Because I didn't want anything interrupting my concentration.

My brain was rapidly running over the events of the previous day, of the things Reinald had said then, and everything he'd said until now. The Conrad invasion by Latorian forces that started it all. The fact that Reinald had known it was coming. The death of

the two princes and Geoffrey's faked demise. All of it was so simple, and yet…

I don't care if you laugh. Now that the time for answers had come, I understood for the first time that it was anything but an easy truth to swallow.

"Karen?" asked Achim.

"Hmm? What?"

"No, it's just… Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Thank you…"

All along, I had wondered. I had suspected. I knew he'd been up to something. But how had I been so utterly dense? All the puzzle pieces fit, and they formed a truth that only I could possibly know. I was watching them as they fell into place, and I couldn't stand myself for being at a loss for what to do. I couldn't even look Reinald in the eyes.

And perhaps the reason he didn't speak to me was because he knew that the confusion was running rampant inside of me; it was the reason that I hadn't been able to gain his trust.

"I must take my leave," Reinald said. "Time is of the essence. Please, all of you, trust us."

And with that, Reinald was gone. He left us as we were at the table, together with Haring.

*Can I just let him go like that?*

My legs were moving even before I had an answer to my question. Arno called out to stop me, but I ignored him. Haring simply watched me go. I chased after Reinald, still in nothing more than my pajamas and the shawl wrapped around my shoulders.

He had just left through the front door when I called his name. He ignored me and kept walking, but I clutched his sleeve. Manners be damned. I couldn't have cared less. Not as I stood at my own moment of truth. My fingers trembled with fear; it was what it was.

"I…"

*I know what you want.*

I tried to speak the words, but they didn't come. I was trying to draw his favor. There was no way for me to know the nitty-gritty details of what he was bringing about in this country, nor the chaos and disorder that was about to erupt, but I had nonetheless developed a hypothesis that at the very least touched on the truth at the heart of it. And yet, at the same time

I felt the guilt of betraying my own sister, and the guilt that came with knowing that, as a citizen of Falkrum, I should try to stop him. The pressure of that understanding pushed down upon me with great weight.

The nation of Falkrum was going to fall. If Reinald was on the move, there was nothing else. And yet I had been compelled to chase him, to pull at his sleeve and slow him down.

What could I say? What did I want? Why did I chase after him? I thought of why my legs had moved before I could even think, and I knew vaguely that I was not driven just by a desire to see Conrad revived.

"You..." I uttered.

And it was then that an old man's words reached me from the not-so-distant past. My teacher, who had taught me so much, looked at me with his gentle smile.

*"Do not force yourself to hate for hate's sake. See the world with your own eyes, and walk your own path."*

That kind smile of his floated up from my memories, and in my heart I apologized. To him, to all of them, and to my sister. I was sorry to all I would betray, and with whatever it was that swirled within me—resolve, perhaps, though I don't know what you'd call it—I chose the words that I would convey to Reinald.

If I wanted his attention, and if I wanted to remain somewhere in his view from here on out, then in the end, was it my best option to appeal to his emotions?

No, I daresay it wasn't.

"Kirsten will have no choice but to obey you," I said. "Conrad, which will fall under your protection, is no different. But what of the others...those who go along with your plans? How will you handle them?"

I did not let my gaze fall. My eyes were fixed on Reinald as I spoke, as I made a case for keeping me at his side. Before he could reply, I pushed on; such was the advantage it gave me.

"Let me help you build a foundation that makes it easier for you to operate. In return for my services, I ask only for you to guarantee that those who fall in line are allowed their property and possessions."

I had to make it utterly clear that I stood before him not as a former potential fiancée, nor as a pitiful widow or a girl under the protection of her siblings, but as a co-conspirator. A partner in crime. He was the captain of the ship now, and I would find

my way aboard, whatever it took.

His gaze pierced me with a harshness I had never known, searching my person, judging me. He could not read my thoughts or feelings, but I felt naked before him, and I trembled. And yet, it lasted but a mere instant; Reinald was quick to make his decision.

“Moritz,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Lend her support. If she can prove useful for mediating with the nobility, put her to work.”

“Understood.”

Moritz offered a respectful bow of his head and watched his master as he left. Reinald did not turn back; his golden hair drifted on the wind behind him as his black horse disappeared into the distance. I had to imagine he was off to deliver the king his death sentence.

“How peculiar,” Moritz muttered, his every word sinking into my heart. “The nation is burning to the ground, and yet you throw yourself headfirst into the flames. You’re beyond crazy, and perhaps even beyond help.”

The words could have been taken as derisive, and yet I did not feel that Moritz was simply ridiculing me. At least, I did not read the meaning in his words as such. From the very beginning, Moritz had been opposed to me getting involved with Reinald, after all.

“Are you ready to be branded a traitor to your own home?” he asked.

He knew that by concerning myself with Reinald, I was setting myself up for a future as a known betrayer of the state. There was a hint of kindness in his words, but it wasn’t just that; he also needed to ensure that my resolve was not one of a half-hearted nature. They had no need for such people. But I had already made my declaration.

And strangely enough, it was the margrave I saw in my mind at that moment, sitting in the Conrad manor study. The old man looked at me with his calm, quiet gaze, and he asked but a single question.

*“Are you sure?”*

There was still time for me to extricate myself from the path before me. I could choose to remain protected here at the manor and wrap myself in the comfort of my bed. I could make

myself just another pitiful victim wrapped up in it all, unaware of the catastrophe facing the nation. If I didn't stop here, then my dream would only grow more distant and all the more difficult to grasp.

And so I wondered: Why was it I wanted to chase after him?

"Yes," I replied to Moritz. "I've made up my mind."

"Very well. Then we will see to it that you are made useful."

I wiped away at tears I hadn't realized were falling. True to form, and ever cold to his very soul, Moritz didn't offer me even a second glance.

"You are fortunate," he said.

"Huh?" I uttered.

"Though nothing can change the fact that my lord is an invader, he will not be as ruthless in his handling of things as you might imagine. And in any case, I daresay he is far and away more preferable than those who are looking to invade in the coming days."

*What does* that *mean?*

"But…wait," I stammered. "So the empire is…?"

"It is a race against time. If you are going to renege on your words and slow us down, we'll have you isolated immediately."

Whatever he meant, he was serious that the moment I did anything suspicious, he'd have me locked away.

"His excellency wants to put you to use, but it will be some time before such an opportunity arises," said Moritz. "For now you are to wait in the manor and obey Haring's orders."

"Oh, yes, understood…"

"We do not intend to bring any harm to Lady Saburova. On that point, and that point alone, we share the view of Falkrum's king."

In other words, *"So don't betray us and don't kick up a fuss, Karen."*

The sun was high up in the sky when a message came for Gerda, informing her of the death of a family member. Moritz knelt before her to deliver the crushing news.

"You must stay steadfast as I speak," he began. "His Majesty, the king of Falkrum, has been killed by enemies of the state."

Gerda's face drained of blood. She fell to her knees but held herself together and did not faint. Perhaps she had been aware on some level that this message was inevitable. I was furious that none of us had been informed earlier that the message was

coming; we knew and worried about the potential of bad news resulting in a miscarriage. But the words Moritz spoke next quieted all my other thoughts.

“The culprit was Zakhar, the Marquis of Rodenwald. He, together with a number of generals he managed to win over, schemed to brazenly take control of the country. Upon murdering the king he aimed to take His Majesty’s position as his own. Sir Reinald saw to it that he did not live to see the day.”

Zakhar was the last name I would have expected in such a report. Neither Gerda nor Arno could hide their shock. I, too, was completely at a loss for words, though it was mostly at the fact that Reinald had killed one of his own family.

“The Marquis?” uttered Arno, his words coming out like sorrowful moans. “I don’t believe it. But he’s Sir Reinald’s own brother, isn’t he?”

“They are brothers, yes,” replied Moritz. “And as Zakhar’s younger brother, it was Sir Reinald’s responsibility to see his older brother’s errors mended.”

“But, why? Why would Sir Zakhar do such a thing?” Arno muttered, wanting to chase the line of thought before glancing at Gerda and thinking twice. “No, that can wait. More importantly, what’s the situation like out there? How far has the news regarding the king spread? Is the chancellor safe?”

“Our reports tell us the chancellor and the grand dukes were together with the king. Some of them survived. At present, they are in the midst of discussions, and so they have elected to keep the news from the population to avoid panic.”

“Then I must head to the castle immediately…”

“No, you must refrain. As the lord of the Kirsten family, you must understand that at present only *you* can protect the child of Lady Saburova and the king.”

It wasn’t until Moritz explained that there might still be traitors around that Arno stood down. Anxiety filled all of us; none knew what would become of Falkrum. This was especially taxing on Arno, who had barely slept a wink as the bad news came in. None of this was helped by the manor itself being locked down and surrounded by soldiers; information was limited, which made it impossible to make thoughtful decisions. The suffocating feeling of it all only served to wear down the soul. I bit my lip as I placed my hands on the shoulders of Wendel and Emil, standing on either side of me.

“Karen…?” asked Wendel.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’ll be okay…”

Had I been quicker to make my declaration, would I have been made aware of Reinald’s plans earlier? I couldn’t stop the “what if” from popping into my head; it was a bad habit of mine. For now, however, we could only wait for Reinald’s next move.

“There’s no use rushing to any conclusions,” I said, noticing how impatient Arno was getting. “The best thing that you and Gerda can do now is rest. If you can’t sleep, just lie down and close your eyes; it’ll help.”

“Karen, this is *not* the time to be lazing around taking things easy…”

“Rest is *exactly* what you should be trying to get right now,” I countered. “Very soon you might not have any such luxury whatsoever. You’re all Gerda has now, Arno, so you have to stay healthy. Whether you like it or not, the people in the castle are going to come calling…”

Gerda was the king’s only consort, and she carried his last descendant. Arno, meanwhile, was likely to act as the child’s regent. Arno acquiesced and agreed while Gerda simply looked down and put a hand to her stomach, which still had yet to bulge in any noticeable way. I watched the two of them like that and felt the guilt wash over me for all my lies. I’d said what I had just to keep them placated. If Reinald and the empire intended to bring an end to Falkrum, there was zero need for a regent. As Gerda left with the aid of her maids, she stopped for a moment.

“I once thought that it might be nice if my child one day found themselves king,” she said, her every word quivering, “but never did I want it so much it meant losing my husband…”

“Emil, stay with Gerda,” I said.

“Me? But I think it would be better if you…”

“Emil, *please*.”

“O-Okay, okay.”

Everyone stayed ready, prepared to be called upon at any moment, and so we were not left scrambling when an escort arrived from the castle. Whateley and the children remained at Saburova manor, while I tagged along with Arno and Gerda as my sister’s aide.

Our “escort,” however, included a huge number of cavalry. It was the kind of security almost unheard of in the royal capital. Moritz explained to Arno that they were guarding against a

worst-case scenario, but I had an inkling that the truth lay elsewhere. Achim, who was accompanying us as protection, eyed it all with a stern gaze.

"Why are all these guards Reinald's forces?" he whispered to Arno once we were inside the carriage. "There are other soldiers in Falkrum besides those under his command. Where are they?"

"Maybe they've other orders, or perhaps they're at the castle. We've got imperial soldiers flocking to the place too..."

"But even then, it's like they're reacting far too slowly. The king has just passed away; surely even just a single squad was sent back."

"Achim, that's enough."

Achim had worries of a different sort from my siblings, but with Gerda looking so anxious, Arno put a stop to him voicing them. Achim then turned his suspicions on me.

"Karen, have you heard anything?"

"Heard...what?" I asked.

Achim paused for a moment.

"No, forget about it."

In times like these, Achim was nothing if not sharp. I would not have escaped further questions had it not been for Gerda's condition; in this sense the circumstances themselves acted as my ally.

When we arrived at the castle, it was emptier than we'd ever seen it. People we'd never seen before were rushing here and there, their fidgety visages likely mirroring the agitated frustration and worry that drove their superiors. The day marked the first time I had ever been so deep into the castle, and yet I had no time to marvel at the wonder of the furnishings; instead, I walked on silently behind my sister as we were led through the castle halls.

The room we were brought to was one made of stone. It was very chilly. On a large table in the center of the room lay a body in its final rest. It had been dressed in formal attire and covered in the Falkrum flag, like a message of gratitude to the king for his service.

I remember seeing my sister touch the king's cheek. Her trembling fingers brushed his lips, then touched the hands which would never reach out to grasp her own again. She called his name, knowing his body would never know warmth again, and then she put her head in her hands. Her shoulders shook as

her sobbing filled the room. Arno gave me a gentle shove in the back, and I put a hand to Gerda, who wrapped me in a tight hug. I wasn't sure I had the right to return the embrace, but as I rubbed her back I felt just how much weight she'd lost.

I stared down at the king's body. It looked as if he had died in his sleep, and I wondered if perhaps he had gone to the afterlife more peacefully than I'd imagined. The queen was also lying not far from her husband, and her tranquil state felt so strange to behold. Indeed, it was not just the king who was gone.

"So the queen has passed too," muttered Arno in disbelief.

"When she learned of the king's passing," said Moritz, "we were unable to stop her in time…"

Arno let out a long sigh and stared up at the ceiling. The pillars that supported our very nation were gone. They would never speak another word. I…was not especially surprised. In truth, it struck me that Reinald and his people had been quick to act. At the same time, however, the sight of the two bodies impressed upon me that much more that I had entered a point of no return.

"Sister, you're only going to catch a cold here…" I said.

It was freezing, perhaps in order to preserve the bodies. I had expected it to be hard work prying myself from Gerda's grasp, but she was far more responsive than I'd expected. She put a hand to the king's own, then placed it on her stomach.

"Do not worry, my dear," she said. "I will see our child protected."

She was grieving, of this there was no doubt. But though she shed tears, Gerda refused my support. Her face was no longer that of just a mere woman; in the lines of her face was the strength of a mother.

Upon leaving the room, we were met almost immediately by a civil servant, acting on behalf of various lords, kneeling in wait. It looked as if they were waiting for an opportunity to speak to us. They weren't wearing a coat—or anything particularly warm—but sweat poured from their face as they explained that those who had survived requested a meeting with Arno and Gerda.

"Are they all safe?" asked Arno.

"Though his excellency the chancellor was not so fortunate…the dukes are fine. Some of the others, too, made it to safety…"

"I see. I'm glad to hear it."

“Yes, yes,” replied the civil servant. “It truly is…”

In contrast to Arno’s joy at the news, the servant seemed to speak as if through clenched teeth. They were also constantly wiping their forehead and cheeks. It was a portrait of nervous agitation, and though they kept their eyes largely on the ground, the civil servant did glance up for a moment to look at Moritz. Arno tilted his head at the gesture, but he quickly stood up straight again.

“Gerda, I’m sorry to ask this after you’ve just said your goodbyes, but do you think you can make it through a meeting?”

“Yes. I’m fine,” replied Gerda. “I’ll be rather unsightly, however…”

Both were set to attend. That left me, and because I was not involved in the nation’s politics, I asked to be taken to a room where I might wait for them.

“The meeting will likely take a while,” said Arno. “It’s completely fine if you’d like to return home…”

“I’ll wait,” I replied. “I’ve got some things I’d need to think about. Surely they’ve a room I can borrow for a time?”

“Would you like Achim for company?”

“No, the two of you take priority over little old me. I’ll call someone should I decide to leave. For the time being, just focus on yourselves.”

I was brought to a small room facing the castle gardens, from which one could gaze upon its thoroughly landscaped beauty. Not a single person occupied the castle garden; perhaps it was the gloomy wintry sky, or otherwise the panic trapped within the castle walls.

The room was cold, but I didn’t feel like calling upon anybody for a blanket to place over my lap. Nobody was going to bring me any tea, either, but the environment was sufficient for sorting through and organizing my thoughts. I took a seat and stared up at the ceiling.

At present, I did not know who was with Reinald’s forces and who was an enemy. I would have liked to talk to Moritz to better grasp the situation, but he’d left with Arno and Gerda, and it was his guards standing at the door to my room. It would have been one thing if it were Elena, but I very much doubted that the stern-faced guards would fill in any missing details for me. As I thought about how to make contact to get the information I wanted, I heard a sudden knock at the window.

I spun to discover blood on the glass door leading to the garden. On the other side of it sat a woman, a look of anguish on her face. Had she been a complete stranger I would have screamed for the guards in a heartbeat, but I knew this woman. She was a military officer, and she'd offered me support when I'd visited the castle to report the details of the Conrad domain's fall. Her hair was a mess, her face covered in sweat. There was a desperate, clinging look in her eyes. I ran over and opened the door.

"Please, don't call for anyone..." she whispered, laboring with every breath. "I'm so glad it is you, Margravine Conrad, that I happened across..."

"Wait, but all this blood," I stammered. "I must get you help!"

"Shh," she said, quieting me. "Please, don't."

Her voice was a whisper, her eyes darting about, cautious and fearful. She held a hand tight to her side, blood gushing from a wound she'd received. She'd tried to press a cloth against it, but it was completely soaked through. Her face was deathly pale, the touch of her fingers cold. And yet, she clasped my arm with a desperate strength; I knew it would be no easy task to remove her grip.

"But we can't just leave your injuries like that," I said. "We must have them seen to."

"It's too late," said the woman. "Please, listen...!"

She spoke the words with such conviction. I saw signs that she'd been carrying a sword, but it was gone, as was her scabbard. She clung to me as she lay fallen, a grave look in her eyes.

"Please, you must take Lady Saburova and run," she hissed. "That traitor killed the king, and he forced the queen to drink poison..."

"Traitor? Who are you talking about?"

"Marquis Rodenwald's younger brother, Reinald. That...that evil...!"

She was in horrible pain, but her frustration outweighed it. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes, and when she spoke Reinald's name, you could hear the venom. Yet she kept the raging fire of her anger held back as she conveyed to me the facts; it was her sense of duty and loyalty that compelled her to do so, even as blood bubbled up from her throat and ran down her jaw.

“The chancellor, Marquis Rodenwald…he killed anyone who knew anything. He came in the night and captured the generals…that’s why, nobody could do a thing.”

“Calm down, you mustn’t give up.”

“The only people left in the castle now are those who fear for their lives, or those who would sell their own country. You are in danger, staying here.”

My voice wasn’t reaching her. The guards were knocking on the door, having realized that something was amiss.

“I’m…I’m not…” I started.

“I’m…so glad…I could tell you,” said the woman. “Take the king’s child…his wife…and flee…”

Her breath was ragged. Tears streamed down her face.

“Forgive me…” she whispered. “I could not protect His Majesty. I promised my parents…that I would give my all…to serve my country…”

Had she done it? Had she fulfilled her duties?

The woman’s voice grew weaker with every word. I watched as she seemed to transform before my eyes from a gallant knight to a child. I heard the door to the room burst open. I put a hand to the woman’s cheek and felt the life draining from her body. Her eyes dropped out of focus.

“Mother,” she whispered. “Please, forgive me…your Paula only wanted…to be a valiant…knight…”

The woman’s grip on my arm finally loosened, and she slumped to the floor. I looked into her eyes for a time before closing them with a hand. The sorrow that had filled her face appeared to have faded into something resembling peace.

*You served well.*

We had met only briefly, for nothing more than mere moments, but I could not bear to see her efforts sullied in her final moments.

“She’s dead,” I said, turning slowly to the people standing behind me.

I told myself that she had fulfilled her duty. Served her country. I think it allowed me to push away the shame and disgust that welled in my heart. In the end, she had died unaware that she’d passed her message to one who had betrayed the nation. Was this a blessing? Or was it misfortune? I did not know. All I had was a feeling; a sense that the sticky red liquid slathered over my hands was not yet done following

Reinald around.

Paula's body was quickly taken away. Among the people who'd been chasing after her was Elena, whose shoulders seemed to shrink with the apologetic look on her face.

"I'm sorry, I never imagined that she'd make it all the way to where you were, Karen... Still, it was our fault that she escaped in the first place. We weren't watching her closely enough. I'm sorry we troubled you."

"She was not out to hurt me," I replied. "I'm fine."

Perhaps Paula had been imprisoned somewhere. Elena noticed the bloodstains on my clothes and ordered someone to prepare a new outfit for me.

"But she was badly hurt," I said. "That wasn't your people, was it? Is everybody else unharmed?"

"Umm..."

"When all the dust settles, I will be helping to support Moritz," I said. "As per Sir Reinald's orders. Please, you can talk to me."

"Really?"

"I don't have any reason to lie to you, Elena. There's no changing the tide now, and by lying I'll only make things worse for myself, no?"

When it became clear that I was on her side, Elena let out a sigh of relief.

"In that case," she said, "we only ever used force when swords were drawn, but it was our intent to avoid as much bloodshed as possible. That woman escaped from her room, killed her guards, and made a break for it. We had no choice but to draw our own swords to stop her."

"I see..."

Paula's corpse had not been handled carelessly; it had been placed on a stretcher before being carried out. Though it was their job to carry her, the soldiers did not look upon Paula's body with disdain; rather, they treated it with a certain air of respect. Perhaps Elena was being honest when she stated that they'd had no choice. And in truth, Elena revealed that she had been fond of Paula.

"Any loyal soldier would be outraged to discover their master murdered. I know how she must have felt. That was why we had her confined."

"I'm surprised. You were fond of an enemy."

“Whatever they may think of us, my own thoughts and feelings are mine alone. Still, I feel she would have been a handful if she’d been the type to wait things out. It’s a pity; she was a fine swordsman.”

Elena offered a relaxed smile, even though I was sure she felt some anger at having lost one of her own. I realized that I was still a long way from truly understanding Reinald and those who worked for him.

“So it *was* Reinald’s forces who killed the king, then,” I said.

“You don’t know?” asked Elena.

“It was only early this morning that the bigger picture started coming together for me.”

I told Elena that I did not understand the situation in its entirety, and she nodded.

“It’s better that way,” she said. “I could tell you, but it might be for the best to wait a touch longer. If His Excellency has agreed to have you on board, he and Abelein won’t simply leave you in the dark.”

And with that, Elena stretched and left as soon as my fresh change of clothes were delivered. She seemed very busy and even said herself that there was still much work to be done. When she was gone, I was left with silence and my own thoughts as company while I waited for Arno and Gerda to return.

Arno noticed immediately that I was wearing a different outfit.

“That’s not what you were wearing earlier,” he said suspiciously. “Did something happen?”

“I bumped into someone who was unwell, and in seeing them to help my outfit was dirtied. The people of the castle were kind enough to see that I was prepared a change of clothes.”

“I see. Sounds like an ordeal.”

They took me at my word, but only because it seemed the greater part of their minds were occupied with other thoughts entirely. Haring and Moritz were standing nearby, and both Arno and Gerda—though especially Arno—could not hide the contempt they felt for them. It was very unusual for Arno to allow himself to be so transparent.

“We’ll prepare you a carriage home,” said Moritz, bowing deeply.

“Save it,” said Arno. “We’ll leave the way we came.”

“In which case, please allow us to prepare you an escort. Our

lord has made your family's safety a top priority."

In other words, we would not be free of their watch so easily. Arno was a bundle of confusion and rage, while Gerda looked more exhausted than anything else. The two kept their mouths shut as tight as clams until we boarded our carriage, and so I followed suit. Just as I was about to hop inside, however, Moritz stopped me. He did not say much, but his words sat heavily with me.

"We are expecting a favorable reply from your siblings. If you wish to prevent the worst from occurring, you will do your utmost."

Exactly what I was dealing with wasn't revealed to me until we made it back to the manor. Which is to say that when Haring and his men were out of sight, Arno flew into a rage.

"How dare they even speak such stupidity!"

It was decidedly rare to see Arno so angry that he was punching cushions. Emil and Wendel had never seen anything like it; they watched on in disbelief.

"Calm yourself for just a moment, brother," I said, and then, turning to Emil and Wendel. "Would you excuse us, please?"

"I want to know what's going on," said Wendel.

"I'm with Wendel," said Emil. "We have a right to know if something has happened."

"We're not going to keep anything hidden from you," I said. "It's just, Arno hasn't... No. The adults still haven't had a chance to cool down, and for that we'll need a little time. I'll talk to you two later, I promise, so please just do as I ask. Okay?"

Fortunately, Wendel caught my drift and took Emil away with him. Arno wanted me to leave with them, but that wasn't happening.

"You're enraged, and Gerda and Achim have gone practically mute. What is going on?" I asked.

I had avoided mentioning how pained Gerda looked, her hand on her stomach. I knelt down in front of her while she shook her head and let out a sigh.

"It's Reinald..." she said. "He and the grand dukes, they...they want Falkrum to surrender to the empire. To that end, they want my child to act as a symbol for our nation."

"Symbol... More like a conveniently placed ornament," spat Arno. "We have no idea what's going to happen. And Gerda, please don't speak of the grand dukes like they're in on it. You

saw how petrified they all were; this is *not* what they really want."

"Terrified or not, we have to accept the fact that they're under Reinald's control now. They voted unanimously; nothing changes that."

"But all the same…"

The two were about to launch into an argument, so I stepped in.

"Brother, sister, fill me in, *please*."

"You didn't know?" asked Gerda.

"Know what?"

*Ah… Perhaps Gerda has started to sense something.*

We stared at one another for a time, but eventually Gerda flashed a bitter look and gave up. In any case, I hadn't lied. I really didn't know. Not everything.

"Fine," she said. "I'm not in the mood for bickering anyway."

Perhaps she was doing it just to organize her own thoughts, but she went on to explain what had happened. Which played out like so:

Arno and Gerda had been led to a room where the grand dukes were waiting for them. Also in attendance were the nobility—including Reinald—and the military's generals. The nobles were of course all of high stature, not unlike the grand dukes. However, two or three of them were not the usual lords but their considerably younger children. Arno had noticed this immediately and asked about it; he was told that all the former lords had stepped down from their positions.

All in attendance expressed their condolences at the loss of the king and queen while they nervously wiped at the sweat upon their brows. And then the announcement came.

"Falkrum will now fall under the rule of the empire, the governing of which will be directed at its order. We ask you, Lady Saburova, the bearer of His Majesty's only descendant, and your guardian, the lord of the Kirsten family, to understand and cooperate in this new arrangement."

It was not a discussion. The matter had already been settled.

Naturally, both Arno and Gerda voiced their objection. Neither had wanted Gerda's child to be the heir to the throne, but with the nation collapsing the circumstances had shifted. Why was there an insistence on placing such pressure on an unborn child? There were, after all, members of the royal family still alive, even if they were not direct descendants of the king. Gerda and Arno

argued that they, not to mention the nation's citizens, would not accept what was being proposed. However, when they learned the fate of the other members of the royal family, a shiver went down their spines. Reinald took it upon himself to tell them directly.

"Unfortunately...it was not just my older brother who moved against the king, but also the king's extended family. They can not be trusted to lead the people of this nation."

"Are you saying that my sister's child is the only one left...? And Sir Reinald, I do not understand what you are doing here. I understand that we owe you our gratitude for the part you played in halting the attempted revolt, but you are of Rodenwald descent. Explain to me the reason for your attendance."

"I am here to ensure the protection of Falkrum's people."

Reinald remained seated and completely calm as he spoke. The complete lack of any change in his person felt decidedly ominous.

"First the princes died, then the king and the queen," said Reinald. "These are now undeniable facts. But it is our responsibility to see Falkrum protected. That means from Latoria, yes, but also from the imperial forces soon coming to demand its surrender."

There was no hesitation in his voice, only conviction. He had declared the nation's imminent fall a fact. Arno could not help but question this; he knew that showing opposition could land him in danger, but he could not leave the stone unturned.

"Sir Reinald, it strikes me as odd that you would speak this way. 'Soon coming'? How could you possibly have access to knowledge that only the king should be privy to?"

"The answer to that is a rather trivial thing."

"*I* will be the judge of that."

It was clear to both Arno and Gerda by that time that something was off about the grand dukes' behavior. Arno decided then that, if necessary, he would take it upon himself to stand up to Reinald, even if he was alone. In this sense, he was perhaps not unlike Paula.

Prepare yourselves, for this is where the bombshell drops.

"The person leading the empire's military is my younger sister," said Reinald. "She appears to have joined forces with Latoria and has decided to invade Falkrum."

He explained this without any change of emotion, though it

took Arno somewhere in the realm of thirty seconds to fully comprehend what he'd been told. Gerda took in the rest of Reinald's explanation.

Some of the nobility in the room kept their eyes averted, while others stared down at the floor, their fists tightly clenched. Some among them glared at Reinald, and others still looked upon him favorably. Reinald paid none of them any mind as he looked out over all of them.

"All of you here have a choice," he said. "Obey my commands, surrender the nation and protect its people, or have everything you have ever known torn from your grasp by the coming military forces. The wise among you will choose the former, but I'm prepared for an outcome in which you choose otherwise; I will not hold the decision against you."

The choice: to ally or to revolt. Gerda and Arno could not answer immediately, though it seemed the rest of the nobility had not been given the luxury of time. And perhaps the only reason Gerda and Arno were given more leeway was because of the importance of the child she bore.

Arno struggled with the decision. On the one hand was his pride as a member of the nobility, on the other was his responsibility to see the family line survive.

"I understand full well how dangerous it is to turn against him," he said. "I know that survival means choosing the alliance. I *know* that. But it's not that simple... It's just not."

Arno knew that what mattered most was Gerda, and that he was no more than a potentially convenient addition. When Reinald had spoken of the fact that his younger sister was leading the imperial army, he had also revealed something of his *own* position. To answer immediately would be to leave a good impression, and yet Arno had chosen not to. One might have called his attitude indecisive. And yet, with their country slipping away from them, it was only natural that many would feel the same worry and anxiety as my brother. Gerda and I, who were mostly ready to accept things without fuss, were likely part of the minority.

"You don't seem particularly rocked by any of this, Gerda," said Arno. "You intend to go along with him?"

"This has all been quite the shock, but I can't just stand around bawling. I have but one goal to see accomplished."

"Your child, yes...?"

“Indeed. Their life is my highest priority.”

She did not know yet whether her child would be a boy or a girl, but for the sake of their still unknown future, Gerda saw only one choice.

“We still don’t have any real idea how this will all play out,” Gerda continued. “Perhaps at some point we will become unnecessary, and if that should happen then I must see my child protected.”

“Don’t speak of things that are so unlikely,” said Arno.

“But it’s not out of the realm of possibility, is it?”

Gerda saw the potential future paths as clearly as our older brother.

“And what of you, Karen? Are you okay with this?”

“We have entrusted Reinald to be the guardian of Conrad,” I said. “News of that has already spread, and I can no longer claim to have no connections with him. That, and he saved our lives. We’re on friendly terms.”

My siblings eyed me with suspicion, and I could tell them at least this much. All the same, I sighed; I worried as to what the future held for our relationships.

“I only realized what was happening this morning,” I continued. “I didn’t know what he was doing.”

And while rumors spread about Reinald himself, there was perhaps nobody better to be Conrad’s guardian.

“Even though Reinald has ties to the empire, and even though the empire was responsible for Conrad? Even then, you intend to go along with things?”

“Even then,” I replied. “There’s no going back.”

Moritz had made it sound as though the empire did not move with a single shared goal. There were factions. So far I could see that there was Reinald, and there was his sister, who had invaded Conrad. When I thought on the topic more deeply, I saw that Falkrum too was not so different. Everybody was part of their own power struggles, so it should have been no surprise that the empire, a nation so much larger, would also be split into factions. We too would have to choose a side; we would have no future otherwise.

“I envy you two for your decisiveness,” muttered Arno. “I still can’t get over the shock of the king’s passing.”

We could hear it in his voice; the envy, the frustration.

“Brother, you’re the only one who can support Gerda right

now," I said.

"I know. And if neither of you were here, I wouldn't even have had to think twice."

He stood on shaky feet and retired to his room, telling us he wanted some time alone. In the afternoon, he returned to the Kirsten home. Whateley informed me later that Arno had sent a messenger out somewhere before dark.

I explained everything to Whateley and Wendel, and we sat down to once again discuss the future. Emil called for Wendel partway through, and he left…at which point I explained to Whateley about the Latorian position. I expected anger, and so I was surprised when Whateley responded with a sigh.

"I can't say I'm especially surprised," said the old steward. "If it is true that the empire has split into two factions, then it is enough for me that we are not on the side of those who killed the margrave."

"Are…are you sure?" I asked.

"Times change," replied Whateley. "Enduring such change at this age…is far from ideal, but I still have my duties to see through as the family steward."

He felt a responsibility to support his master, Wendel, and that drove him onward.

"How much do you know of the imperial family…?" I asked.

"I know only that there is an imperial princess. If what Reinald says is true, and she leads the imperial military, then she occupies a position of considerable authority."

"So if he can call someone in such a position his sister, then…"

"There's likely no mistaking it. He has no reason to lie."

By this point, Reinald's rank, as it were, had become clear to a select few, and with Moritz having dropped a little extra information, now I was certain. In the past, Falkrum's royal family and nobility had offered up Lady Rodenwald to a member of the imperial family, a member who now ruled as the emperor. Reinald was the son of their union.

"I *had* wondered…" I said. "I'd had an inkling…a hunch, you might call it, but now that the truth is right here in front of me, I don't know what to make of it."

"In the majority of circumstances, it is decidedly unlikely for such hunches to prove true."

Could I believe that Reinald was a man of such standing…? Yes. His calm, his dignity, and his grace had all come by way of

the imperial family.

"But why would a man of such rank live in Falkrum for so long?" I asked.

"That I do not know. I had heard that the emperor had a son, but he has many consorts; such rumors were everywhere, and the only child officially recognized as the emperor's was the imperial princess. Her mother hails from a very distinguished family in the imperial capital."

"I don't like the sounds of that."

"Fear not. I, too, harbor nothing but a sense of ill omens on the wind."

Perhaps it was a salve for us both that we could still laugh at such times.

"And yet, here we are, still kicking," said Whateley.

"Still kicking and waiting to see how it all plays out. Conrad's reputation will be tarnished, however. I am so very sorry."

"Oh, hush. A reputation can be earned back. And while it is nothing worth bragging about, cleaning up is a specialty of mine."

"My, how encouraging... Lots to look forward to, then."

"Leave it to me. I want you to use my skills as a former diplomat as much as you please."

I decided to file away my concerns about Reinald living in Falkrum for another time. For now, it was time to gather information. Still, Whateley felt it pertinent to warn me of one thing in particular.

"It is possible that, in dealing with Sir Reinald, you may not be able to avoid being pulled into the imperial power struggle. I recommend shying away from any behavior that might make you stand out."

"I don't expect that to be an issue as I'll only be working as a mediator, but...thank you. I will take your words to heart."

"The unexpected may occur at any moment. Best to be prepared."

And time would march on regardless of how much we willed it to stop.

In the end, Gerda did not require any convincing on my behalf. She did not show any signs of rebelling against Reinald, and Arno, in his role as her support, also accepted the conditions. In this way, the heir to the Falkrum royal family was surrendered to Reinald.

Never had I once expected that, upon my already impossible rebirth in another world, I would live to see an entire nation fall before my eyes. Had my former Japanese self known this, they would have laughed at how preposterous it sounded.

No more than a day later, shock spread like waves through the people of Falkrum. As rumors swirled regarding the death of the king, travel outside of the royal capital was prohibited. This was because the capital was completely surrounded by the imperial army, which had no less than several hundred cavalry waiting at the gates.

Some might have wondered what Falkrum's own military were doing. The only reason that the city didn't erupt into chaos, however, was because the royal infantry stopped such a thing from happening. Naturally, many didn't think highly of their attitude, but none had voiced their opinions thus far.

The state of the towns and cities, however, was something Wendel informed me of later. Before that, I was in the castle, in the same room as Reinald. Moritz's and Reinald's other officers were there, along with all of the capital's influential nobility. I was not accompanying either of my siblings and instead was in attendance on my own. Arno and Achim were both beyond shocked to hear it, but in the end, their gazes simply sunk into sorrow.

Reinald's presence could not be denied, and by his very carriage he drew the room's eyes. He did not speak to me and simply met eyes with me during a single glance.

It was as silent as a funeral when a woman entered with her entourage, and it seemed to me that the gaze in all of Reinald's officers' eyes grew a touch sharper. She was tall, and dressed in a man's uniform so well ironed I spotted not a single crease. Her blonde hair was tied into a neat ponytail, and she held herself so straight that the gesture seemed to express a facet of her personality. At her side was a decorated scabbard, and across her shoulders was a cloak embroidered in gold and silver thread. Her boots echoed as she marched into the center of the room.

All watched on with bated breath as the woman came to a stop in front of Reinald. The two stared at one another—no, in truth they glared—and neither took a step back. Both exuded an elegant, graceful sense of presence. And while they did not look alike, something about the auras drifting from each felt similar.

She came with a huge number of guards, and by the way in which everyone stood at attention, it was all too obvious who the woman was.

"I see," she said, a slight huskiness in her voice. "You've done well."

She smiled boldly, then cast a quick glance around the room, her eyes scanning the gathered nobility.

"You've brought about exactly what the emperor wished for," she continued. "You kept the use of your military to a minimum, and Falkrum is on its knees. I need not even lift a finger."

Nobody spoke a word, and so the woman's words echoed clearly. She was Wilhelmina, the imperial princess of the Arrendle Empire, and she offered the hint of a smile as she went on.

"How incredibly tiresome. This whole thing is horrendous, but…fine. *You* accomplished the task. Isn't that right, brother? In any case, it *has* been a rather long time. Let us sit down for a relaxed chat, so that we might catch up."

*Oh, what's this? Why did Princess Wilhelmina's aides look so shaken at her calling Reinald "brother"? And why do Haring's and Reinald's other officers look as if they've just achieved a momentous victory?*

"You haven't changed a bit, Wilhelmina," said Reinald.

"I could say the same for you, Reinald. Forever the detestable older brother. Oh, how I wished that I might have found you dead on the frontier somewhere."

"And to think I prayed only for your well-being."

"Ha. Ah, yes. Lose me and things work out badly for you. All those pesky insects, suddenly broken up and dispersed."

The conversation put everyone very much on edge, and the imperials in particular were white as sheets. Reinald and Wilhelmina, however, seemed in fine spirits, and they left looking not unlike two people enjoying a chat as they strolled through the park. I assumed they were off to speak about things in private. Many of those left in the room looked clearly relieved that Wilhelmina hadn't been in a foul mood and ordered any heads to roll.

Everybody opted to stay in the castle in case they were called upon, and Arno and Gerda also chose to move elsewhere to wait for updates. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing, and as I was thinking things through, somebody called out to me.

“Perhaps you might like to spend some time over this way?” asked a girl with curly chestnut hair. “We’ve prepared tea.”

With the girl was a boy with tanned skin. Both were young, their faces friendly and charming, though I couldn’t help noticing that both were dressed in the uniform of Reinald’s troops.

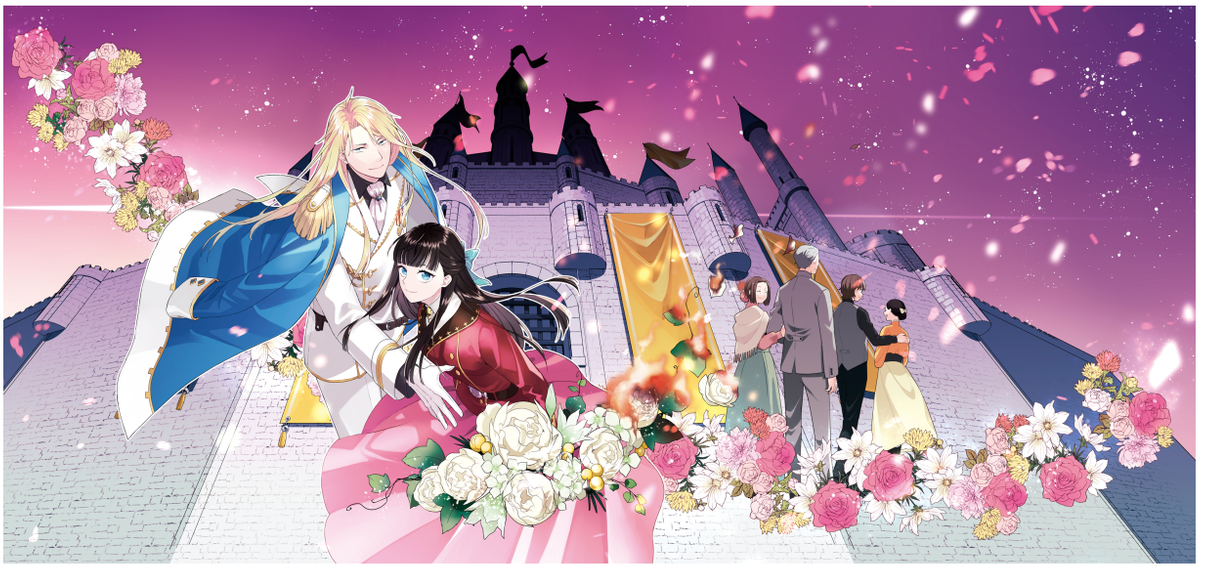
“Silke,” said the boy, a slight admonishment in his tone. “You have taken her completely by surprise.”

He spoke with a slight accent, as though he wasn’t completely accustomed to the language. The girl looked a touch troubled by his words.

“My apologies,” she said. “I merely wanted to avoid drawing attention. Miss Nika would like to have a word with you.”

The name came as a shock, but I had no reason to turn the offer down.

To be continued in part 2





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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman: Volume 2 Part 1
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