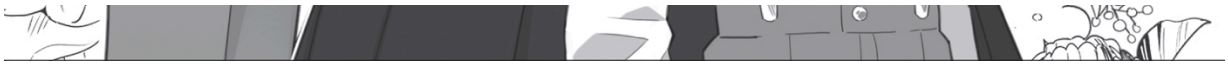

3
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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman
The Price of Glory
Part 1


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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman 2

Characters





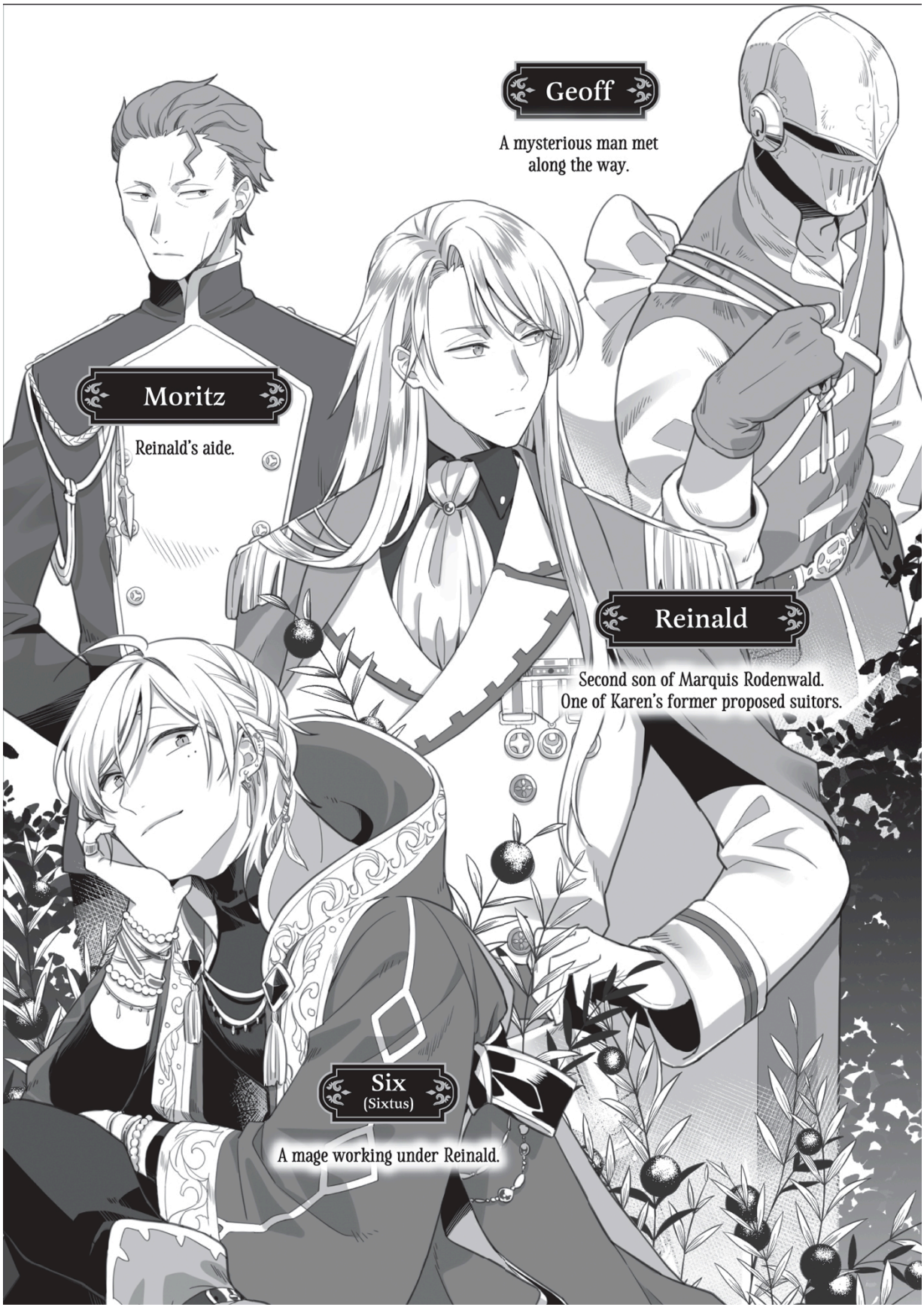

Geoff
A mysterious man met along the way.
Moritz
Reinald's aide.
Reinald
Second son of Marquis Rodenwald.
One of Karen's former proposed suitors.
Six
(Sixtus)
A mage working under Reinald.



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Characters
3. 1: The Mage Sixtus
4. 2: A Brother and Sister, Split
5. 3: A New Pledge
6. 4: Settling in as Rumors Swirl
7. 5: A Most Mysterious Friendliness
8. 6: A Rather Pushy Vice Captain
9. 7: How I Longed to See You
10. 8: The Promise of a Home-Cooked Dinner
11. 9: The Rage and Agony of the Prodigious
12. Bonus Textless Cover
13. About J-Novel Club
14. Copyright

1: The Mage Sixtus

I didn't stop to observe every single detail, but based on what I saw from the doorway, the general design of the room and all the furniture was identical. That made my mind go completely blank. Because *of course* it did. Ordinarily, the door should have opened to a corridor or a different room. How could anyone possibly expect to walk into a room of the same size, with the same furniture, and decorated down to the same wallpaper?

I stood there with my hand on the doorknob, frozen for a time.

I'm scared. Maybe even too scared to move.

"What is going on...?"

I had no answer to my question, but the idea of turning back was even more terrifying. I knew that the corpse in the previous room wouldn't move from its place, but the image of it rising to its feet filled me with worry. I felt a scream rising from the pit of my stomach, but I shoved my terror from my mind as best I could and took a step into the new room. I stood at the corner of it, my eyes on the door at the opposite wall, a mere ten steps away.

I walked toward it with such trepidation it was almost laughable, taking in my surroundings through something of a dull mental haze. It wasn't that I wanted to see *it* again, but I at least wanted to know if it was still there, unmoving and slumped over the desk. I wanted to reassure myself that the only odd thing about the situation was the room itself, and so I reluctantly took it all in.

And as if to laugh at my show of confidence, fate saw fit to alert me to something out of the ordinary. I heard a sharp intake of air and did not immediately realize that it was my own gasp. It turned out the second room I'd entered was not an entire replica of the first; this was good. The difference, however, brought me no joy.

Gone was the corpse strewn across the room's desk. Instead, *someone* sat slumped against the far wall. I could not make out their

features with their head slumped, but the clothes made me *think* it was a male. The reason it was so difficult to tell was that the body had reached a point beyond such simple judgments. Its skin was black like charcoal and it clung to the bone, making for unnaturally thin limbs. Speaking to the thing was useless; I was staring at another corpse.

How long did I stand there, frozen in place, I wonder? It might have been a minute, or ten, or even just mere seconds. All I knew was that the only sounds in the room were those of my own breathing and the gentle rustle of my clothes. When I focused my ears to listen for more, I heard none of the birds that should have been chirping outside, no wind against the windows, and no shaking of leaves in the trees.

A feeling crept upon me then. It was an instinctive understanding that this was a place outside of the world I knew, and in it there existed only silence and death. And when the understanding hit me, I ran.

Why? Well, isn't it obvious?

I didn't want to be there even a second longer.

"This sucks," I whispered to myself. "This sucks, this sucks, this sucks!"

Somebody. Anybody. Just tell me this is all a dream. I don't even care if it's some weirdo bad taste theme park. It can be whatever it wants, just get me *out of here...!*

I felt myself sweating even though it wasn't even hot. All I had to do was turn the doorknob to escape the room, but for a moment my fingertips trembled at the thought. Still, I held my panic at bay and opened the door at the far end of the room, only to once again find myself in the same room.

The difference this time? There was no body against the wall; instead, there was an unnatural bulge hidden under the covers of the bed. I lacked the courage necessary to check what lay under them, and so I hurried to the door and flew into the next room.

In the fourth room, I saw a face. It belonged to a woman, lying on the ground with her arms crossed, staring up at the ceiling. She did not wear the pajamas of the corpse from room number one, nor

the male garb of the corpse in room number two, but instead was draped in a peach-colored dress. There were no eyes in the sunken darkness of her eye sockets, only gaping black holes. But just like the other corpses I'd seen, her skin was black and stretched taut across her skeleton.

That was when a most unsettling thought hit me. If this woman had died in her sleep, and her skin still remained (dried out though it was...), then I still would have seen eyelids. Based on the eye sockets that remained instead, one had to surmise that the woman had died with her eyes open.

The realization was enough to give me another rash of goose bumps.

There was something surreal about the whole thing. Perhaps it was the lack of anything one might call a scent. The air was thick with dust, but there were no foul odors to speak of. If I'd smelled anything like a dead body, I would have broken down on the spot—reduced to nothing more than a mess of tears, rolled up into a ball on the floor.

Now that I had come this far, however, I was at least able to determine that the corpses that occupied the previous rooms all belonged to different people. Not that it made a difference. I passed quickly through into room five, which was a mess. Someone had trashed it, and their corpse was now just a period at the end of their tantrum.

I found a chair in the center of room six. A rope hung from the open beams up by the ceiling, at the end of which was a noose. Until this point in my life, I had never considered what might happen to a hanged corpse if it were simply abandoned over an inordinate amount of time. Now, however, I could say with great confidence that I would do everything in my power to stop anyone who even considered hanging themselves. Once was enough; I could not bring myself to look at the corpse and its horribly long and distorted neck a second time. And while everything had long since dried up, the floor was nonetheless covered in human filth and viscera.

Room seven proved the most difficult to traverse, and I wanted out even more than I had the first room I'd arrived in. There were

two corpses in it, and judging by their outfits they belonged to a man and a woman. The woman lay upon the twisted sheets of the bed, which were dyed a reddish black. Near her body, on the floor, lay a dagger. That alone would have been bearable, but the man had died in front of the door, effectively blocking it.

I was momentarily tempted to turn back, but I refused to confront the hanging corpse a second time. I felt that to do so would break my spirit entirely. It did not take long for me to make up my mind, though taking the man's corpse by its clothes and dragging it clear of the door gave me the creeps. I broke out in a sweat all over again, my mind a jumble of competing impulses. I wanted to flee, to burst into tears, and to scream.

"I'm over this."

I spoke the words aloud, but my body refused to listen. I gritted my teeth as I took the room's doorknob in hand. I steeled myself for what might lie ahead and the horror that might await me within. I stepped into room number eight, my eyes scanning for what awaited me.

That was when I heard a voice from behind me.

"You came."

The room should have been empty, but I *knew* I'd heard it—a male voice, and one I did not recognize. Before I could think more about it, however, I was pushed in the back and fell hard on the carpet. I hurried to my feet and spun around, only to find that the door was gone.

The door I had just passed through had *vanished*.

No way. How is that possible? I hate this.

There was no door to a potential room number nine either. There were no doors at all.

I'm trapped.

"No, no, no, no, no."

There's no corpse in this room. There were corpses in all the other rooms, but there's no dead body in here!

It was at that moment that I lost the ability to hold back the rushing waters of dread, fear, and panic pounding against the dam of my heart. I made my way to the window, desperate for options,

but with my legs now turned to jelly it was a slow, lumbering gait. I pounded on the glass again and again, screaming for someone to get me out. It was only when my throat ached from all the shrieking that something dawned on me.

I had realized earlier that there was no sound in this place, but only now did I notice that the scene outside the window was frozen. The sky, the trees, all of it was eerily still. The room I was in appeared to be on the second floor, and when I looked down I saw eight black, wavering shadows. They were blurry and unclear, but I could see that all of them had their eyes open. They turned their eyes upward to where I was.

They turned their eyes on *me*.

It's likely that I screamed when it happened. I leaped away from the window with everything I had and rolled up into a ball. These were circumstances that I did not understand, but my brain refused to stop pushing the most likely truth upon me.

"No," I uttered. "No, no, no..."

But try as I might to stop the pieces from coming together, there they were. It was a hunch that had crept closer with each room I passed, but I had held it at bay, knowing that to accept its truth would be to lose myself to despair. It was in the clothes the corpses wore. Clothes that changed with each room. The corpse in the first room had worn pajamas, but they had been of a very old design. With each passing room, the clothing had grown more current. The two corpses in the seventh room had worn what could be called currently in vogue.

The last room, the room in which I now found myself, was devoid of doors and devoid of the corpses that had filled the others.

Which means that the next person to rot within these walls is...

I wailed and I cried. I threw a tantrum. But eventually, I ran dry of tears. I looked around the room as I wiped at my face, and my hazy mind achieved a small amount of clarity. My eyelids twitched. I felt ill. Through the fear I stood to my feet, empowered by a strong desire to go home and the knowledge that to sit in the corner doing nothing would—by its very nature—achieve exactly that.

I took the room's chair in my hands and threw it at the walls and

the windows. Nothing happened. I sat down on the carpet, heaving at the sudden exertion and taking deep breaths.

They're looking for you. They must be.

Embarrassing as it is to admit, I had completely forgotten about the others up until this point in time. If I had disappeared into thin air, they would come searching. And despite his personality, there was no denying that Six was a very capable mage.

So this is no time to panic.

I bit my lower lip, the dull pain the only thing calming my nerves and keeping my mind on track. When my breathing settled, I circled the room's walls, knocking on them in the hopes that I might discover a secret door of some kind. When that turned up nothing, I checked carefully under the bed and behind the desk. And though I abhorred the idea, I forced myself to go once more to the window. The moment I peeked outside, the eight figures craned their heads to stare at me. A shiver ran down my spine, but when it passed I shot a glare at them in a vain attempt at confidence.

I considered the situation. All that had happened was a push in the back and an extended intimidation campaign. The figures outside watched but did nothing. They took no overt, direct action. In terms of physical harm, I'd taken far worse in Falkrum and Conrad. Even the corpses I'd seen up until now were little more than dried-out husks. What was there to be so afraid of?

So why are you letting this get to you, Karen?

If any of those mummified corpses even tried to attack you, I bet you'd have a damn good shot against them.

"I am getting out of here, whatever it takes."

I made sure to speak the words aloud. It was a way of reinforcing the strength I needed and wanted in the moment. An instant later, I heard something drop to the floor behind me. I found a dagger on the carpet, and though I did not remember the particulars in detail, it looked to be the same as the one I'd seen in room number seven.

Out the window, the eight figures had at some point grown mouths. They opened wide as if trying to shout, their mouths pulled so far open I could see their gums. But the voices never reached me. All the same, their message reached me.

"Hurry," they said. "Hurry, hurry, hurryhurryhurryhurry..."

Hurry up and die.

I heard voices ringing in my head. Pulling away from the window eased it somewhat, but even then I felt sick. I picked the dagger up from the floor and ran its blade into the wall. I was enraged. I was *not* going to take my own life. I was done playing these games. I saw no reason to leave this world yet. If anything, all I had were reasons to stay. I gouged out a section of the wall in anger.

My attack did not last long. I did not want to waste energy, and so I moved back to the center of the room and once more took everything in. All I had in this place was time. I took a seat on the bed, then lay down and closed my eyes. The voices in my head had quietened to nothing, and though it provided me a small comfort, the circumstances remained unchanged.

That I could even lie down at all was due to my conviction that whatever had put me in here would not lay a hand on me. The proof of that was in the previous rooms. While rooms one to four had provided little in the way of information, things had been different in the rooms following.

I was speculating, yes, but room five showed signs of violence and panic. The person in there had behaved not unlike me when I threw the room's chair around. Whoever it was in room six had ended their life upon realizing they had no way out. And though the woman in room seven appeared to have been murdered, that made sense if it was the man who did the murdering. Why room seven contained *two* people was unclear, but outside of that room there were no signs of any struggling. Then the shouts of "hurry up" were nothing more than attempts to push me along.

"Damn it," I muttered. "I wished I hadn't gotten so freaked out. I should have checked out those other rooms more thoroughly."

Getting frustrated wasn't going to change anything, but I knew that if I'd kept a cool head from the start then I could have been working with convictions instead of speculations. That annoyed me. I already knew that it was no good to get wrapped up in a panic. I had a feeling that the margrave and Doctor Emma would have given me a good lecture over it. Sven would have laughed at me.

I did not want to die here. I could not allow it. I stood up and looked at the ceiling. It was then that I noticed a length of rope tied to the beams. It was just the right height for me to reach if I stood on the chair. I don't know when it got there, but it was a neat and tidy job with a very clear purpose.

I held the dagger in an icepick grip as I stood in the corner of the room. Based on the placement of all the furniture, I could get a sense for where the room's door was most likely located. Instead of simply cutting randomly and recklessly, I wanted to gouge away at the walls more strategically. When I felt the knife dig into wood, I hacked away some more.

To be honest, I was anything *but* sure of my plan, but it was far better than doing nothing. If hacking at the walls proved futile, I would move on to rolling up the carpet and checking the floor.

Hunger and thirst aren't going to stop just because the world outside has. I'll have to make sure I rest too. That damned Six. I will never *forgive him for this.*

Half enraged, half in tears, I stabbed the dagger into the wall. I told myself that the next time I saw Six I would sock him in the jaw as hard as I could. That was when I heard something: a crawling sound of some kind. I hoped that this time it would be a physical entity—something I could hit.

A dark mist was gathering from the corners of the dim room and coalescing at its center. It was like watching bugs swarming together, but it really was just a mist. I immediately broke out in a cold sweat, having been convinced until that moment that I was safe from any direct attacks.

Can I even stab this thing?

I was filled with panic, but I refused to go down without some kind of fight. I held the dagger in front of me, gripping its handle for dear life. My legs trembled underneath me.

I'm probably... I mean, I am*...fine. I can do this...*

With each passing moment, the mist took a human shape, and as its head moved, I got the sense that it was searching for something. As its arms reached out for me, I shirked away. And then eyes floated up from among the black human shape and stared straight at

me. A moment later, it gripped my cheeks between its hands.

I couldn't look away. I was convinced that it was all over before I even had a chance to react.

"I found you!" cried a singsong voice. "Now please, don't make things any more difficult."

It was a voice I recognized for its carefree, if grating, tone. And though it sounded like it was surrounded in a certain static, there was no mistaking it. The tension that had been running through my entire being until that moment dissipated in an instant, and my legs gave out from under me. I slumped to my knees as an exasperated mage-shaped mist person looked down at me.

"Oh my, are you quite all right?" asked Six. "How unfortunate that you were put through something so horrifying."

"Six..." I uttered.

"Yes, yes," he replied. "It is I, your savior. Six."

I couldn't see much of a savior in that mess of darkness, if I'm being honest. Still, when he gripped my left arm, a strange sensation ran through it. It wasn't painful, per se, but it felt like it was pervading my person and I could hardly stand it. It creeped me out. I wanted to run at the mere touch of it, but I also wanted to shrink into a little ball; all my instincts told me not to stare into that darkness.

There was so much I wanted to blast him about. The whole reason I was here was because of him. Then there was the fact he was acting like this wasn't his fault, and how damned easygoing he was in the presence of someone who'd been through the horrors that I'd been put through.

And yet, with Six standing there in front of me, I couldn't put words to any of it.

"You... How... What...?" I uttered.

The black mist was in the shape of a person, but it had no hair, no clothing, and no discerning features. It really was just a silhouette. No ears or nose either—its face was just a mouth with lidless eyes. The only thing that let me know it was Six at all was the tone of voice.

The silhouette's mouth curled into a smile, and it laughed. It was

an easy, casual laughter, and one with a mocking tone. It struck me then that the shadowy figure before me looked not unlike the eight I'd seen out the window earlier.

"I see, I see," said Six. "I *thought* something was odd, and now I realize it's because I scared you! It's just been so long, you see. I've been around such charmless types of late, and clearly I've completely forgotten how it feels!"

The Six-silhouette chuckled and snapped its fingers. An instant later, it had transformed into the Six I knew. It was a sight most unbelievable in ordinary life, and the young mage who'd just brought it about knelt down to look me in the eye and wipe the tears from my cheek with a finger.

"Reinald told me to find you on the double," Six continued, "and so I really did my utmost. To think I'd be met with tears. It's heartbreaking, it really is."

"But this was...all...*your* fault..."

"Yes, yes, my apologies. But we were fishing, you see? And what a shock—it was like the fish jumping at our bait before we'd even cast our rod! But at least you weren't killed immediately, so all's well that ends well, no? It is *so* important for humans to be generous and forgiving."

"*You're* going to lecture *me* about forgi—"

It was all too obvious that his heart wasn't in the few words he'd offered as an apology. I had it in mind to drown him in insults right there, but I did not want to remain in this place any longer than I absolutely had to. I put my frustrations aside, and it was then that I noticed it: the countless hands reaching up from the floor and clawing at my dress.

"Huh?! Wh-What is that?!" I stammered, cutting myself off.

"Oh my, aren't you the popular one? I daresay somebody doesn't want you to go."

"Who cares?! This is horrible! It's the creepiest thing ever! Six! Help me!"

The sight of ghostly hands should have shocked me stupid, but Six's attitude sucked all the tension out of the moment.

"Look at you, with all that energy to scream and shout," said the

mage. “Put that energy to work and you might be able to brush them all off.”

“How?! Just help me already! They’re so strong, and... Wha... Stop...it hurts...!”

It should have been surreal to see so many hands just appearing out of the floor like that... Six, for his part, simply stood slowly to his feet.

“Dear me. I do wish you’d stop making this so troublesome.”

He brushed the hands clawing at me and stomped on them, at which point they dissipated into something like dust and disappeared.

You mean it was that *easy...?*

“There we go,” said Six. “They might be pitiful things, but it’s not like I can just give you to them, so it is what it is. Come on then, it’s all clear; on your feet, little one.”

Damn it. I’ve been so steadfast until now...

I don’t want to tell him. I really don’t.

“I can’t,” I admitted, finally.

“Huh? Are you toying with me?”

“I’m not toying with anyone! That took me completely by surprise! My legs won’t work!”

That “Huh?” of his was the angriest any “Huh?” had ever made me in my entire life. As expected, however, the mage merely chuckled and patted me on the head the way one might when placating a small child. My face flushed with embarrassment, but no matter how hard I tried my legs refused to respond. It was as if I’d completely forgotten what standing even felt like.

“Would you *please* stop with the chuckling?” I said. “It’s not like I asked for any of this!”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time to simply wait around, so I suppose I’ll just carry you. If we’re late, Elena will probably lop my arm off again.”

“What are you... Wait!” I shrieked.

I thought Six was simply reaching out for me, but then he hefted me up off my feet. He was a man, yes, but he was a decidedly slender one, and not at all the type you would imagine could carry

another human being. And yet he picked me up as if I were nothing more than a pet cat.

"No struggling, little one," he said. "This room is not what it appears, and if I drop you I'll have to go through the pain of finding you again."

He held me in a single arm, cradling my butt and thighs in the crook of his arm. Lost in the surprise of it all, I struggled to find my sense of balance and ended up pulling on Six's hair. He did not react in the slightest.

"Well then, I think it's about time we said goodbye to this gloomy room, don't you?"

Six faced the wall near the corner—the very place I'd taken my dagger to earlier—and kicked it. Where there was nothing a moment ago, now there was a door.

"What? But it was just a wall..." I uttered.

"It was hidden so as to keep you from escaping," Six explained. "That said, even if you had found it by way of luck, that's no guarantee that you would have made it out safely."

With another kick, a symbol appeared at Six's feet. A magical seal, I think? It expanded to cover the door, which fractured before transforming into a dark mist that dispersed throughout the room.

"That is *so* creepy..." I commented.

"What a most refreshing response. I love it. You've really reminded me of just how much the others seem entirely devoid of any charm whatsoever."

"Is there a corridor on the other side of that?" I asked. "Can we go back now?"

"No. It may look like a corridor, but in fact it's something entirely different."

Six took a step forward, and black spread out before us. I know it sounds weird, but there's no other way to say it; it was just a black darkness, spreading out before our eyes. It felt like a trick of the eyes, an utter impossibility, and yet, perhaps because of what I'd just been through, I couldn't really think of it that way. The only noticeable sight was a white path, one that suddenly appeared beneath Six's feet and stretched on into the distance.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Beats me... I mean, I didn't create this place. All I know is that it's a nasty place for stuffing pitiful little sacrificial lambs."

"You mean I wasn't locked in a room somewhere?"

"It wasn't a real space, no. You're in that house from earlier while also being in a space that doesn't actually exist anywhere. That's why the others couldn't find you even though they turned the place upside down. I have to assume that the same thing happened to all the others who reportedly went missing too."

"So the other rooms, the other people, they were trapped..."

"I think we can sympathize with them in that regard, though they'll never be back."

"This is your first time here, isn't it? You seem awfully knowledgeable about it."

"It's just the sense I get from what I've seen. They're there whether you like it or not."

There was *so* much to unpack in what he'd just told me, and so I asked about the most pressing matter as Six walked along the path in front of us.

"Do spirits exist?"

"If you say they do, they do, and if you say they don't, they don't."

"Which is to say it's...a mindset thing?"

"What you've seen and experienced cannot be summed up or explained in one neat word or sentence," said Six. "Spirits exist, as do evil spirits and vengeful ghosts. What you saw was decidedly rare in that it was out to cause real physical harm. How lucky you were to run into the slow and drawn-out murderous type."

"All of that is terrifying."

"It's exceedingly rare, really. For a spirit to willingly reach out to trap others, even though there's nobody around? That would have taken some training, I can tell you that. And whoever did it couldn't possibly have been of sound mind. If they were still alive, I'm certain Karl would have just loved them."

Slow and drawn-out murderous type?

It seemed plausible that "instant death trap" spirits were also a

thing, and the mere thought sent a shiver down my spine. But I should add that I was also just as freaked out by the fact that the Emperor Karl was fond of such things, and that Six spoke as if he and the emperor were on a first-name basis.

I'm going to have to change subjects, and fast. I am dangerously close to plunging my nose right into the secrets of the empire.

"So spirits aren't just the stuff of fairy tales, then? They really *do* exist."

"Their presence is mostly extinguished, so to speak, but yes. Many existed in the forests of Conrad, where you lived until quite recently."

"There's so much I want to get into that I can't even get my thoughts straight... For an imperial citizen, you know an awful lot about nations outside of the empire."

"Indeed. I may be stuck where I am now, but before that I was a wanderer. I traveled nations as I pleased until I was bound to the empire, and I remember it all quite well. My travels are restrained these days, but I'm still able to get out and about."

"A wanderer?"

"Yes. I walked the lands so thoroughly you might even say there's not a place on the continent I haven't been."

Does he mean to say that he isn't a born imperial?

I didn't feel like he was lying to me. That said, although he was happy to drop the occasional snippet from his past, he was not at all concerned with giving any further explanation to anything he said, which made piecing everything together quite difficult. But even then, it wasn't like I had all the time in the world to get to the bottom of things either.

I'd never really doubted Six's origins before. I knew he was a man of many secrets, but now I was left with a question I couldn't bring myself to ask at the moment: *Just who is this man?*

"Did you know what was happening to me when I was caught?" I asked instead.

"More or less. We don't have to bother with the details if you don't feel like it, though; I came here to rescue you, and I've little interest in any of the rest of it."

"I see. Well, that speeds things up, then. There were others who'd been trapped before me. What's going to happen to them?"

"I don't know. But they're just part of all this now, so I suppose it depends on what happens next. They were sacrificed to ensure that the secret of this house was kept under wraps, and if we break that wide open, perhaps they'll simply disappear or dissipate."

"And that brings us to another thing I want you to tell me: why is all this weird stuff happening in an ordinary house?"

"Oh, please don't. Explaining all of that is going to be *such* a pain..."

"You don't have a choice! You called me bait, damn it!"

I demanded an explanation, and I was intent on getting one. I had *no* idea how I'd gotten into any of all this, and I was not going to simply accept that it was all done and dusted just because I'd been whisked away from danger. Six, however, simply smiled and showed no signs of saying anything more. For a moment I considered attacking him, but I didn't know what might happen if he dropped me. I took instead to pulling roughly at his hair, but it didn't seem to bother him in the slightest, much to my chagrin.

"Lady Karen, it's as if you grow bolder and more impulsive with each passing day. But really, you must show respect to your elders. Or is it that you only play things coy for Reinald?"

"If I insisted on being polite and reserved around the likes of you I'd be dead! Multiple times over! I'm not joking when I say that you better be ready when we make it out of this place!"

"Oh, dear me, how utterly terrifying. Quite the aura of intimidation for a girl who lost the use of her legs out of sheer fright."

There wasn't a hint of anything serious in Six's attitude. And while I felt at least secure enough to fly into a minor rage, I *had* been trapped in a doorless room in a strange space filled with corpses. On top of that, pretty much everything Six had said until now was in some way ominous or unsettling. I felt entirely outside of my comfort zone.

"It'd be far quicker for you to see the real thing for yourself than for me to explain it all," continued Six. "Or if you want to know the

particulars, ask Reinald yourself. He's a soft spot for you, and I'm sure he'd open up if you simply asked... Ah, this is the spot."

"Here? But the road still stretches on..."

I don't know what Six was thinking, but he chose that spot to turn a full ninety degrees. The moment he stepped from the white path we were plunged into darkness. I felt like I was going to spit my own stomach out.

"We're...?!" I started.

"*Falling*" was what I intended to say, but just as suddenly we weren't. Six's feet broke through the darkness and landed on a floor of some kind. A shock ran through my whole body, shaking it.

"There we are," announced Six as my eyes were still rolling in my head.

If we're going to fall like that, at least warn me!

I was just about to actually put words to my thoughts when an entirely different thought hit me.

Where are we?

But I didn't have a chance to think about it very long, because Elena was pulling my face in to hold me close.

"Karen!" she cried. "Oh, I'm so relieved! How do I even begin to apologize for this idiot?! When you disappeared like that, we had no idea what to do!"

"E-Elena," I uttered. "I...I can't keep my balance."

"Elena, release her, or the poor little waif will fall," said Six.

Reinald and Haring were there too. We appeared to be in some kind of basement room. It had a timber ceiling with walls made of stone and no space for any sunlight to get in. I was quick to take it in because the room layout and the location of the fireplace were the same as in my house. The room was lit by torches, but the complete lack of furniture made the place feel cold.

Reinald was with some five others, and Six looked them over, then glanced at me.

"Save your complaints until later," he said. "Haring, am I right to think it showed up? The trap we set was fractured, so I assume it must have."

"Yes, it appeared rather suddenly," replied Haring, "just like you

said... Kokoska! Some space, please."

"But! But I didn't even notice she was gone! I'm so sorrryyyy!" cried Elena.

"What are you apologizing for?" asked Six. "Look how quickly we found her. And also, it's because *you* introduced Karen to the place next door that everything came to light. If anything, you should be proud of yourself."

"You just don't know when to keep your mouth shut, do you?!" Elena shot back. "Do you really want me to lop off your arm again?!"

"Six, stop stirring her up."

Haring took the tearful Elena by the collar and dragged her away from the mage. I gathered that Elena felt guilty about what had happened, but I didn't know why she was apologizing. She was all too eager to let loose a rain of insults, but Haring simply covered her mouth with a hand. He did not budge—he barely even blinked—as she struggled against his grip. The oddest thing about it was how it seemed like something Haring was very used to.

"In any case, we've more important matters to discuss," said Six. "So let's get to them, shall we?"

My eyes met Reinald's, but the suddenly serious look on Six's face kept me from saying anything to him. There was also the fact that I was terribly embarrassed by the predicament I was in.

"Er, Six," I said. "You can put me down now."

"Can you stand on your own?"

"Not exactly, but I can't just have you carrying me around all day either."

"Yes, but I'm the only one here who can carry you and remain entirely unencumbered. And anyway, *you're* the one who won't shut up about explanations and the like."

It was at that point that I realized Six hadn't looked at all tired the entire time he'd been carrying me. Was he even human? Or was he using some kind of strength-boosting spell?

Haring was gazing at one of the walls, just barely lit by the room's torches. When I squinted for a better look, I noticed a gaping hole in it. It was quite the creepy sight when combined with the general gloom of the room itself, but Six wasn't bothered at all.

"Lady Karen would be best off being escorted home," said Haring.

"Did you not hear our conversation, Haring?" replied Six. "She's the reason we managed to get this far without any extra bother, and she's *curious*. It's fine to tell her, isn't it? She lives right next door, after all. Best to have her help us with all of this."

"Your thoughts, Lady Conrad?" asked Haring.

I was glad for his concern, but Six was right, however much it pained me to admit it.

"You might not be aware, Sir Haring," I said, "but I just went through a truly horrendous experience just now. If I am to be sent home, then I expect to at least be told what is going on in this house."

"A little help, Your Highness?" said Haring, looking toward Reinald.

"Tell her," he replied. "We got her into this mess, and that responsibility is ours. The moment Six brought her inside, our hands were tied. Let me assure you, Karen, that you are safe for the time being."

"Truly, I can't even put into words what I just went through back there, but...I'll save my complaints for later."

"It seems Six would like for you to accompany us. Are you hurt?"

"It was just a mild shock, nothing more. Six carried me the rest of the way, and I'll stick with you even if I have to drag myself by my arms."

"Best that I just carry you, then," said Six. "Our friend in here still hasn't learned their lesson; they're still watching us. That means there's a chance you might get swept away again the moment you set foot on the ground. I can stop that, yes, but it's a huge pain."

"That's the first I've heard of that!"

"Because it's the first I've said of it. So don't go touching anything."

I wasn't going to! Not even if you asked!

Still, at least Reinald was on my side. The two of us peeked into the darkness of the hole in the wall. It seemed to widen deeper inside, and as my eyes became slightly accustomed to the darkness, I saw that there was a staircase heading downward.

"Look," said Six. "This is the secret that this house is hiding. This house's true purpose is to hide this entrance, or otherwise kill any who enter. Quite the lengths to go to..."

I heard a seriousness in Six's voice, though it was only there for an instant, and the usual happy-go-lucky mage was back.

"Where does the hole lead to?" I asked.

"The underground waterways. This is a long-forgotten secret entrance."

Wait, isn't that one of the near-impossible tasks that the emperor pushed onto Reinald?!

I was taken completely by surprise, and I remained that way as Reinald stared down at the stairs.

"And you're certain?" he asked.

"It doesn't smell very good down there, but I detect the faint hint of those horrid ruins," replied the mage. "Follow the path and you'll reach them, of that I'm certain."

"I see. Hide an entrance among the common populace, and it's very unlikely to be found."

Reinald called for one of his guards, who brought him a sword which he attached to his belt.

"Now to see if it proves advantageous," said Reinald. "Both the emperor and Wilhelmina want control of the place; it might be fun to give it to them."

"There you go again," said Six. "You've zero intentions of doing anything of the sort."

"That depends on where it takes us. If it proves useless, we can still sell it for a high price."

Six fell unusually silent at Reinald's comment.

"I don't like that idea," he muttered.

"Then show me something worth more than what's down there. I may have to hand it over, depending on the circumstances."

"You realize where this house is located, yes? Hand it over and you'll put either the emperor or your sister right on track to meet with Lady Conrad."

Er, why am I important to this conversation? And also, why am I being used for intimidation?

There was a bitter look in the mage's eyes, but it didn't seem to bother Reinald.

"In such a case, we'll simply have to provide Karen with a new home."

But I don't want to move again!

Reinald's reply was, judging by Six's expression, not what he wanted to hear. Reinald's guards, however, ignored the pouting mage and turned to their master with worry written on their faces.

"We don't know what's down there," said one. "Let us go first; you can come down when we've confirmed that the location is secure."

"Don't be a fool. You think I'm going to let go of an opportunity so intriguing? Let's not forget that both the emperor and my sister said that it was my 'duty' to understand the waterways. In which case, how could I possibly show my face to those under my command if I do not check things for myself?"

"But with all due respect, this is no time for games. You cannot take this lightly. You know just as well as the rest of us that the imperial princess's reconnaissance team never returned from their expedition."

"Yes, but if Wilhelmina was someone foolish enough to tell the emperor *everything*, my job would be that much simpler..."

"She runs further searches in secret, for one thing," muttered Six. "There's no way Karl has the full picture."

"Haring, tell Nika and the others to go," said Reinald, turning to issue orders. "The rest are to continue, and I'll leave that in your hands."

"Understood. However, word will spread of your visit to the common residential district."

"As it always does. Let them say what they will. I know some people who will love having such juicy rumors to chew on."

"As you wish."

Haring looked anything but pleased by the idea. From what I could tell, the rumors they were talking about concerned Reinald mingling with the ordinary citizenry.

"We'll say I went to visit a friend and happened to enter the

house next door," said Reinald. "A house in which we discovered issues. You'll assist us in this, I hope, Karen?"

"It looks to me like I have little other choice," I replied. "So yes, you have my word."

By this time, I was far more drawn to the waterways. Six stood silent and nonplussed, and it didn't seem like anyone was going to explain things to me.

"But are you sure it's okay to discuss such things in my presence, Sir Reinald?" I asked.

"How coldhearted of you to say such a thing. Do you intend to run into the arms of the emperor or Wilhelmina? I wouldn't recommend the first of those two options."

"Then I will take your openness as a sign of trust."

"A wise move. I, too, would hate to lose a friend."

Well, at least he's talking to me more now than he used to. That's a plus.

While Reinald issued further orders, I rested an elbow on Six's head—he was still essentially a chair for me—and leaned in to look at him.

"Let's explore the waterways before your mood gets any worse, shall we?" I suggested. "There will be plenty of time for you to pout when we're done."

"Quite right," replied the mage, sighing. "But oh, how sad it is to think that you're the only one to console me."

"Console you? Nothing of the sort. I'll have you know I still haven't forgiven you for referring to me as bait."

"Oh, come now, don't be so petty. Why, when Reinald was just a boy, I threw him into the waterways and left him there. He smiled and let it go. You would do well to learn from such behavior."

All I learned from that was that Six had done something awful to Reinald as a youth. That alone told me that the two had known each other far longer than I had imagined.

"Let's not go turning fact into fiction," said Reinald. "If I'd been unable to escape I'd have at least ensured that you joined me down there."

"Such resolve buoys the heart. So impressive. That willingness to

pour yourself into the impossible is due in no small part to my actions. How it warms the soul."

I knew by this exchange that Six had been embellishing. I wondered if it was most likely a lie.

Haring returned upstairs to relay Reinald's orders. Reinald took a glass lamp in hand and led the way down the stairs, followed by Six and Elena. Tension was carved into everyone's face. Well, everyone except for Six, who had at some point rediscovered his carefree ways.

"Rumor has it that the waterways are a labyrinth," I said. "Is it true that even the imperial family doesn't completely understand them?"

I know the timing of my question was bad, given that we were plunging into the depths, but my curiosity won out over my common sense.

"It is," said Six. "Truth be told, it's near impossible."

The stairway was narrow and steep, and at some point they turned from stone to wood, creaking under our footsteps.

"The way I heard it, the laborers who designed the waterways all died," I said.

Six chuckled.

"Yes, that's how the story goes."

The stairs did not go on particularly long. The torches we carried lit a small room within a cave. But it was not just a small room... I knew I should have been used to such sights by now, but nonetheless I gasped when I saw it all. Elena tapped me on the shoulder to let me know I was safe, then stepped into the room.

"It's a tomb, but there's airflow," said Elena. "I'll set about lighting the place up."

"Get to it," said Reinald.

There were handles of a sort along the walls, and torches were placed in them to give light to the room.

"Tombs within houses are banned," said Six with something of an exasperated sigh. "It's amazing this one remained hidden."

The walls were supported by timber and stone beams, but the room was largely dug out of the earth. There were recesses dug into

the wall at regular intervals, in which lay the bones of once living people. There couldn't have been more than ten. There was another similar room farther down, which meant more skeletons.

Six walked up closer to one of the walls, which meant that I, too, was taken closer to the dead in their place of rest. My skin crept immediately.

"I don't want to touch any of them if I can help it," I said, troubled by it all. "You'd be doing me a great favor by staying clear of the walls."

"It's not just the bodies of the house's former residents, I see..." said Six, staring at a body that had not been properly prepared for burial. "Look for yourself. You've seen that somewhere before, haven't you?"

Six motioned to the clothing that covered the skeleton. It was little more than dirtied rags, but I *had* seen that traditional lace pattern before.

"I saw this," I uttered. "In the first room of that horrid place..."

It was the nightgown draped over the body of the woman in the first room. The room where it had all started. The realization sent another shiver down my spine.

Wait.

But before my hunch could be properly confirmed, Six motioned Reinald into the next room. This room, too, contained a number of buried dead. Elena was looking down at two corpses that were comparatively...more recent than the others. I recognized the clothes they wore as those on the corpses in room number seven. They had deteriorated over the years, but nonetheless I recognized them.

"They died together..." uttered Elena. "I remember my grandfather telling me about it. He said that the girl next door had eloped with her lover, and that she wore an outfit just like this one."

"You know something about this?" I asked.

"This house has been vacant for an age. The last time people moved out, everybody said it was because the daughter of the family who lived there had eloped with her lover..."

The parents had moved out so suddenly, however, that the actual

truth had never had a chance to come to light.

"They were immigrants that had come from abroad," Elena continued. "The family before them had lived here a long time, but when they left, it was many years before anybody else arrived. I don't know anything about that first family, however..."

"And I daresay that all of this was *their* work," commented Six. "What might have started as a dedicated ritual was likely abandoned. That's perhaps fine in and of itself, but maintaining such a ritual isn't easy. And back when all of this was done, such rituals were both frowned upon *and* difficult to manage. When the keepers of it left or died, they left things in such a state that they would still go on. Reinald, who were the past residents of this house?"

"Past records have them as a wealthy family of craftsmen. Architects, it would seem, though the details aren't clear."

Six had reason to believe that some of the family had perhaps become the house itself, by way of its resident spirit. Generations of the family had lived at the house while it was rebuilt, but some decades ago an accident of some kind had forced them to leave. Relatives had then looked after the premises but after a time simply stopped showing up. The house thus remained vacant until another family bought it; at which point a young woman "disappeared" with her lover.

"The house had been left without a way to replenish itself, so to speak, but right next door lived a boy and a girl in the right age range. The house had its eyes on you," said Six.

"But why only Wendel and me?" I asked.

"Perhaps because you had the right energy, or because the ritual required a young person." Six paused for a moment to think. "But if it only affected the third floor of your home, we'd best further investigate the third floor of this one. It's rather difficult to reach as far as another house without some sort of a connection in place."

Later, a room would be discovered on the third floor that looked exactly like the one I was trapped in. Something was off about the floor plan, however, and a secret room was found after a suspicious wall was brought down. In that room was a corpse, thought to be male, hanging from the wall. It was far older than anything in the

basement, and based on its clothing and accessories, was presumed to be a mage of high standing.

All of this left one question: Why go to such roundabout lengths to hide an entrance to the waterways? On this matter, Six had his own opinion.

"Though it's weak, magical energy courses through the imperial capital's waterways," he said. "At present it's only enough to cause a loss in your sense of direction, but even if you cover it up, mages will still sense it. Especially mages like myself. It has to be hidden via the proper methods."

"Proper methods? You mean magic?"

To put it in the context of food, if you didn't want the smell of the meat you were cooking to get out, you had to put something up to block it. It was admittedly an odd comparison, but not entirely wrong, apparently.

"It's likely that the people of this house devised a spell that only members of their family could see through. And given that it needed a sacrificial lamb to be locked away..." Six paused to laugh. "But it's so inefficient! So unstable! For all we know they might have devised it purely on a whim! Still, they managed to hide it from me for many long years, so respect where respect is due, I suppose."

"What is up with mages?" I asked. "How can they do such horrible things?"

"That's just mages for you. That they work for the state is just a way to make things look nicer than they are. Even now, mages still experiment on live specimens. Some particularly nefarious types are even developing a brain-sucking magic."

"Six, that's enough."

"Yes, yes, my bad. I'll shut up, then, Reinald."

"I understand that the house kidnaps people to...replenish itself when it grows weak, but isn't that odd in and of itself?" I asked. "I don't have any magical prowess to speak of. Wouldn't it usually target...you know..."

"You mean it wouldn't target ordinary plebs, but mages?" said Six.

"I wouldn't use those exact words, but...yes, that's the gist of it."

Apparently, however, what I thought of as an aberration didn't matter.

"You're right in that originally the chosen sacrifices were people with magical power, but based on the girl who was taken before you, it doesn't seem to be concerned with differentiating sacrifices now. That's my best guess, anyway."

It was true that at least until room number four, there had been nothing in the way of panic or struggle and no signs of suicide. With that in mind, and though you couldn't really say that the victims had consented to their treatment, it seemed the ritual had been successful.

In any case, there was little point in thinking too hard on what was in the past. It was enough simply to know that there was a door to the rumored imperial waterways, and the house in which it existed was built so as to keep it hidden. Apparently, some of the underground waterways' paths even connected to the imperial palace.

"Six, we're at a dead end," said Reinald. "Can you take a look?"

Reinald was peering at a point in front of us, as calm as ever. He hadn't even shown a hint of discomfort at the tomb we'd passed through either.

"One moment, please... Yes, this is the way all right."

The room we found ourselves in had an altar at the center of it, and it was upon this that Six casually plonked me. Elena promptly screamed. I prepared myself for another kidnapping, but no dizzy spell ever came.

"I couldn't stand the way that thing kept stealing glances at us, so I crushed it," said Six, by way of explanation.

I hadn't seen him do anything more than walk around with me in his arms. I had no idea when he could have done it.

"Oh, and by the way," Six continued. "That's probably the sacrificial altar you're sitting on. See the dried bloodstains? I can almost guarantee it's where—"

Before he could finish, I screamed and leaped from the altar.

"You can stand on your own two feet!" remarked Six, chuckling. "I gather you can walk on your own now too, yes?"

God, I hate that guy...

When he was done having his fun laughing at me, Six kicked a statue standing against the wall, which crumbled to pieces and revealed a path beyond. A faint, damp smell wafted from the opening, and the white stone walls within looked nothing like what we'd seen so far.

"One of the waterways is connected directly to the Tower of the Eye, located at the center of the imperial palace," said Reinald. "There's a door to the waterways on the lowest floor of the tower, but nobody has ever made it to the surface from there. Which is to say that a route from the tower to the surface via the waterways has yet to be discovered."

If it really *was* the waterways that lay beyond the opening, then they were very dark. I assumed they'd still need to be searched.

"The waterways were built several layers deep, and the whole thing is a labyrinthine puzzle, making the right paths impossible to find. There are three other known entrances to the waterways outside of the one in the Tower of the Eye, but after many long years of surveying they all are assumed to go nowhere."

"There are *three* other entrances?"

Even if the waterways were built many years ago, this struck me as odd; more entrances meant more ways for one to get in. Or were the extra entrances meant instead to make it easier to flee from within? Were they to put off would-be intruders? I mean, they already had spells in place, was there a need to be overly cautious?

Six knew what I was getting at and let me know with a mischievous chuckle and the wave of his hand that I had things all wrong.

"It's the opposite of what you're thinking," he said. "The waterways weren't built underneath the capital. It's because the waterways and the ruins they connect to were here that the capital had to be built upon them."

The empire wanted to make use of the location's ancient magical systems, which had been lost to humanity since before the empire was even founded. It was crazy, yes, and almost unbelievable, but to be honest it was the fact that we were *finally* getting into true

“fantasy” territory that left more of an impression on me. It was because of this that my response was rather muted.

“Well,” I said simply.

Clearly, it was not the reaction Six had been hoping for, and he gave me an annoyed flick to the forehead.

“You don’t even understand just how astounding it is!” he declared.

“I really don’t,” I agreed.

“Look, I know that the spirits and the sacrifices make it all rather horrifying, but all you need to know is that a magical system of such scale is impossible by today’s standards.”

I wondered aloud if that lost technology was why the empire was remaining mostly hands-off when it came to dealing with what lay beneath its capital. Six looked utterly exasperated.

“What is it with you?” he cried. “I honestly can’t tell if you’re smarter or stupider than you look!”

“Elena, Six is being so rude,” I said. “Can’t we do something about it? I’m going to get quite mad if this keeps up.”

“Unfortunately, this is how he is with everyone.”

Six looked nonplussed as he stepped through the opening and took a look around. Reinald was about to follow him when the mage stopped him with a hand.

“This path leads to my room,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “It leads to the Tower of the Eye. What’s your move?”

“You’re certain?” replied Reinald.

“Unlike before, we’re close, I’m sure of it. This is a path I can follow, meaning it is one of the safe paths, so to speak.”

“The Tower of the Eye...” muttered Reinald. “And is the emperor there at this moment?”

“He is, though as usual he is on the top floor.”

To say that we had a path to the tower was one thing, but Six mentioning that it connected to “his room” was most strange. Elena and the others reacted with shock.

“Your Highness,” said Elena. “Are you going in there?”

“I won’t be in any trouble if I’m discovered on the other side,” replied Reinald.

Reinald was intent on following the waterways to their destination, and his officers prioritized his freedom. All the same, it surprised me to see that they were quite hesitant about the idea of entering the waterways themselves. Elena turned to Six to speak on behalf of all of them.

"If the rest of us were to enter the tower, we couldn't do so without the emperor knowing, could we?"

"You know how it works," replied the mage. "I won't say a word to Karl myself, but if he were to ask me, 'Did Reinald's officers enter the tower?' then I would have no choice but to answer him."

Everyone except Reinald let out a long groan. All of them wanted to protect their leader, but none of them wanted to set foot in the tower. The Tower of the Eye was a construction of great symbolism, and entry was strictly controlled. In contrast to his entourage, Reinald was quick to decide on a course of action.

"All we need is to confirm that the path leads to its destination. For that, Six and I are enough. That said...having too many people around will only draw attention, so Haring, you're in charge of the house. The rest of you are dismissed."

"But Your Highness, that's far too dangerous!" said a guard.

"If a survey of the waterways is your intent, surely we can see to that over the coming days?" added another. "This is not a matter you need to rush!"

Both made excellent points, but Reinald had made up his mind.

"If this part of the waterways really does connect to the tower, then I want to see it for myself," he said. "If you are staying here, then I am going alone. And I highly doubt that I will be abandoned and left to my own devices a second time."

"I did it the first time because you were nothing more than another illegitimate child," said Six. "Now that you're a member of the imperial family, however, I'll not do anything so rude."

Reinald was nothing if not quick to action. His guards steeled themselves and prepared to join him as far as the entrance to the tower, but Six wouldn't stand for it.

"That would leave a group of people just hanging out in front of my room. The answer is an outright no. If you insist on coming

along, I'll insist on getting everyone except for Reinald lost."

"Would it be okay if I came along, then?" I asked.

Perhaps the question came as a surprise. All eyes suddenly turned on me. Elena's were bloodshot. I read a message in them that was something along the lines of "ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!" Six's eyes practically bulged out of his head, which fell toward his shoulder at an almost ninety-degree angle. It creeped me out, honestly.

"You wish to join us, Lady Karen?" he asked.

"Well, it seems safe as long as we have a trustworthy guide, and I'm curious to see both the waterways and the tower. And while I *am* an aid to you in all of this, unlike everybody else, I'm not a member of the military...right?"

I was a coconspirator, but not one of Reinald's official aides or officers. I didn't think you could really place me within the same framework as the others. Reinald thought on the matter for a moment.

"Indeed," he said, nodding. "You are not under my command. So while I will not refuse you your request, know that the emperor is observant and cunning. If he asks Six about what happened, Six will have to answer. With that in mind—"

"That's fine," I stated.

I could tell by Reinald's expression that he had not expected me to cut him off with such gusto. Six's head, meanwhile, remained bent, though his arms were now crossed.

"What are you thinking?" uttered Reinald.

"Let's consider her a guest that I invited personally," replied the mage. "And as long as we keep the story straight... Yes, while Karl is indeed a crafty sort, he knows me well, and he will not ask anything that endangers the rest of you."

"So it's okay, then?" I asked. "Really?"

"It's what you want, isn't it?" replied the mage. "Let's go."

And with that, Six stepped through the opening and into the waterways proper.

"Come along now, Karen," said Reinald, following after him.

"Huh...? Uh, wait for me!" I cried.

I heard Reinald's guards cry out and Elena scream for us to be careful, but in my rush to catch up I didn't have a chance to look back.

"I've never been a fan of dark and gloomy places," I muttered.

As expected, it was almost pitch-black around us. If not for the glass lamp that Six had acquired from out of nowhere, I probably wouldn't have been able to find my own hands in the darkness. When I listened more carefully I could hear flowing water, but that didn't make it any easier for me to get a bearing on where I was. The ceiling was low enough that Reinald could have touched it just by reaching up. It was all rather claustrophobic, and it was something of a wonder that we could even breathe down here at all.

"For a waterway, there's scarcely any water around," I commented. "Just where are we, anyway?"

"This here is a bypath," replied Six. "Reinald, hold young Karen's hand and don't let go. *You* might have made it out of here once before, but she'll be far more prone to the confusion. If we lose her, even *I'll* have a hard time locating her."

"Very well..." replied Reinald. "But tell me, why did you allow her to join us?"

I took a hold of Reinald's outstretched hand. When it occurred to me that I might find myself lost the moment I let go, my grip tightened. Six, however, walked on without a trace of hesitation. The path bent this way and that and split into crossroads to an extent that would worry even one who knew the waterways well.

"You would ask *me* for a reason?" asked the mage.

"Surely you realize it's unusual, even for you."

"It's nothing worth any deep thought," mused Six. "It's just been quite a while since anybody was simply interested in the tower and not bearing any ulterior motives. My freedoms are restricted, as you know, and it bothers me to constantly be viewed as a spectacle. So why not invite someone every once in a while? She isn't the first, you know."

"But she is the first I'm aware of. I thought you hated people of all shapes, sizes, and races, so I never imagined you'd invite anyone to see you."

"I *do* hate people. I despise them. And Sistine in particular. I still detest them with a passion. That's why I want nothing more than to agitate and harass that Karl, who so loves his secrecy and the peculiar."

Sistine? I seem to remember seeing that name somewhere before, but where?

"Oh," I uttered. "Do you mean the first emperor?"

"You certainly *are* well studied, aren't you?" remarked Six. "And to think there was absolutely no need for you to remember the history of a foreign nation."

"My interests run wide, I guess," I said.

The reason I remembered was because the first emperor was, in fact, an empress. It was little more than a footnote in Falkrum's history textbooks, however, and so to be honest it hadn't occupied very much space in my memories.

"You're awfully sure of where we're going, Six," I said. "Do you know the way?"

"Nope. But I wouldn't get lost on a path like this one. Not a chance."

He was nothing if not confident, and while I couldn't *quite* share the same self-assurance, Reinald showed little worry.

"Fear not," he said, turning back to glance at me. "Six will not betray us here."

Our footfalls echoed upon the stone-paved floor. There was a chill in the air that pervaded the body and looked to steal its warmth. At some point along the way I noticed water on the other side of a crossroads.

"You said that there are ruins deeper down, and that the capital was built above them," I said. "Are they really so important to the empire?"

"Quite the nosy one, aren't you?" replied Six. "But yes, in the distant past, when my grandfather was still alive and well, the use of magic was as ordinary a thing as breathing. Spirits, too, lived alongside people. We could also communicate easily over long distances."

I had thought of the waterways as just a piece of lost tech, but to

hear Six tell it, the world of the past offered something on a much greater scale. It sounded almost on the level of modern Japan in terms of how extraordinary it was.

"It was a life unlike anything we can imagine today," Six continued. "And what was left is what's here, though it might be truer to say that the place simply survived the passage of time. By the time I was born, however, magic had almost entirely died out, so none know the truth of the matter."

What we *did* know was that the empire wanted to secure it. When I asked why such a thing was necessary, I was met only with laughter. Six spoke no more on the matter, and Reinald—who was taking in the path and trying to commit it to memory—remained just as silent. I did what I could to remember the way we'd come, but every time I thought I'd made some progress we were met with another crossroads. I pretty much gave up.

I walked along in silence, led by Six's silhouette and the warmth of Reinald's hand. I'm not sure how much time passed like that, but eventually I smelled a change in the air. It was a gentle scent not unlike incense, and completely different from the musty air of the waterways until that point. We hit a three-way junction, turned, and met with a dead end. Hanging on the wall in front of us was a mirror.

"This is it," said Six, reaching out a hand.

The moment he touched the mirror, he was swallowed by it. The mirror rippled like water, and Reinald leaped into it. Naturally, I followed immediately after. I would have screamed "It's a magic mirror!" but I didn't have the chance; the moment I opened my eyes, I found myself in a hall. It would have been one thing if it was *just* a hall, but I found myself drawn to the strangest sight within it.

It's a huge, floating stone.

It was a massive stone octahedron, many times larger than myself, floating above the ground without any support and emitting a faint green light. On it were carved symbols that gave the impression of a language, though it was one I'd never seen before.

"Is this all there is?" I asked. "And where is Six?"

Reinald stood by my side, but Six was nowhere to be found. I

thought we'd been headed to the place he'd called his room, but this was far too desolate a space to call it anything of the sort. It was just a round hall without even a single window. No light got in from outside either. It was just that floating stone octahedron.

"I don't think we have to worry about anybody coming," said Reinald, staring at the floating stone, "but best to keep your voice down all the same."

"Sir Reinald?"

"Look at it," he said, pointing to the octahedron. "That's why Six invited you here."

It was then that I took a closer look and noticed that a small section of the stone was missing. It was like a small fracture at one of the corners that allowed a glimpse inside the floating stone.

"You mean it's more than just the carving on its exterior? Is it hollow on the inside?"

Quite the feat of craftsmanship if so, I thought. I released my grip on Reinald's hand and timidly approached the stone. There was a small opening at the fractured point, and past it was only darkness...or at least, it should have been.

Because it was then that an eye appeared in that same spot. There was no way to know if it was the right or the left. It was just a single eye, and it had appeared from the darkness at the corner of the octahedron, where it now gazed upon me before narrowing as if the rest of it were grinning.

"Welcome," said a voice.

It echoed through the hall, but I couldn't work out where it had come from. It didn't seem to come from anywhere, though it reached my ears without issue.

As I looked upon the eye, I realized I had seen it before. Back then, it had been attached to the black figure that had come to rescue me when I'd been trapped. I knew then just who I was looking at as I stared up at the floating stone.

What a day. Endless surprises. But wait, I mean... I'd gathered from the flow of our earlier conversations that perhaps Six wasn't exactly human, but even then I assumed he was just a spirit or something like that... He's not?!

“And so we meet face-to-face for the first time,” said Six. “Welcome to my room. You are one of only a very small handful of ordinary citizens to visit the lowest floor of this tower since my imprisonment.”

I could do little more than gape, my mouth opening and closing as if words no longer existed.

“This is Six,” said Reinald, making it clear as day. “This box is the real Six.”

But I didn’t think anyone would consider what Six was a mere “box.”





2: A Brother and Sister, Split

You must understand. While I was completely aware that I wasn't in a yokai anime filled with creatures of folklore, when I saw that googly eye peering down at me from that floating octahedron, a very clear image of a certain character floated to my mind unbidden.

"S-Six...?" I uttered.

"Indeed. This is the real me. This galling box is I, Sixtus."

At that moment, a certain mist in my brain dissipated, and my thoughts were startlingly clear. I remembered what Ern had told me, and I understood the words she'd spoken. She'd said, "Six is a box."

And while the term didn't bring to mind entirely the right image, there wasn't really any other way to describe it.

So, uh...what am I supposed to say now?

I glanced at Reinald, but he simply stood with his arms crossed, looking up at Six. The mage, too, seemed to be waiting for me to speak. The air was heavy with anticipation.

"Is..." I started.

"Is...?" repeated the box.

"Is it...cramped...in there?" I asked.

Don't say it, reader. Just don't.

I know, okay? Damn it, I know!

I know full well just how stupid a question it was! But when I was put on the spot and expected to speak, that was the first thing that came to mind!

The giant eye blinked a few times, then narrowed as Six's laughter echoed through the room.

"I didn't see that one coming," he said. "I suppose it really *is* nice to have guests once in a while. Thank you for your concern, but that very sensation—cramped—doesn't exist where I am concerned. Still, this form is quite pleasant all the same. Indeed, this moldy room with its cold stone construction and its lack of any light is just

perfect for soothing the soul. What more fitting hospitality could a sly and shady empire provide? It's enough to move one to tears."

It was only when Six mentioned it that I realized he was right. There were no openings for any natural light. It was only the illumination of the octahedron itself that lit the room.

"If you don't like the furnishing, take it up with the emperor," said Reinald.

"You don't think I have? Do you know what happened when I did? The very next day he had all the candleholders removed. That was some ten years ago now!"

"Ah, now that you mention it, they *are* gone, aren't they?"

"That's some nerve you have."

"Sir Reinald," I said. "You didn't know about it?"

"Wilhelmina and I are rarely given permission to enter the tower," he replied. "Outside of those who have the emperor's permission, the only people allowed in here are the cleaning staff."

Said cleaning staff were blind, it turned out.

"Ern told me that Six is able to run interference with people's perception. Very few know what he actually is."

"Not entirely true. There are the people I've told directly too."

"Okay, so...a little more than very few. You're being quite difficult about all of this."

"Of course I am. I've been this way a long time, and I won't stand for being easily understood. Yes, I'm bound by certain rules I must adhere to, but I've discovered a few loopholes."

I just name-dropped Ern without a second thought. I wonder if that will get her in trouble... Well, moving right along...

"I know this is about as basic as questions get, but why are you here?" I asked.

Six had referred to the octahedron as his real form, but he'd said other things previously that made me wonder. He had to have been trapped in it somehow, and that didn't strike me as a trivial matter. I mean, he'd already told me that he was once a traveler, and he'd even spoken of his grandfather on the way here. I just couldn't picture him walking the lands as a giant, floating box.

"Ah, yes," chuckled Six. "You must be curious."

"Who wouldn't be? This is all so weird."

Given that this was my first time speaking to a giant eye, the exact etiquette for the situation was unclear to me. Still, Six's giant eye simply continued to look down on me as it spoke.

"Well, I'm not stupid enough to have come down here just to hide. No, in the distant past I was tricked by humans, who trapped me here. And thanks to the ruins below and this damned box, I can't escape."

"And that's how you took this form?"

"That, my lady, is confidential."

He was not going to tell me. I could tell by the slight movements of Six's eyelids, which offered him some expression.

"Hmph. So you were just another person before it all happened then, I assume?"

"Oh? You would be so kind as to think so?" replied Six.

What does that even mean?

"Of course. From the moment I met you you've been a right pain in the ass and mostly useless, but you've the mind and heart of a living, breathing person."

My words seemed to shock the giant eye which, to my surprise, said nothing and continued to stare at me. I looked down at my feet to avoid its gaze.

"I don't know what happened, but I can tell it wasn't easy on you," I added.

"I appreciate the thought. If you really want to show me sympathy, however, you can help Reinald. But don't come running and complaining to me if it results in your death. You're responsible for your own actions."

"Well, aren't you kind? Fortunately, I was going to help him out anyway. And, uh...you won't take your other form?"

"I will if that's what you want. Don't tell me; you've taken a liking to my appearance, haven't you?"

"I don't feel like I'm actually talking to you when you're like this. It feels, I don't know, weird."

"Well, nobody else has ever said *that* before. A strange one, aren't you?"

The mage then dropped into a sudden silence.

"Six?" I asked.

"Reinald," said Six, his giant eye narrowing as he spoke. "Take Karen and get out of here."

"What is it?" asked Reinald.

"It's Karl."

Before I knew it, Reinald took my hand and strode toward the room's only exit—a gaping black hole. He didn't slow down even as I tripped over my own feet. My vision warped as we passed through, and from behind me I heard high-pitched laughter and a voice calling out.

"I have arrived, oh pitiful prisoner."

It was a male voice, but I didn't have any time to think about it. Within a blink, I was back in the waterways.

"Was that...?" I started.

"Do not let go of my hand, Karen," said Reinald. "Your safety is still not guaranteed."

He stood by my side, the two of us facing a big mirror. He had a firm grip on my hand, and he let out what felt like an uncharacteristic sigh of relief.

"We're back in the waterways," I said.

"And in the nick of time. We managed to escape before we were spotted. There would have been trouble if you'd been seen."

"I don't even want to imagine what might have happened if we hadn't made it in time. Six won't be coming?"

"Not when he has the emperor for company. He will not be able to make another copy of himself for some time. That means we'll have to return on our own, but don't worry; I remember the way."

"Y-You remember? But it's a labyrinth..."

It was a mess of twists and turns and crossroads, and we'd walked it just *one* time! Was Reinald in the possession of an otherworldly photographic memory? I still couldn't quite believe it as Reinald pulled me along by the hand. I *had* tried to remember the way myself, though admittedly the attempt had ended in dismal failure. I thought I remembered the last part of the way to the mirror, but the route we walked now was...different.

“Wait,” I uttered. “Wasn’t there a crossroads before the corner to the... Is it just me, or is the labyrinth way less...labyrinthine now?”

“This has always been a right turn,” replied Reinald. “There was no crossroads.”

“Huh?”

“You saw a different route,” Reinald explained. “Do you remember when Six said that the waterways were easy to get lost in? That’s because they are enchanted to ensure that intruders lose their sense of direction.”

In short, Reinald and I saw entirely different paths to the Tower of the Eye. When I told Reinald of the maze it had felt like for me, he gave me his take on the same route.

“It was not nearly so complicated a thing from my eyes. If you were to stray from the correct path and go down a different one altogether, you’d quickly find yourself at a dead end or otherwise flung somewhere else entirely.”

“Flung...? You mean you’d disappear from the waterways completely?!”

“It’s recorded in some reports. Some disappeared from near the entrance to the waterways only to be discovered later on the second floor of the basement leading to it. According to one survivor, the person they were following simply vanished into thin air.”

“If that were to happen...”

“Most would never make it home. Those who did had the luck of the devil.”

Now that I had made it to the Tower of the Eye via a safe route, I could see the same path that Reinald had. Even then, however, there was no guarantee that I wouldn’t still be caught in the aftereffects of the confusion spell.

“Six says that once you’ve made it out the one time the spell is no longer effective, but all the same...” Reinald muttered.

“Yes, all the same, please don’t let go.”

And as if to make the point clearer still, I tightened my grip on Reinald’s hand.

“Oh?” I murmured, as a thought dawned on me. “Are you unaffected because you’re a member of the imperial family, Sir

Reinald?”

“The imperial family are less affected by the confusion, particularly Sistine in the past, but not entirely immune either. The simple answer in my case is that I’ve gotten out of here once before. Thus, the effects are weaker.”

“Which is to say...you’re totally fine in here?”

“No. It’s still very much a labyrinth. Enter recklessly or unprepared and you’ll still find yourself neck-deep in trouble. There’s still much about the place that is a mystery, and we don’t know when the enchantments might once again take root.”

“Did Six say anything about it?”

“Unfortunately, one can’t place all their trust in a mage like him.”

“I... I see. You, uh... You mentioned a safe route just now. Is that how the waterways work?”

“In the past, Six abandoned me here,” replied Reinald, musing on his childhood.

“Yes, he did mention that, didn’t he? Wait a moment. But isn’t that the most awful thing imaginable? He left a *child* in here?”

“Call it what you will. He did it to see me dead.”

The words were spoken so casually one might have simply let them slide. But I was walking the very waterways he spoke about, and I knew being cast aside in a place like this was, for all intents and purposes, the very definition of a death sentence.

“And yet you escaped,” I said.

“The fact that I was not entirely confused by the spells here was the only reason I survived. It took me two days, but I found the exit.”

Reinald had found a way out, but on the way he had resigned himself to the fact that he might simply die. The path he had taken to the exit, then, was what he thought of as a “safe” path. But it did make one wonder about how the waterways worked.

“I can look back on it and laugh now,” said Reinald, “but at the time I almost drove myself insane, scheming my revenge.”

“And what did Six say when you saw him next?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? No sorry? No apology whatsoever?”

"None. For him it was all a game. Just a way to kill some time. And I suppose I *do* bear some responsibility; when he asked me if I wanted to see the waterways, I said yes."

"And how old were you at the time?"

"Thirteen, perhaps fourteen? The age when curiosity often got the better of me."

"And you had the confidence to indulge it too, I gather..."

"I was fortunate to have a lamp with me. Without it, I wouldn't have dared to move at all."

So he said, but it still sounded all wrong to me. A teenager left to their own devices in a place like this? To me the only option was to simply wait for death's cold embrace. It was near unbelievable to think that Reinald, too, was one of Six's victims. As for Six, he was even more brazen than I could have imagined, though Reinald spoke of it all as if it were all just in the past now. Even though Six had never, ever apologized, not even to this day. And when he'd seen Reinald return, alive and well, he'd responded with no discernible emotion whatsoever.

"I think I'm starting to see why you two are so...tight-knit," I said.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Reinald. "We're simply together in this whether we like it or not."

The return trip was just as dark as our walk to the tower, and even with a lamp one had to be mindful of their step.

"I must say, Karen, you're very bright," remarked Reinald. "One wouldn't ordinarily link the word 'flung' to disappearing nearly as quickly as you did."

I giggled.

"I suppose not. But I did meet with Ern not so long ago, and she taught me quite a lot."

"Ah, Ern Quach, is it? A truly remarkable individual, that one. To have her own laboratory complete with assistants already is an exceedingly rare achievement. Her concepts and ideas are groundbreaking. It's why many call her a generational prodigy."

"I... I had no idea," I admitted. "She is a wonderful friend, that I can say for certain. I am rather ignorant of the ways of magic, but she makes it easy for me to understand."

"I daresay it is you, and you alone, who are able to ask for such lessons from a girl so private. Ah, I see. So that's why you mentioned her earlier."

He remembered! And I screwed up! While magic is common in this world, teleportation magic is anything but. Which is to say that when one hears the word "flung" as Reinald used it, they ordinarily think of flight, or being thrown.

Why would my home world RPG standards turn out to be true in this, of all things...?

Time to change the subject!

"Er, while it surprised me that the emperor would visit Six personally, it's a different matter that has captured my curiosity."

"And what might that be?"

While I also wanted to learn more about the emperor, Six's true form left me intrigued about something else.

"Six said he despises humans. So why do you two get along so well?"

"I wouldn't say we're all that friendly."

"You jest," I shot back. "What else would you call it, then?"

Reinald fell silent. I wondered if perhaps all the talking might end with us getting lost, but that particular worry proved unfounded. Reinald's memory proved accurate, and there were also white marks left on some of the walls that pointed the way, though they were barely visible if you weren't looking for them.

"When did *these* get here?" I wondered aloud.

"Six made it easy to follow by making a lot of noise, but leaving actual markings is against the laws of the waterways. You shouldn't be able to see them."

"So the fact that I *can* means...?"

"That perhaps when you made it to the tower, they became visible to you. That said, I'm no expert, so I can't give you a definitive answer."

"The waterways truly live up to their reputation."

"That's why they've been a constant headache for the nation's emperors. Even the most high-handed and overbearing of them shudder at the topic of the waterways. It's quite the sight."

He seemed to enjoy talking about the imperial family in such a way. Regardless, with a gentle pull of his hand we started walking again.

"As for your previous question, I think it's safe to tell you. Six invited you to the tower himself, after all. Just bear in mind that I trust you will tell nobody else."

"Understood. Might I speak of it to those in your inner circle?"

"Moritz and Nika. Though I can't say for certain whether they'll indulge you in the topic."

"Not to worry. I won't speak to anybody else on the matter."

"That's a promise, yes?"

"Of course! Look, don't get the wrong idea! I just want to know who I can talk to in case the whole topic is far heavier than expected!"

I squeezed his hand as if to accentuate the point, but I didn't feel like I had Reinald's trust. Still, I knew I was a girl who could keep a secret, and I wasn't a chatterbox either.

"I don't suppose you might continue with your story from earlier, about you and Six?" I asked.

"It interests you?"

"Very much so. And besides, you brought it up. You can't just tease a girl and then leave her hanging. It's heartless."

I pulled on his arm to prod him into talking. I was probably a little too excited, but I was happy to leave any regrets to the future me.

"To say we are friends leaves me feeling conflicted," said Reinald. "I understand him better than anybody else in the imperial family, and it's true to say he has assisted me in the past."

Which was as I thought. Back in Falkrum, when Six had referred to Reinald as a friend, I hadn't felt like he'd been putting on an act. Here, too, I felt like Reinald was opening up to me, if only a smidgen. He went on.

"Six wants to escape the box he is trapped in, and I want to see the box destroyed. Our interests are in alignment, and so we are working together."

The emperor, Wilhelmina, and their factions wanted the box repaired. Reinald was the only member in the history of the imperial

family to oppose the idea.

"Really? Only you?" I asked.

"Nobody else ever has, according to Six. If the emperor knew, he would have me expelled, I'm sure, but this is how I feel."

"But you aren't motivated by generosity or kindness, I assume. This isn't about releasing Six, is it?"

Reinald himself had said their interests were in alignment, but he'd said nothing about sympathizing with the mage, and he was quick to confirm my assumption.

"I'm not the type to be moved to action by kindness alone," he said. "I simply can't stand the state of the empire."

"What do you mean?"

As little more than a member of the nobility, I had no real grasp of the inner workings of the empire's politics. My only option was to continue showering Reinald with questions. He didn't seem to mind, however.

"Six is said to be beholden to the emperor, his heirs, and select others. Such vast power means that no emperor ever need fear any outside assassination attempts so long as they control that box. Those with Six at their fingertips are essentially free to do whatever they like."

"Vast power, indeed."

"You saw a glimpse of it yourself, earlier. Impressive, no?"

Six wasn't happy about his predicament, but he had never once rebelled against the imperial family. The box was why he couldn't. Everyone knew that Six did his work reluctantly. The emperors had never much liked that, however.

"Apparently he had never been able to create copies of himself before the box began to break," explained Reinald. "He could only wield magic as ordered by the emperor."

"And that's why they want to repair the box."

"Exactly. However, the box is in every way an ancient relic. Research is ongoing, but the technology is a long, long way from being solved, so to speak. That has created a great rush to gain total control of the box that Six is trapped inside of."

Before he was the Six I knew, Sixtus was a mage of exceptional

skill, whose talents left a great impression on Sistine, the empire's founding mother. It was said that he entered the box willingly and offered his powers to the imperial family in his now half-spirit form.

In truth, however, things couldn't have been more different. As the box's source of power, Six *did* obey the orders of the emperor and his direct descendants, but outside of that he was rebellious and capricious in nature. Apparently it wasn't at all uncommon in the past for him to crush branch families and useful officers just to kill time. He had been a huge headache for many long years, but over the last few decades his magical powers had weakened considerably. And he had once been able to scout distant nations in an instant, as well as locate and destroy domestic insurgents.

Six was of the opinion that this decline was not him, per se, but rather the limitations of the box itself. And while this is not a perfectly apt example, it was perhaps simplest to think of Six as electricity and the box as an electrical appliance. No one gave a second thought to the box's durability, and so over years of use without maintenance, it was showing signs of wear.

I had to wonder if the box was in fact the very reason that the empire's power had remained so unwavering. Was *that* why the empire had been able to overwhelm and annex so many other nations?

"So Six is a half-spirit, then?" I asked. "I had wondered if perhaps he was a spirit, but the way he speaks is so human."

"The truth is hazy. All I know for certain is that he is not human."

"You haven't tried to get to the bottom of it?"

"Say it's true that he's a half-spirit; even then, if he has no desire to assist me, I have no reason to have him in my company. I am not necessarily against forcing Six to obey, but he serves antiquated views. Those who control him know their safety is assured, so they sit upon their thrones using Six as if they own him, but they have achieved nothing on their own power. What irks me most is that they feel no shame for it."

It wasn't often that Reinald spoke so much of his heart in such a direct manner. I felt self-conscious, but also something like delight. I couldn't help but giggle.

"Yes, I see now just how different your opinion is to those who want to see the box repaired."

"Indeed. Though, Karen... Have I said something odd?"

"No, I just... I'm just struck that that is your only reason for wanting to see the box destroyed."

Nika had spoken before to me of the reasons she had come under Reinald's command. He was a man of meritocratic outlook, and when he wanted something, he sought to take it by his own hand.

"You see little meaning in simply taking what is given you," I remarked.

"I won't deny others that way of life, but it does not suit me."

"And for that reason you wish to see Six freed?"

"I have no interest in those who would serve me reluctantly. If he wants out, I'll get him out. Keeping him around as one might an inherited pet would only spurn more enmity in him."

"You would release him, even given the potential dangers?"

"If he kills me, then so be it," and at this, Reinald paused for a moment. "You knew my answer when you asked that, didn't you?"

I giggled.

"Indeed, I just wanted to hear it from you directly."

I had heard enough from Six himself to know that the mage detested humans. Someone like Reinald, then, proved himself far more trustworthy to Six because his motivations did *not* come from a place of sympathy. And while Reinald's approach to things made for a great many enemies, I did like how he held himself. It meant I could move on without regret for joining his side in Falkrum.

"And I am glad to hear it," I added.

"I admit to being left scratching my head, though."

"Don't let it bother you. I had a feeling that I liked that about you, and now I have confirmed it. Nothing more, nothing less."

All that was left was whether or not the Conrad family could meet Reinald's expectations. We would need to gain knowledge and experience quickly so as to ensure our businesses went smoothly.

"I couldn't help but notice that your hands are quite rough," I remarked.

“All the sword practice, I assume, though unfortunately I’ve no opportunities to put it to use of late.”

“One imagines it best that such opportunities remain in hiding, though.”

We proceeded through the waterways until finally we spied a distant light. Eventually we noticed a person too, and when they noticed us they waved their torch in a signal-like manner.

“Your Highness! You’re safe!” said one of Reinald’s guards, his face brightening at the sight of his master.

“Thank you for waiting for us. How were things here while we were away?”

“As per your orders, only a small number of people remain in the house. We received a message from Sir Abelein, requesting that you return posthaste.”

“It’s in his nature to worry. As for the passage here...”

Reinald released my hand and pushed me gently into the basement tomb we’d left from. It was fully lit by torches now, which made it feel safer and more secure.

“Tell the others that it’s what we hoped for,” continued Reinald. “We’ll have to keep watch over the place. There must be other paths to the outside too, and we must make the search for them a priority.”

“Understood!”

The guard’s response was one of great vigor. It seemed that things had gone even better than anyone expected. Haring soon appeared from upstairs, having been informed of Reinald’s return.

“Your Highness,” he said. “You’re just in time.”

“What is it, Haring?”

“Yes, well...”

Haring flashed a glance my way and informed us that someone from my home was at the front door, arguing with Elena and the guards.

“We bought a little time by explaining that Lady Karen was inspecting the location, but our visitor looks set to bust his way inside if he has to.”

“Oh my,” I said. “Quite the headache, I’m sure. I apologize. I’ll

see to it immediately."

I ran upstairs to find Elena and Achim in the midst of a heated argument. Achim tried vainly to push himself inside while Elena kept him at bay. When I spoke up to get both of their attention, Achim's murderous gaze softened slightly.

"Lady Karen!" he cried. "What are you doing in this place?!"

"It's just the house next door," I said. "You know it's been bothering me, so I asked for some help checking it out."

"Help that required military personnel?! *I* would have helped had you simply asked!"

Achim was very, *very* mad. Letting him just go on was like letting a fire feed itself on a heap of dry brush. He was barely even listening to me! I was left standing there in silence and unable to come up with any good excuses in the moment when Reinald arrived from behind me.

"Perhaps you would allow me to explain?" he offered.

"Huh? What are you doing here, Your Highness...?" uttered Achim.

"I apologize for the concern we've caused, but for now let's move somewhere quieter. I assume that won't be an issue?"

Achim's cheek twitched, but he was in no position to deny Reinald his request. Reinald's prompt action got us clear of the house, but how was he going to explain why we'd been there?

Whateley and the boys were back home by then, which told me we'd spent a considerable amount of time both in the house next door and then traipsing through the waterways. Naturally, everyone was shocked by the sight of our visitor. Wendel was comparatively calm, having met Reinald once before, but Emil was like a poorly built robot, he was so clunky and awkward. On our way to the dining room, he pulled me aside to whisper nervously in my ear.

"Are you quite sure we're allowed to invite the *imperial prince* to an ordinary home like ours?! Shouldn't you be having your discussion somewhere more appropriate?!"

"Hmm... I mean, yes, the house *is* a touch messy, but it's clean enough, isn't it?" I replied. "Sir Reinald's not the sort to let this kind of thing bother him."

"You lie! Have you no shame?!"

"Emil, stop worrying. It'll be fine!"

"It won't! It really won't!"

Whateley served us all tea, at which point the air settled and Reinald spoke.

"First, let me apologize for taking Karen's time without any prior notice. There's clearly been a misunderstanding, but as you can see, she's completely unharmed."

"Fit as a fiddle," I said. "And, uh...I suppose it's only right that I give a brief summary of what we were up to, yes?"

I thought it best to offer my services, but I was summarily denied the chance.

"It's not a complicated matter, it won't take long," said Reinald. "I came here because I heard of odd sounds emanating from the vacant house next door. Given that *I* was the one responsible for seeing the Conrads to their current home, I felt it only right that I see to handling the issue myself."

Oh, so that's *the angle you're taking. At least it's nice and simple.*

"You came here personally...for *that*...?" asked Wendel rather timidly.

"Only in the role of chaperone," replied Reinald. "It was in fact the palace mage, Sixtus, who was most curious about the reports, having overheard them quite coincidentally."

"Sixtus wanted to see the house next door," I added, "and His Highness came with him. I couldn't just leave them, and so I accompanied them to check on things."

Reinald had made a few alterations to the facts, but he maintained that their motivations lay in the act of inspecting the vacant house. He went on to explain that while the source of the noise was still unknown, unidentified corpses had been discovered in the house. This shocked everyone, but Achim was more worried about something tangentially related, and it was enough for him to speak directly to Reinald; an act he would usually have avoided.

"I apologize for speaking out of turn, but did Lady Karen happen to see them...?" he asked, referring to the body.

"She did not."

The lie was as smooth as butter. My mind flickered with images from the past—the underground tomb, the horrifying experience I'd endured in that strange other place—but my twitchy smile remained plastered to my face.

"There is no need to be concerned," said Reinald. "We returned late only because my mage saw fit to play some tricks in jest."

"May I ask exactly what that means?"

"It is a bad habit of the mage in my employ. When he did not find what he hoped for, he decided that the would-be haunted house needed some flair, and he took to putting on something of a performance to shock the rest of us. We indulged him, and so we were late."

"And that was all?"

"That was all. Do you doubt me?"

"I wouldn't dream of such a thing. I am beyond grateful that you would even take the time to explain the situation to me so thoroughly."

Reinald's plan was to place the blame entirely on Six's shoulders. And being that the mage wasn't in attendance, he made the perfect scapegoat. Reinald was also making use of his authority in a subtle fashion; he knew full well that Achim was in no position to push the matter. He went on to say that Achim hadn't been allowed into the manor next door because of how agitated he was, and Elena had made her call out of reasons of security. I wasn't sure if Achim was going to accept that, but he did; he must have realized that he'd let his emotions get the better of him.

"Yeah, and when it comes to Arno and Gerda, he'll dive into the fray at a moment's notice," whispered Emil.

And I daresay that if you *were in a similar situation too, Emil, he'd act no different.*

In any case, Reinald used Six as the rag with which to wipe up our mess and brought things to a neat close.

"In short, we came here because we feared the house had been broken into," he said. "And while it's unfortunate that we were unable to get to the bottom of things, there's no need to worry. I will take it upon myself to ensure that the house next door is managed

appropriately.”

Achim wasn’t completely sold on Reinald’s explanation, but his hands were tied. For one thing, I had returned completely unharmed. For another, it wasn’t like he was going to call the imperial crown prince a liar.

But there was one other, more pressing factor that made it impossible for Achim to delve into the matter any further: Wendel.

“So those noises that we heard in the night...” the boy uttered. “The noises that nobody else could hear... Oh no...were they...?”

“Uh, Wendel? Are you okay?” asked Emil.

“I can’t do it, Emil!” cried Wendel. “Let me stay with you! In your room! Please!”

Reinald saw this as a good chance to finish his tea and take his leave. I had hoped I might have a chance to say hello to Nika when I saw him off, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Now that you mention it, yes, she’s gone, hasn’t she?”

“You didn’t notice, then?”

“I can hazard a guess at why she might have left,” he replied. “When she realized it was the real deal in that manor, she wouldn’t have stayed any longer than she absolutely had to.”

He flashed the hint of a knowing grin, mischievous like that of a child who has just realized a most wonderful trick to play on others.

“In the past, Nika was once the subject of Six’s pranks,” continued Reinald. “The house he trapped her in was much older than this one, but to hear her tell it, the experience was rather harrowing.”

“Oh... I...I see...”

“She’s been unable to stand the very idea of spirits ever since. She broke a door down just to get out, and Moritz was especially gentle with her for quite some time afterward.”

So maybe that’s the reason Nika never stepped foot inside...

“You’d best take great care when playing any tricks on Nika. Her ire is a truly terrifying thing to behold.”

And with that, Reinald hopped about his carriage and was whisked away. There were no shouts and no arguments from the vacant house that night, but this didn’t make things any easier for

Wendel and I in the immediate aftermath. Fear still plagued the both of us for a number of days, and while Wendel could simply go and stay in someone else's room, I had no such luxury. It wasn't like I could just sleep in any of the men's rooms, and the servants quarters were off-limits too. In the end, I made it through by forcing Emil and Wendel to stay in my room with me.

All the same, this alone did not resolve the issue. I had experienced true terror firsthand, and it permeated even my dreams. I had nightmares in which I found myself fleeing black silhouettes. I suppose the reason it didn't hit me straightaway was that Reinald had been so calm about the whole thing. There was also the shock revelation of Six's true form and a whole number of other things to go with it. But oh, how those horrifying memories returned with a vengeance when the dust settled!

In short, I was not in a hurry to enter any dimly lit rooms anytime soon after.

I suppose that experience and its aftershocks were the reason I came down with a fever just a few days later. I moaned from my bed, vexed by the fragility of my own constitution. Reinald sent me a selection of fruit as an apology for the whole matter, but in the end it was the boys—ah, the endless hunger of the young—who ate the majority.

It was in the midst of this fever that I slept through the day and then stirred as I felt a hand on my forehead. It was cold, and something about it was comforting. I felt so safe in its presence that I was about to let the sandman sweep me away once more into the land of dreams, but then I heard the voices.

"How is she?" asked one.

"This is my sister's room!" hissed the other in response. "You shouldn't be here!"

"Waiting downstairs was so very dull. I realize this is personal, however, so don't worry. I won't bother you."

"That's not the point. It's just common sense!"

"You would lecture *me* about common sense? Who has less of that than *you*?"

"You must take me more seriously. All the more when it's a

personal matter."

That voice... It can't be...

When I opened my eyes, the kindly man looking down on me panicked and stood to his feet.

"Arno...?" I uttered.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

But it wasn't a dream. It really *was* Arno. He looked genuinely sorry, but also like he'd messed up by being seen.

"When I heard you came down with a fever, I wanted to check up on you," he said.

"What are you doing in the capital?"

"That...is a long story."

I still wasn't entirely awake. I could hear my own words slurring as my brain stirred into the waking world. My gaze wandered and fell upon the other person in the room, standing by the door. I squinted, trying to get a better look at them, but even when the woman came into focus I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Oh, er..." stammered Arno. "About that..."

Arno fumbled his words as he looked to construct a meaningful excuse, but none of it got through. After all, for all intents and purposes, what I was seeing defied reason.

What is Wilhelmina, the imperial princess of the Arrendle Empire, doing in my room?

I knew I wasn't dreaming or hallucinating. Wilhelmina was right there, and though she was dressed in more ladylike clothing than when I'd seen her last, her bold carriage and determined gaze were unmistakable. She was beautiful, and I had absolutely no doubt that she was exactly who I thought she was.

"Wha...?" I started.

"I know you must have a lot of questions, but don't move," said Arno. "You're still running a high fever."

"Yes, but..."

Wilhelmina watched on, greatly intrigued by the interaction playing out before her eyes. But it was not me she was watching, it was Arno.

"What a surprise," she said, leaning against the door with a smile.

"The coward is capable of acting the responsible big brother for his younger sister, then."

All I could do was reel in fever-addled shock. And what shocked me even further was my own brother's response to the imperial princess's ribbing.

"Could you *please* save the jokes for later, Wilhelmina?" he said.

He spoke to her as if they were on a first-name basis. He was practically scolding her, and it revealed they were anything but strangers to one another.

"Yes, fine, as you wish," said Wilhelmina with an easy shrug. "It's my fault for coming in here. Thought I might catch a glimpse of something unusual. I apologize for waking your sister with my curiosity."

"No, it's fine."

The princess was here without guards. It was unclear to me exactly how they'd come to be in my house, but it was only after she'd talked that I realized I still hadn't spoken a word to her.

"I apologize...for being in such a state...upon your visit..." I said.

"Save it. I'm the one who barged in uninvited. I'm not so heartless that I'd expect etiquette from the bedridden."

"Your position itself is what forces people to act as such," replied Arno, exasperated, "and Karen is an earnest young girl. Now, would you *please* leave us?"

"Oh, how you wound me, Arno. But yes, given all your complaining, I'll go...now that I know she really *is* ill. Have her visit at a later date."

"I *told* you it was true. She has a weak constitution!"

"Forgive me. Trust isn't something that comes easily to me."

The princess left the room while Arno tried in vain to get me to go back to sleep. I did not make it easy on him.

"Arno, wait," I said. "What is the *imperial princess* doing here? And how do you know her?!"

"I'll explain everything just as soon as your fever subsides," he replied. "But for now, please, get some sleep. I only came to make sure you were okay. That's it, really. I'll contact Achim just as soon as things calm down..."

“Achi... Ah! So he knew!”

“I’ll explain that too, I promise. I’ve been run off my feet since the moment I got here. But I’ll make time to tell you everything. Trust me. For now, though, just do as I say and get some rest.”

“Arno...”

He tucked me in, then stood up and headed for the door. I felt like I had to say something before he went, but the words were not easy for me to find.

“Why are you and Wilhelmina so... Brother, I don’t understand...”

“Of course you don’t. It’s just like how things were with us back in Falkrum.”

The door shut as Arno left, and Whateley arrived soon after to inform me that Arno had gone home. Whateley had not known that my brother was with the imperial princess, however, and when I revealed this fact to him he yelped, realizing how grave the situation was.

“Princess Wilhelmina...” he uttered. “We can discuss it all in greater detail upon your recovery. Now is not the time to be overthinking complicated matters, so drink your medicine and rest, I beg of you.”

Whateley would not allow me another word. Struggling wasn’t going to get me anywhere either, and so I did as I was told. It did nothing to clear the growing uncertainty in my heart, however.

Once I recovered, I received an invitation from the Kirstens. By this time, the Kirsten aides that had been staying with us were already leaving, and Achim along with them. When they were gone, Whateley did not mince words.

“It seems clear that Princess Wilhelmina is not yet ready to relinquish her spot for the throne,” he said. “The Conrads have sided with Reinald, and so it benefits neither us nor the Kirstens for their aides to stay with us any longer.”

And just like that, our house suddenly felt both quieter and more spacious. A little lonely too, it must be said, but the truth of the matter was it made things far easier on our servants. Emil was given a room on the third floor, while Whateley and Hil—both among the oldest in the house—were given rooms on the second floor.

The invitation I received asked that I visit Arno at his current place of residence. I planned to take Geoff with me but have him wait in the carriage while I talked with my brother. I had some hope that if everything went south, he could make a getaway, but I had to give that idea up; Achim was on my brother's side, and he knew who Geoff really was.

"This is a most serious meeting," said Geoff. "Surely you would be better off with Sir Hil than the likes of I..."

"You were selected after careful consideration," I replied. "And besides, Hil himself recommended you."

Geoff was hesitant all the same, but Hil had Humphrey to supervise, and I wanted the two with Wendel, anyway. Hil, for his part, had seen Geoff at work and given the man his own stamp of approval; Geoff was conscientious, trustworthy, and more than capable of shouldering work of importance. Geoff was deeply touched to learn of his comrade's appraisal when I shared it.

The carriage to take us to meet Arno arrived together with Achim. Ordinarily, Achim dressed in a light and easy manner; the sort of outfit in which he could seamlessly blend into city crowds. Today, however, he was clad in a tailored suit of very impressive quality.

"Please, knock it off with the staring," he said when he saw my face. "I know better than anyone that it's not a good look, but I'm here on work, you understand."

"Oh, don't be like that," I said. "I think you look wonderful, and isn't that enough?"

"If your eyes were daggers I'd be dead already. I'm going to cry if you keep it up."

"Then cry you must," I said, pausing for a moment. "You knew about Wilhelmina, didn't you?"

Achim laughed the question off, but his body language gave him away completely. But it made sense now as to why Achim was so against my getting closer with Reinald, and his recent behavior had made that all the more clear.

"Look, the young mas... I mean, Sir Arno will tell you everything in good time," said Achim. "But I haven't said a word to anyone of your guard there, so there's no need to be so cautious. As long as he

doesn't do anything untoward, his secret is safe with me."

"There's no need to worry about that. I promise you he won't move against his benefactor."

"I'm not a fan of snitching people out in secret, so pray he doesn't betray my expectations."

For all his talk, Achim had grown to care for Chelsea during his time with us. On that note—and this is something of an aside, I should add—Chelsea had calmed into a stable routine since moving in with us. Wendel was a large contributor to this, having dug through Doctor Emma's remaining notebooks and found a herbal tea to help calm anxiety and similar mental afflictions. But it wasn't just Wendel; the servants, too, made sure Chelsea had a comfortable environment in which to live, and she responded to it with a placid calm. As a result, she no longer burst into tears or hysteria.

Perhaps the biggest contributing factor to Chelsea's behavior, however, was that Geoff himself could now feel safe about her living situation, which meant he too was calmer and more relaxed when he was with her. All of which, it should be said, brought him great joy.

We did admittedly spend quite the tidy sum ordering herbs and whatnot, but I thought of it all as an investment. Surely it would all be of use later down the track.

In any case, Geoff and I went to the waiting carriage with Achim and readied ourselves to depart. It was then that a strange pair—a young man and woman—caught my eye. The man had a look of mischief about him, while the short-haired woman had an air of calm. When they saw me looking their way, the man seemed to panic while the woman offered a nod. Then they left. I hadn't met either of them before, but I was certain they'd been watching us...

"My lady, we're ready to leave," said Geoff, urging me aboard.

"Oh, yes. Sorry."

The two of them held themselves like soldiers, so perhaps I'll ask Elena about it...

I looked out the carriage window to the house next door. No soldiers remained there now, and I wondered what might happen to it. My whole life felt like a bundle of different unanswered questions,

but the carriage trundled along to its destination all the same, eventually entering the residential district of the rich, complete with glass lamps lining the streets.

The manor we arrived at was, from the looks of things, in the leagues of the ultrarich. It was bigger than our family home in Falkrum, and upon entering through the gates we were met by the sight of a spacious garden, in which each individual flower and tree had clearly been immaculately cared for. I had zero doubts that the gardener they employed was obsessive-compulsive.

We entered through the double doors and walked into a lavish entrance way, where the manor steward was waiting for us. He bowed respectfully, then led us along marble floors to the sort of luxurious staircase one imagined in fairy tales. Flowers decorated the tables, and paintings covered the walls.

"When did Arno's taste in home decor change, Achim?" I asked.

Achim, however, answered with only the polite nod of his head. We followed the steward to a room at the back of the manor, and along the way we passed by attendants. I knew immediately that none of them were from the Kirsten family, but that wasn't what caught my attention about them; after all, if Arno had been telling the truth, then he wouldn't have had time to organize his own people for his move to the capital. All the same, the attendants seemed used to things around here; none of them were new recruits.

Then there were the knifelike gazes they shot in my direction. Curiosity was one thing, but some of the attendants made no attempt to hide their open enmity. It wasn't very comforting, let me tell you.

One of the men we passed was clearly of the nobility, and while there was a vivid curiosity in his gaze, it held nothing in the way of consideration. That he could take such an openly rude stance meant that he was audaciously bold or otherwise of a very high standing. When he recognized who I was, he moved to speak, but he backed down when Achim got in the way.

"Sir Arno, your younger sister has arrived."

The room in which Arno met me was a study, with bookshelves

surrounding a lavish desk. Books were spread across the room and documents covered the desk. Ostentatious furniture was of a minimum, which made the room noticeably more comfortable for me than the rest of the house. Arno was focused on some papers but hurried to his feet when he saw me.

"Oh, I apologize, is it that time already?" he said. "I thought the ride would have taken a little longer."

"Hello to you too," I said. "You look busy, brother."

As soon as the steward excused himself, Achim let out an exasperated sigh and began tidying the books and papers strewn haphazardly across the room. When we turned to him, he waved us off with a hand.

"Don't mind me," he said. "I'll be by the wall and out of your way just as soon as I make this office a touch more respectable."

"Sorry, and thanks," replied Arno.

"It's not like there's anybody else to help, and you've never been able to tidy a room to save your own life. So don't try, please; you'll only make it worse."

"Keeping things orderly always *has* been a weakness of mine."

Arno looked suddenly awkward and uncomfortable. Probably because I had simply taken a seat in silence, where usually I would have had a snappy remark for such a statement. Something along the lines of *"You'd be drowning in your own filth if not for Achim, brother."* Instead, we sat across from each other, and Arno cleared his throat in a vain attempt to lighten the tension in the air.

"Did you invite me here just so we could sit together in silence?" I asked.

"No, and it's not my intent to leave you hanging either."

The tension was like waves, rocking against the walls of my heart. I knew that whatever we were going to discuss here would be bad news, and it was not hard to imagine how things would go.

"I've come to the capital to work as the imperial princess's second secretarial aide," stated Arno. "I know what you're thinking, but let me be clear: I'm here of my own volition. I've wanted to talk to you...about how I simply cannot side with Sir Reinald."

I knew it was how he felt, but to actually hear my brother speak

the words didn't make them any easier to take. For a time, we sat in silence, both of us with arms crossed. This was a topic I'd seen coming, and our silence was a consideration for our positions.

"Is that the reason you kept your actions silent in Falkrum?" I asked.

"I assume you knew, then?"

"No. Not until the other night, when you visited with the imperial princess in tow. After that, a little thought was all it took."

Accepting a position under Wilhelmina was not something that could have possibly happened overnight. First, Arno and the princess would have needed to get to know each other...which likely meant they'd been in touch since Wilhelmina came to Falkrum. There's no way she would have been happy to have Falkrum snatched out from under her nose, and it was not out of the realm of possibility that she would look to form bonds with the Kirsten family, who bore the responsibility of protecting Falkrum's future governor general.

"So when was it? When the princess first came to Falkrum, or...?"

"Karen, I apologize, but this particular topic is not why I called you here today."

"If not the Kirsten family falling under the command of the imperial princess, then why *did* you call me here?! Was it to—"

I was about ready to explode, but Arno silenced me with a raised hand. Achim shot me a look, then motioned to the wall with a jaw and tapped his ear with a finger.

"Once I got here, it was only going to be a matter of time before the rumors would reach you," Arno said, putting a finger to his lips as he went on. "So before that happened I wanted to talk to you myself, in person."

The message from the two men was as clear as day. Ours was a discussion that was being listened to by people outside of the office. *"Be careful what you say in here"* was the message that Arno and Achim imparted.

"I had hoped we could proceed with all of this in a slower, more relaxed manner, but I see I'll have to get straight to the point. Karen, look. I want you to seriously consider cutting ties with Sir Reinald."

"You ask the impossible," I replied. "You know just as well as I do

that he's the Conrad family's official guardian."

"If you agree to cut ties as I ask, you have the imperial princess's word that you will be looked after."

"It's not a matter of protection. I selected him for the responsibility myself."

"I am only too aware of how big a decision that was for you."

"And yet still you ask this of me?"

I could tell by his tone of voice that Arno was not going to budge from his position. And while I had not wanted this conversation to devolve into an argument right from the outset, I could not help clenching my fists. Arno, it seemed, felt likewise.

"Let me at least state my personal take on matters," he said. "However it happened, I simply cannot bring myself to trust a man who took our nation by murdering its king."

Arno did not intend to mince words. He had never stated his position so directly and so I'd never said anything, but I'd always had a nagging hunch that this was where Arno stood. And when I considered his personality, I already knew that Arno did not think highly of Reinald. All of that said, I had never imagined that his feelings on the matter would manifest in this particular way.

I knew all too well how hard things were for Gerda to accept, but when it came to Arno... I had wanted to believe that with the Kirstens moving to the imperial capital, there might be a chance to meet, to talk things through, and to reconcile. In this, however, I had been terribly naive.

"Brother, it is because of Sir Reinald that Falkrum—" I started.

"This is not a matter of results," said Arno, cutting me off. "Perhaps for the nation—no...perhaps for *him*, it was the best course of action. Perhaps it was the path of minimal casualties. I've gathered what information I could, and I've learned a great deal. I know there is a bigger picture. It's why, at the very least, I can understand what happened."

Perhaps some part of me had simply clung to the idea—prayed for it, even—that Arno would stand by my side. But he was his own man, with his own thoughts and feelings. His own principles. That I had not noticed was ignorance on my part.

"Then you know why the empire dispatched troops at the time too, yes?"

"Yes, I heard. The princess had her reasons for her actions. But compared to him, it is Wilhelmina whose principles best suit the coming generation."

"And is Gerda of the same opinion?"

"Even if she *did* back the crown prince, neither she nor her child could ever be considered safe in the company of a man with so many enemies."

"That's *not* what I asked. I asked what she *thinks*."

"*I* have done the same as you. I have only considered the best possible path for my sister and her child."

I did not get an answer to my question, which told me that Gerda had not made her stance clear. Still, without any authority—and without any military backing—she was powerless to do anything but go along with what the Kirsten family decided. I considered the conversation so far and clenched my fists as one clear fact once again made itself clear.

Wilhelmina had not yet given up on the throne. Far from it, in fact.

"Her Highness has spoken to you of her motives, but I know nothing of them. Still, I grant that they were clearly reason enough to make you reconsider your stance."

"I am glad you would say as much, and it's why I ask that you meet the princess and speak to her. If you are amenable to the idea I can arrange for a meeting, and..."

"If I do that, will you meet with Sir Reinald for a similar discussion?"

"You ask too much of me, sister."

"Yes, and I do so intentionally."

I heard the disappointment and resolve in Arno's voice. He did not have to ask what I thought of his response; he had already read it in my answer.

"The Conrad domain was nothing to them but a convenient piece of land to be negotiated," I said. "The people who lived there were innocent. At the very least, they did not deserve to die in the way

that they did."

Arno knew what had happened to the peaceful, ordinary people who had built their lives upon those lands. He knew that what occurred was the decision of the emperor and his daughter. Still, I stopped myself from saying any more; I was not sure this was the place for such a discussion.

"I know. I heard it from the princess herself."

He saw how conflicted this all made me. The resolve etched into his kind features painted the picture of a man who was not the brother I knew; his was the face of the head of the Kirsten family.

"And knowing that, you chose to serve her?" I asked.

"I did."

"Then tell me, just what did the princess say of her handling of the Conrad domain?"

"Just the facts. Nothing more."

He did not elaborate.

"You're kidding. That's it?"

I sank back into my chair. I did not shed tears, but my sigh was heavy with regret.

"In which case, yes, what you ask of me is completely, utterly unfeasible," I said. "Conrad survived because of the bonds we forged with Sir Reinald. In changing our official guardian, people will think I am spitting on Conrad's name. Who could ever trust me then? I wouldn't dare do anything so ungrateful."

"Her Highness can aid you in this regard. She has a great many connections in the capital and can ensure advantageous deals for Conrad. Surely you must know just how difficult a position Sir Reinald is in at present?"

"Not the particulars, no."

There was no use lying, though given the timing with which Arno brought Reinald up, I could hazard a guess.

"Won't you consider my suggestion as a means for ensuring Conrad's survival? Please, at least think on it..."

"That was the reason I made my choice in the first place," I said, but I was not done. "I do not intend to overturn my decision. I will see the world with my own eyes and walk my own path accordingly."

It was what the margrave himself had told me to do. I had labored over each step, but all of them had brought me here. I would not budge for Arno, just as he would not budge for me. If he had never known that Conrad was little more than a bargaining chip for negotiations between nations, and the hell it had meant for its residents, then perhaps there might have been a way to change Arno's mind. But if he had chosen the princess even knowing full well the weight of her decision, then there was nothing more I could say to persuade him.

"Let me ask you this," I continued. "Would you consider relinquishing your position as the princess's secretarial aide?"

"No. You might have secured a place for our family's next in line, and I am grateful for it, but my mind is made up."

Which meant there was no shared future for the two of us. We might yet exchange words on occasion, but nothing now could sway the resolve that burned in our individual hearts. We were siblings, and I wanted to respect that. I did not think of Arno's actions as a betrayal. I couldn't. We were family, and though that meant we sought to help one another, we were also individuals with our own thoughts, our own emotions, and our own goals.

For a time, Arno and I sat in silence, staring at one another. Arno was the first to break the gaze, slumping against the backrest of his chair like a balloon deflating.

"I know that once you've made up your mind it's no different from an immovable rock. I won't push you any further; I ask only that you come to me should you ever reconsider."

"And you too, brother; do let me know if you ever resign from your post."

We shared a wry grin at the knowledge that such events were as likely as a cold day in hell.

"On an entirely different note," I said, "this is a most wonderful manor. Do you really live here?"

"No, this is just temporary. I'd like to move somewhere a little quieter."

"Ah, then the people I passed on my way to your office..."

"Comrades of Her Highness, I suppose you could say. So yes,

things will be different when we next meet. A conversation of a much calmer nature, I expect, and one in which we can speak as siblings."

"I would like that very much."

It was not as simple a matter as he made it sound, but I knew that it was an expression of his love and care. That he could say something so easily while our conversation was being listened to also showed that he was beginning to grow a stronger spine too.

Come to think of it, Reinald asked about Arno back when we strolled the streets together. Did he already have a read on his sister's movements, even then?

"I don't want to stay any longer than necessary and cause you any hassle," I said. "I'll take my leave."

With our negotiations essentially in tatters, there was no point in staying any longer. It just made it more likely that I'd slip up in conversation and get Arno in trouble.

"I forgot to say so earlier, but thank you for visiting me when I was ill," I said. "I had just been thinking about how long it had been since I last saw you, and it was a relief to see you in such good health. How is our sister...?"

"No issues in terms of health," replied Arno. "She was happily eating whatever was on her plate around the time that I left."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"You should worry more about your own health than the health of others. I assumed that you probably ran yourself ragged at least one, but twice? You really must take better care of yourself."

Yes, but there was no avoiding it that second time...

Both Arno and Achim came to the manor entrance to see me off, though I couldn't help noticing something like sorrow in the slump of Achim's head. I had not been able to give him the outcome he had hoped for, and it weighed on him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know you want only to protect me."

"It's okay," Achim replied. "You've made up your mind."

"Know that I will do everything in my power to support you, as you are family," said Arno. "So should something happen, my door remains open to you."

"Thank you. Until next time."

Unlike the anger he was all too happy to express, Achim did not let his sorrow show often, if at all. It saddened me, and I also knew that if the political situation worsened, we would no longer be able to spend time together in any public places. I won't say it was the weight of it all that spurred the urge in me, but I wanted to walk my thoughts off, and so I refused the carriage that had been readied.

"Did anything of note occur while you were waiting, Geoff?" I asked.

"Nothing noteworthy. The servants brought me water and food, and they were all very polite. They are all used to such work, and I have to assume that their lord saw to it that they were all properly trained."

Geoff likely felt in the air how things had gone, and so he did not ask about my conversation with Arno. Still, I felt like talking about it with someone, and so I told him as we slowly walked toward home. I had talked of the matter before, so it was now just conjecture confirmed to be fact, but all the same Geoff listened quietly.

"And you do not wish to speak with Princess Wilhelmina, Lady Karen?" he asked.

"To be honest, I simply don't have the strength of will. She changed Arno's mind, and that means she carries intel powerful enough to do so. Still, I'm just not ready. It's pitiful, I know, but I'm just not confident that my decision was the right one beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"I see. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that, my lady."

I let out a long sigh.

"But perhaps I should have at least *shown* that I was more receptive to hearing the princess's side of things. I was too headstrong. I should have at least asked where Arno and the princess met."

I had chosen Reinald. It was *my* decision. I did not want to back down or waver, and it was with that mindset that I engaged with my brother.

"Hmm," murmured Geoff. "So instead of attempting to convince

you, he put a request on the negotiating table and did nothing to stop you leaving either...”

His head was tilted quizzically, his arms crossed. As usual, I could not read his expression through his helmet. I was used to the sight of him now, but it would have been amusing for any passersby, I imagine.

“Geoff?” I asked, prodding for a little more context to his thoughts.

“I don’t think your brother ever thought you would bend to the princess’s will,” he said. “His position under the princess no doubt affords him a handsome salary and extraordinary benefits. And yet he did not ask that Emil be returned to the Kirsten family.”

“Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“In which case, I daresay the discussion ended just fine.”

Geoff went on to explain that though he was not quite on the level of Whateley, his extensive experience at the palace allowed him to understand the subtleties of conversations like the one I’d had with my brother. In other words, there were messages woven into Arno’s words that I had missed, and Geoff was quick to point them out.

“Even with the newfound authority in his position, your brother kept contact open. That can be read as confirmation that should you be forced to split with Reinald’s faction for whatever reason, a path to safety remains open to you.”

Geoff had also noticed a certain plea in Achim’s eyes when the two shared a silent nod to greet one another. Geoff saw this as a request to ensure my safety.

“But if he is going so far to protect us, does that mean he has simply put himself in the princess’s good graces? Was he lying when he said he supports her steadfast principles?”

I didn’t mean to doubt my brother’s resolve; I think it was perhaps more that I was grasping at dangling threads of potential hope. Geoff’s answer, however, was no.

“Based on your brother’s character, at least from what I have heard from everybody else, he is not the lying type. For that reason, I think it is more likely that he prioritized his own position but, in

speaking to you, he also sent you a message. A message that hinted at the future."

Well, talk about a message that was exceedingly hard to grasp.

"Why are noblemen so opaque whenever they say anything?!" I cried. "And yes, I realize that noblewomen are likely no different!"

"I agree, but it is a sign of his trust in you. That, or he assumed you would talk things over with Whateley upon your return. In any case, as long as Emil remains under the care of the Conrad family, the Kirsten family has a future."

I did not like what Geoff implied, but the truth was right there: No matter who rose to the position of emperor, the Kirsten family would survive.

"I don't like that at all. The Kirstens aren't the Kirstens without Arno!"

"Then perhaps you'd be best to aid him in his time of crisis?"

"Now *you're* the one asking the impossible!"

"My apologies. Some of Whateley's dry humor must have rubbed off on me."

He might as well have simply said, *"Sorry, not sorry!"*

And yet, there was meaning in his words, all the same.

3: A New Pledge

Arno had put his support behind Wilhelmina because it was still uncertain who would succeed the emperor, and he wanted assurances either way. If Geoff was to be believed, then by leaving Emil under the protection of the Conrads, Arno had ensured that, were he to die...er, no, I mean were he unable to continue as the family lord, the family line would nonetheless continue. At the same time, if Wilhelmina inherited the throne, Arno had arranged a way to save us.

"That is *very* reckless," I said.

"Your brother's position may be less precarious than you think," commented Geoff. "It would seem the princess is quite considerate of him."

Geoff felt that Arno's new role as princess's second secretarial aide was a prime piece of evidence. The leading secretarial aide was a far more prominent position, which made them an easy target. Comparatively speaking, it was not so bad for the guardian of Falkrum's future governor general to be appointed the second secretarial aide. The position was a safe, nondescript one.

I wanted to scream in frustration, but I was in no position to criticize my brother. After all, this very thing had happened before, but with my brother and me on opposite sides. What my brother was doing now was no different than what I'd done in the aftermath of Falkrum's fall.

So this *is how Arno and Gerda must have felt...*

"Arno's current residence, temporary though it may be, is truly impressive," I said. "And filled with many of the princess's supporters, it would seem."

"They likely want to introduce themselves to your brother too," Geoff added. "I have heard that the princess's supporters are quite a strict, severe lot. It is likely uncommon for foreign nobles to be

appointed to such positions."

"While I'm happy to hear that he's making a splash, I'm nonetheless conflicted."

"You should not be taking this all in simple terms of black-and-white, good and bad. You are still too young. Leave such things to those older than you. What matters most at present is that you listen carefully and keep your eyes on the road ahead."

"And yet the road ahead is so rocky... But yes, I appreciate the advice."

Geoff stopped in place for a moment.

"Thank you, my lady," he muttered.

His helmet was tilted skyward, and I followed his gaze to the clear blue sky stretching out above us. It was a truly gorgeous day, but in Geoff's words of gratitude was an invisible burden. One heavy with sorrow and grief.

"If only there had been enough power in my words to inspire...others to trust me," he uttered. "Perhaps things might have gone differently."

I knew exactly who Geoff was talking about when he said "others." The buildings changed as we walked, everything settling into quiet as we made our way through the district. I sensed that Geoff wanted to walk a less crowded path.

"Perhaps if you are amenable to the idea, we might take a slightly longer, more scenic route?" he asked. "I would like you to know of my past."

"I would be happy to oblige, but please know that there's no need to force yourself."

"I want you to know: Chelsea has grown so close to everyone at your manor, and you have been kind enough to prepare medicine for her condition. To insist on silence, even now, would be nothing more than disrespect."

A lonely sorrow dripped from Geoff's words as he went on.

"That, and...it is high time I saw things for what they are. I need to accept the truth; both that I bore a great grudge against his highness, and that my sister as I once knew her will never return to me."

This was the story he had been unable to tell me all that time ago. It was the story of Geoff and his sister, and the events that led to them meeting me at the border; a story that started with two siblings losing their parents at an early age.

"Chelsea is like a small child in nature now, but she wasn't always like that," Geoff began. "She was a girl just like any other; one who thought and gave words to her feelings."

It saddened me to hear him speak of such things in the past tense.

"She was a good girl, and so sweet. Even now, you can see how pretty she is. We received marriage proposals from a number of good families, and I saw it as my duty to ensure that she was married into a worthy home."

"It sounds like she was very well-liked."

"I'm a little embarrassed to admit it. It sounds so presumptuous. But she was so bright. So kind. People always gathered around her... She and I both served at the castle, though I'm sure very few remember that now."

It wasn't uncommon for young women to serve at the castle so as to learn the rules of etiquette. Geoff and his sister, having lost their parents, were sent on the basis of a recommendation.

"My sister had little interest in castle duties, but she did not want to shame me by refusing the offer. Perhaps, in hindsight, that was a mistake."

Chelsea was nothing if not earnest in her endeavors. She was a hard worker and she learned quickly. She was a live-in servant at the time, and she spoke with great hope for the future when Geoff had time to see her. By finding meaning in her work, she grew all the more enthusiastic about her studies, and she had her sights set on eventually working as a civil service official.

"She was a touch ashamed of her ambitions, being that she discovered them comparatively late, but it gave me joy to see her holding on to dreams. We had lost our parents far earlier than most others, and I felt that marriage was the key to her future happiness. She taught me that there were other paths to happiness too."

"The both of you looked toward bright futures," I commented.

"We did. I'm ashamed to think of how hardheaded and how stubborn I was, but I was proud of Chelsea. She had found meaning in her life, and I decided that I wanted nothing more than to help her reach her goals."

But that, unfortunately, was when the tide began to turn.

It started when Geoff—then Geoffrey—was sent outside of the imperial capital by order of Second Prince Demyan. Upon his return, he learned that Chelsea had suffered an injury.

It was a day he would never forget. He rushed in to find his sister forcing a smile even through her pain. Chelsea tried desperately to play her injuries down and sweep them under the rug, but one of her roommates confided in Geoff and revealed to him the truth. Chelsea had been assaulted.

Geoff could speak of all of this in a calm manner now, but at the time his head had gone entirely blank. Chelsea should have been safe. She had not been sent anywhere dangerous. And yet, her bruises told the tale of a broken arm. At the same time, Chelsea was clearly scared to be in her own brother's company. And while it was a blessing that there were no signs of sexual abuse, Chelsea's sudden fear of men made it painfully clear what had happened to her.

"What was perplexing at the time was that she refused to name the perpetrator. Not a single person came forward as a witness either. I was furious and intent on tracking down the culprit and beating him to within an inch of his life, but Chelsea abhorred violence. Perhaps she knew what I intended, and that is why she said nothing."

Chelsea took a temporary leave from work, and Geoff arranged to commute to the castle from their family home so as to take care of her. Such arrangements were uncommon, but Prince Demyan had grown to like Geoff, who was well trusted by his superiors. When the queen heard of what had happened, she even assigned a female doctor to check up on Chelsea periodically. Chelsea's wounds healed after about a month, and she began to rediscover her smile. She told her brother that she would no longer serve at the castle and instead turn her efforts to finding a place as a working member of

society.

It was around this time that a sudden and shocking change occurred in Chelsea. The first to discover her was a housewife who came by daily to help with chores. She grew worried when Chelsea never appeared from her room, and upon checking on her, she found the girl simply staring skyward, her gaze blank and drool running from her tongue.

Chelsea no longer recognized even her own brother. Her raw emotions flooded from her in speech that was slurred and incomprehensible. She was driven by the whims of whatever her mood brought. It was a second mystery, but this time Geoff was not content to simply wallow in the confusion of it all. He left his sister in the care of a doctor and began an investigation.

"And there were no signs of any changes in your sister before then?" I asked.

"Nothing. Nothing until the day it happened. Chelsea's recovery had been slow, but she was growing to trust me again, to the extent she was even making us breakfast in the mornings. Our doctor told me that she was heading in the right direction."

Said doctor was sympathetic to Chelsea's ordeal and acted not unlike a therapist, offering the girl a shoulder to cry on. Geoff tried to spend as much time with his sister as he could, but his duties kept him busy, and it was no lie to say that the doctor had come to know his sister perhaps better than he did.

"What did your maid have to say on the matter?"

"Nothing of import. Only that Chelsea had seemed no different from usual the previous day. Ah, I should add that we'd known the woman for quite some time, and she had been very close to our parents. It was unimaginable to think she would ever lay a finger on my sister."

"Then how...?"

"At the time, I, too, had no idea."

When Chelsea had been found in her vegetative state, there was a glass of water and a powerful herbal medicine nearby. This led most to assume it was an attempted suicide. The going theory went like so: Chelsea had left the castle without so much as a word, and

less than favorable rumors had been going around as a result. Despairing for her future and seeing no light at the end of the tunnel, Chelsea took her own life.

"I could not accept that line of reasoning," said Geoff. "It's true that Chelsea stopped working at the castle and gave up on her dream of becoming a civil servant. But even then, she remained hopeful. She told me that if employment proved difficult in the royal capital, she would happily find a place to work in a domain elsewhere."

While his voice remained calm, Geoff's fingers dug into his palms as he clenched his fists.

"But there was one other reason she couldn't have possibly killed herself," Geoff continued. "And it was one that she kept secret from everyone right up until her death."

"What was it...?"

"She was pregnant."

In the face of Geoff's revelation, I was rendered completely unable to respond.

"Chelsea was beyond being able to comprehend anything that was going on, but the...evidence...lay at her feet."

The remains of her child were there on the carpet. A doctor's examination revealed that she had fallen pregnant before her assault. Given that she had grown a strong aversion to men in its aftermath, a pregnancy afterward was impossible to imagine.

I know how awful it is for me to put it this way, but I couldn't help thinking that perhaps the herbs found with Chelsea were ones she had acquired upon learning of her own pregnancy, leading her to consider drastic measures... I could not bring myself to raise this idea with Geoff, but I did not have to; he refuted it himself.

When he looked back upon his conversations with his sister after her assault, he saw signs that in her efforts to rejoin society she was looking for a place where she could raise a child. She had mentioned locations where she could conceivably make a living without Geoff's support, and she had spoken of towns and cities in which many women worked.

Geoff had at first thought that Chelsea was simply looking to get

away from the capital, but her motivations made much more sense when one factored in the idea that Chelsea herself knew she was carrying a child. Her refusal to name her assailant, and her efforts to make light of her own injuries, too, could be seen as Chelsea acting to protect the father.

With this new hypothesis in mind, Geoff once again questioned Chelsea's former roommate, who sheepishly shed some light on the matter. In the months leading up to the assault, Chelsea had been so happy as to appear radiant. She began wearing accessories of the like she would never have bought herself. The roommate had also found silk-wrapped jewels on Chelsea's shelves.

However, there was a reason that the roommate had refrained from asking Chelsea about any of these happenings. While such cases were rare among servants, they were not entirely unprecedented: it was a love blooming in secret within the castle walls. Based on the buoyancy of Chelsea's mood, one had to assume she had met quite the man.

"This was...all news to me," admitted Geoff. "Perhaps she thought I could not be trusted with such information."

"Nothing of the sort," I said. "However close you are to your siblings, matters of love will *always* be a sensitive topic."

Geoff allowed himself a dry chuckle, then went on.

In short, Chelsea was anything but despairing of the future. Geoff believed she was fully prepared to make a go of things, even if it was as a single mother. He ruled out suicide and visited Chelsea's doctor in the hopes of unveiling the person behind it all. This was a misstep. Word of his investigation reached the queen, and she called him for an audience.

"I feel your pain, and I understand that you have lost an irreplaceable member of your family," she said. "However, if you continue to poke around unnecessarily and it results in hostility of any sort, I will have to see you removed from your position as Demyan's education coordinator."

She made it clear that some in the castle did not think highly of his off-the-books investigation. Realizing that proceeding openly and in public might reflect poorly on the second prince, Geoff thus

changed tact. And, in continuing with his investigation in a more confidential manner, he found himself with a new lead. It indicated Chelsea's lover was someone working under Demyan's brother, Prince David.

At this point, however, Geoff's investigation stalled. Chelsea's romance was one of a most secretive nature, and Geoff could find no one who would speak of it. By this time, Chelsea's former roommate had also married and moved elsewhere, making her impossible to reach. One of the likely culprits, too, had left for a distant domain so as to take up the position of his family lord.

Geoff resorted to bribes in an attempt to acquire whatever information he could, even though the act ran counter to his principles. He knew that if the culprit was indeed an aide under Prince David, he would be a man of considerable rank, and so Geoff had to proceed cautiously. However, no proof came to light, and in that way some ten years passed. It was then, as the weight of defeat threatened to extinguish the wavering fire of revenge in Geoff's heart, that new information arrived from a most unexpected source: the second son of the Rodenwald family, Reinald.

"Did you know of Sir Reinald's heritage?" I asked.

"Not at the time," replied Geoff. "I only knew him by name and very little else. The king and those under him avoided him wherever they could, and so most others, in following, naturally kept their distance."

Geoff knew only that Reinald was related in some way to an imperial, and that his rank was little more than a formality. Given that Reinald was made to feel unwelcome in the castle, Geoff paid him little mind, and wondered if, because of his imperial heritage, Reinald was a hostage of some kind; a safeguard in some kind of deal between Falkrum and the empire.

"When he reached out to me, his reasons for doing so were unclear, and I was especially cautious. However, he gave me exactly what it was I had been searching for."

Reinald offered Geoffrey the name of Chelsea's secret lover and his coconspirators.

"At first I could not believe the name I was given, and I

summarily turned him away."

By this point in Geoff's story, however, a name was already floating around in my head. Call it an ominous hunch, if you will.

"I had heard of his womanizing, and yet I simply could not bring myself to believe that Prince David had been in a romantic relationship with my sister," said Geoff, confirming my suspicions.

"I see. So it *was* Prince David, then..."

"I sense something of a knowing tone in your voice."

"I know of...an incident," I replied. "It was...quite bold..."

"Is that so? In my case, the rumors were just that; rumors. I had never seen the prince act in such a way, not even once. In my presence he was nothing if not a generous man; when his aides or their families were ill, he saw they had time to rest and recover. He was good to those who worked for him, and he rewarded them for their efforts. That was the sort of man I knew him to be."

It was the side of the prince that I had never known, but Geoff, too, admitted that it might have simply been that he never saw the prince in the company of women.

"It is certainly possible that that prince sometimes approached his servants for trysts, but it was difficult for me to believe that he could have swayed the heart of one as conscientious as my sister."

And yet, this was just the beginning of the shocking revelations. Had it simply been Prince David, Geoff's rage would have had but a single target. As it turned out, however, this was a betrayal of a nigh unbearable, tragic weight.

"The herbs given to Chelsea came by way of the doctor appointed by the queen herself," explained Geoff. "But she was not the only person who knew of Prince David and Chelsea's secret relationship. Prince Demyan did too."

Geoff did not know exactly when the queen and Demyan had become aware of and involved in matters, but all the same it was more than he could take. All the care and consideration that they had shown him felt suddenly like an act. Their words were now lies. All of those who knew Geoff knew how much worry and suffering his family's predicament caused him. They knew that in refusing to abandon his sister, he brought upon himself slander and threw away

any hope of marriage.

And in the early stages of nursing his own sister, Geoff came face-to-face with the weakness in his own heart. All the money he had disappeared into a fruitless investigation, payments to Chelsea's caretaker, and medicine for her condition. Even with his high salary, Geoff's money dissipated like boiling water into steam. Before finding a caretaker for his sister, his spirit almost broke countless times, and he considered discarding her. Over and over, he tried to tell himself that no one would blame him for making such a decision.

"In hindsight, I see that the kindness shown to me by those I worked with was motivated by guilt. Especially that from Prince Demyan himself..."

Geoff paused to let out a long, heavy sigh.

"I know that now," he continued. "In the end, the prince fell for the flattery and lost himself to his arrogance. He was mentally weak, but he wasn't always like that. He never once forgot his instructors' birthdays, and he always made time to celebrate them. He was kind, and..."

"Geoff," I said gently, reaching out to ensure he was okay.

"My apologies. I'm fine."

His voice wavered slightly, and he made no attempt to remove his helmet.

Geoff had taught Demyan swordsmanship since the prince was a boy, and he had grown attached to him over the years. Unlike his brother, Demyan was timid and neurotic, which made him a tightly wound ball of complexes. It felt odd for me to hear of these other sides of the princes, but I had no doubt that Geoff was telling the truth about the man he had known.

Naturally, then, the information Geoff received from Reinald was like a slap to the face and then a successive series of more. Eager to get to the truth of the matter, Geoff tracked down and located the doctor that the queen had sent to look after Chelsea. She had since distanced herself from the royal family. With her face puffed up from crying and her bloody fingers wrapped in bandages, the doctor admitted to Geoff the truth.

"It was my duty to build a relationship with Chelsea and to see if

she ever made her relationship with the prince public. They told me that all I had to do was report what she said, nothing more... Your sister was a fine woman, but the queen would not stand for a mere servant girl carrying the child of a prince. I tried to convince her to give up on the child, but Chelsea was adamant; she had made up her mind to have it."

Chelsea made her position clear: She would speak to no one of the child's father, and she would not do anything that caused trouble for the royal family. When this was relayed to the queen, the doctor received a new set of orders.

"I was given an abortion medicine—at least, that's what they told me it was. They said that if Chelsea didn't drink it, my brother would be thrown in jail for a crime he did not commit... But you must believe me! I did not think it was anything more than an abortion medicine! If I had known that it was capable of destroying a person so completely, I..."

The doctor wept as she spoke. Perhaps it was regret. Perhaps it was her pain. Either way, she went on to explain that she was ordered *not* to examine the herbal concoction she had been given, and she did not have the courage to disobey. This, she stated, was the reason she had distanced herself from the queen.

In this way, Geoff confirmed the truth. And it was at this time that Reinald also gave him what he needed most: a medicine to help calm his sister. It had a similar effect to what Wendel concocted for her now, albeit less effectively. As it turned out, the medicine was difficult to acquire in Falkrum, and all the more expensive for that reason.

"And what did Reinald ask for in return?"

"It was not a request for anything, but rather a show of support. He said that if it was revenge against Prince David that I wanted, he would aid me in that mission."

I did not believe that Reinald would offer such a favor for nothing, and in this I was right. However, Reinald was surprised to find that Geoffrey could not easily bring himself to betray Prince Demyan right away.

"My sister means the world to me, but murdering royalty is the

severest of crimes. I did not know if I could bring myself to kill Prince David. It is also true that I taught Demyan swordsmanship; he was my student, and the idea of bringing him harm, by my own hand, was not something I could do easily."

These feelings, however, eventually subsided. With Chelsea in a more peaceful state, Geoff had to ensure she had a regular supply of medicine. Geoff prepared the money, and Reinald saw that it reached the appropriate herbalists. In this way, the two maintained a connection—one that Reinald and Moritz exploited to learn about the castle's lesser-known entrances and hidden pathways. Geoff knew the castle well, and as a close aide to the prince, he was allowed access to areas denied to the nobility.

"I realized that my actions were rash, and at the time I tried to shut my thoughts off from how my intelligence was sure to be used... But no, I believe that somewhere in my heart, I longed for an outlet; a way to rid myself of the festering rage that bubbled within me."

There was something of a grim exhaustion in Geoff's voice as he spoke of his past actions. His desire for revenge against Prince David had never truly extinguished, and he did not need to say this aloud for Reinald to know that it was the case. Geoff's was a rage that screamed through the silence. In him were two opposing parts of the same man, hanging carefully in the balance: on one side was the heart of a loyal retainer; on the other, a man struggling to contain his hatred.

It was a balance that shifted irrevocably on the day of the duel. Both David and Demyan lost their lives in the aftermath, but during the duel itself I had noticed an odd moment of pause in Geoff. When I asked about it, Geoff at first hesitated to answer.

"I heard laughter," he said finally, "like that of a man laughing *at* me. I wanted nothing more than to shut my ears to it entirely."

It was not the laughter of anyone he knew, but it froze him in place, and the opening was one his opponent took to beat him senseless.

And at least for the time being, I will put aside my hunch regarding the people I *know who are capable of such strange*

occurrences.

As we all know, Geoff lost the duel. He had been so intent on winning that the crushing reality of his defeat felt impossible to accept. In among this feeling of disbelief, Prince Demyan was run through with a spear, and in that instant the dam holding back Geoff's emotions simply burst. He knew then, with full clarity, that for everything that happened, he could not deny the kinship he felt with Prince Demyan.

"He was...so delicate," said Geoff. "His heart was such a fragile thing. And it was only those of us closest to him who truly understood this about Demyan. Perhaps it is not my place to say this, as someone who leaked intel to foreign actors, but it felt like losing another part of my family after Chelsea..."

Murder had perhaps not been the ultimate endgame for Geoff, but at the moment of Demyan's death, there was nothing in his mind but the word "vengeance." Embers stoked over many long years burst into flame, and they powered the hand that clutched his blade.

I had seen myself what happened next. Reinald cut Geoff down. What surprised Geoff, however, was that in doing so, Reinald had saved his life. When Geoff awoke, struggling with the pain of his near unbearable wounds, it was Reinald looking down at him.

"Can you not move with a little more caution, man?" he asked, his voice exasperated. "One wrong step there and you would have died. You were like a boar, blind to all but your target."

Reinald muttered his complaints as Geoff's wounds were seen to, and it was during this time that Geoff refused treatment for his face. There was also a handsome young man with Reinald, spouting complaints with a pout on his face, and in his voice Geoff recognized the laughter he heard during the duel. At the time, however, there was no chance to ask about it. When Geoff described the young man to me, I knew immediately that he was talking about Six.

He told me he was just there to watch. I knew it! He really did *play a hand in it all.*

"I got the sense that he and Reinald had differing opinions. I have no basis for this save for the fact that Reinald gave him a fierce scolding."

Geoff was then moved somewhere quiet, away from others, and though he believed himself headed for the gallows, this was not to be the case. He steeled himself for death, but instead he found himself in the company of his sister and was handed a bag full of jewels. The soldier who released him was one of Reinald's own officers, Haring, who told him the following.

"Though it goes without saying, please do not return to Falkrum. Should you choose to try, we will have no choice but to kill you both."

"Why are you letting us free?" Geoff asked. "Does it not put you all at considerable risk?"

"Indeed, it was a pain finding people whose body types matched those of you and your sister, but you've saved us a lot of trouble. The way it all ended...it was well beyond anything we could have expected. Consider the jewels a thank-you."

"That is not what I meant. The very act of allowing one like me to live..."

"The royal family is no more. If you still feel any loyalty to them, then that should be all the more reason to leave."

Geoff was left dumbstruck. Haring urged him to move on, but naturally it was not an easy or simple thing for Geoff to comprehend immediately.

"You must take this opportunity while it is here," said Haring, his gaze serious. "For your sister. Lord Reinald appears to have taken a liking to you, enough that he was willing to unsheathe his own sword. But know that there are many others who would prefer to see you silenced for good."

"But not you?"

"My orders take priority. It won't be easy for either of you, not in your state, but if you have trouble finding work, reach out. We'll have work for someone of your skills."

Perhaps realizing that the jewels alone would not be enough for Geoff and Chelsea to get their start, Haring also provided them with money, medicine for his sister, and a horse for transportation. Haring was the person Geoff had referred to as an acquaintance watching over him when we first met.

Geoff and his sister left Falkrum. There was no turning back now. With what little connections they had left they returned to their countryside home, but what happened there was exactly as Whateley had suspected. The villagers were happy to have a hard worker like Geoff around, but less enthused by the arrival of his sister with him. Many told him it would be best to euthanize her. Geoff knew then that he and his sister would not find peace among their former neighbors, and once again they hit the road.

"I was lost and completely at my wit's end," Geoff admitted. "Under all that stress I couldn't make even a single important decision. This is perhaps why I have remained so tight-lipped about my past; I feared it would only amount to a way for you to understand the full extent of my folly and my weakness."

His statement could not have felt heavier, and for this reason I could not easily find the words to respond.

"I can imagine how difficult it must have been," I said eventually.

"You do not need to comfort me. What happened happened because I was indecisive, cowardly."

"I'm not trying to comfort you, Geoff. You were betrayed, you sought revenge, and that meant turning against one with whom you were close. I'm sure the reality of it was far more difficult, far heavier than the mere thought of it."

There were, however, those who could see such difficulties through. People with wills of iron. But in truth, the vast majority found themselves conflicted, the way Geoff was, or I would have been. My similarities to Geoff in this regard were the origin of my sympathies. It was only a very small handful of people who could cut themselves off from their own emotions and commit themselves to a course of action without anything more than a second thought.

Geoff was not one of that small handful. I suspected that I was not either. Had we made the right decisions up until this point in time? Who could say? I was reborn in this world, yes, but I was also just another one of the countless lives that inhabited it. I saw Geoff's behavior as only natural. I did not think it was anything to be ashamed of.

And yet, it was people like Geoff—people who called themselves

indecisive and cowardly—who struck me as having lived most honestly to themselves. I felt something like envy for him. He was owed respect.

"I cannot tell you that things worked out for the best," I said, "but I believe that *you* did the very best you could, given your circumstances. It doesn't affect my hiring of you."

To this, I received a most surprising response.

"You will not see me fired, then?"

To which I replied quite plainly, "Why would I do that?"

Had he really thought that he'd tell me all of that just for me to cut him from my employ entirely? The revenge chapter of his story was over. But however it had ended, connections born from it still continued. For me, that connection had started when I enlisted his help on the road to the imperial capital. And wasn't the realization of past loss and confusion just as fine a reason for trust as any other? In any case, mine was a family around which rumors swirled constantly—so few of them favorable—and Geoff was but a small issue among all of that.

If anything, Geoff's story only made me more certain.

"I murdered Prince David," he said.

"It is not my place to judge your past sins," I said. "I could offer words of forgiveness, but I know they would provide you little solace. The emotional burden you carry is one that will only lighten with the passage of time, no?"

I could not give him forgiveness, but I could at least provide him time to think and an environment in which to do it. That said, I couldn't help feeling a touch awkward, taking something of a lecturing tone with a man more than twice my age. I cleared my throat, hoping it might act to reset our conversation.

Jeez, life is just so tough. The road ahead is so very long, and it really is the most boring, peaceful days that we should be the most grateful for.

"You have lived a life until now in which you lost much," I said. "I think it's high time you started replacing what is gone, together with Chelsea."

"The two of us...together..."

"That means I'll be counting on your help, Geoff."

Great. All's well that ends well. A neatly tied bow to wrap things up.

I couldn't help feeling embarrassed. I mean, perhaps it wasn't my place to say such things. However, as Geoff's employer I felt he deserved praise equal to his efforts, and I was doing my best to act the part.

"I wanted to ask something, being that you were so close with Prince Demyan," I said. "Were he and his brother always on such bad terms?"

"No. There was a time when they got along quite well. Prince Demyan would follow his brother around like a puppy dog."

Prince David had shown a certain care toward his brother at the duel—at least, before the ending—that had lingered with me like a question mark. Geoff said that Demyan's opposition to his brother was something that happened gradually, though exactly when was unclear.

"In the beginning, Prince Demyan was steadfast and dedicated to supporting his older brother. Looking back, I would say his change started when he began privately meeting with the grand dukes and Marquis Rodenwald more frequently."

"The grand dukes *and* the marquis?"

"Prince David was known for being impulsive, passionate, and quick-tempered. Rumors were spreading that if he inherited the throne, the nation would begin preparations for war. The grand dukes and the marquis wanted nothing more than to maintain the status quo, and many spoke of them being a thorn in his side."

"But Prince David and the marquis looked to be quite friendly... I suppose that isn't all that strange, though."

"For him to have been currying favor with both princes is not so strange, no. Their factions, however, would have made engaging in an actual partnership rather difficult..."

The two claimed to be friends, but Geoff was skeptical, given Demyan's private meetings with Rodenwald.

"Is it true that Reinald was treated like an outcast?"

"It is. Little was said about it, and on the surface everybody

showed him his due respect, but not even the marquis wanted to let him get anywhere near the royal family. Only Prince David showed him any interest."

"How strange. I can't help but wonder why he was brought to me as a potential marriage partner, then."

"Ah, yes. There was talk of a potential engagement. Perhaps a convenient way to keep a pest out of one's hair?"

"Even then, however, you'd think they'd choose somebody more fitting than I."

But perhaps that was the extent to which Reinald was placed on the fringes. Perhaps he was planning a way to position himself for domestic politics.

"I must say, it is remarkable that you remembered my face," commented Geoff. "When you called me by my full name at the border station, it came as a great shock."

Geoff was further shocked when I told him about his appearance on the night of the ball, but he nodded to himself as he thought back.

"So *that* was the moment you came to remember my person. It truly is a small world."

"None can ever truly tell how fate will connect people. That said, I consider my encounter with you and your sister to be one of good fortune."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course. I've certainly never thought that you brought a jinx on us."

Life with Chelsea was even more difficult than I had expected, but none of that was her fault. We'd since set up a better environment for watching over her, and with a more structured lifestyle in place, she grew more adorable than anything else. And while I can only say this because ours was a household in which we had a surplus of time and money, I'd learned a lot from Geoff and his sister. I was glad to have met them.

"All this walking has worked up my appetite," I said. "Let's hurry home, shall we? There's so much to do, but I think for starters I might like to indulge in some sweets and a cup of tea."

Our long conversation equated to quite the amount of exercise. The roads grew busier and filled with more people as we made our way to the main streets.

"What are you doing just standing there?" I asked. "Hurry along or you'll never catch up."

I didn't want us to get separated in such a crowded street, but Geoff had at some point slowed to a near halt. At the sound of my voice, however, he strode toward me. He was a man of considerable presence, and so I shied away slightly as he took my hand.

"My sword is yours," he said, placing the back of my hand against his forehead. "I will never betray your trust, no matter the path you choose to walk."

I felt the cold of Geoff's helmet against my skin as the emotion in his words sank through it.

"Very well," he then said casually, taking off in the direction of our house. "Shall we be off, then?"

And so it was that now *I* was left at a near halt.

Did I just receive a knight's pledge?

I wasn't certain what exactly had brought that out of the man, but to be on the receiving end left me stunned. And let me add that when we arrived home, he insisted on pledging his loyalty yet again, and it was no easier a second time.

The rest of the way home, Geoff and I discussed what was on the horizon, mostly with regard to the new staff we had coming in the next few days. I also knew that I would now have to inform Reinald that Geoffrey was in my employ. This was nonnegotiable, given that there was only so long we could keep Chelsea and her condition a secret.

Then there was the matter of my brother, and Wilhelmina having been in Falkrum for a time. The fact that such an event had slipped our notice was very bad, given that it was Conrad's responsibility to keep Reinald abreast of such movements. That meant that an apology was in order and, depending on how things went, that I might have to return to Falkrum to better understand the situation on the ground and speak with various lords face-to-face.

"We've two people keeping watch on us from a distance," said

Geoff, interrupting my thoughts. “Do you have any idea who they might be?”

“Is it a mischievous-looking young man and a steadfast young lady?”

“They fit the description, yes. They don’t appear to be a threat, but I can have them gone if you’d like.”

“If they don’t mean any harm, then let them be. I don’t know what they might be up to, but I’ll look into it. I haven’t done anything of late I should be worried about, so it doesn’t bother me to have them hanging around.”

Why they were keeping track of my movements was a mystery, but they weren’t getting anything out of it. If I needed to be rid of them at some point, I’d handle it then.

The walk home had been quite a long one, and my feet ached from all the extra exercise. I was lamenting how out of shape I was when I noticed something near our house.

“Geoff, what is that...?” I asked.

“Somebody moving in?”

It was a carriage in front of the house next door, the haunted one. The driver and a number of movers were carrying baggage into the house while a man and a woman watched nearby. When they saw me, they broke into great big smiles.

“Welcome home, my lady!” said one.

It was Elena, dressed in casual attire and waving a hand. With her was Haring. It was my first time seeing him in anything other than his uniform. Elena was truly stunning to behold, and it warmed my heart when she took my hand and smiled so honestly. Her uncommon hair color made her all the more beautiful.

“What are you two doing here?” I asked. “And what’s with the baggage?”

“We’re moving in! As of today!”

“You’re moving in?!”

I mean, I knew that the vacant house couldn’t just be left vacant, given what was hidden inside of it, but was Elena moving in just to watch over the place?

This is a house with a hidden tomb inside of it! Yeah, the skeleton

discovered on the third floor has been moved, but there were way more under the house proper, and it's not like they could just remove them all without drawing attention.

Does that mean they're still down there?!

Oh, I see people over there moving out some suspicious-looking...packages.

But even then! Eww!

Haring saw the look on my face and chuckled, keeping a hand on his hat to make sure it didn't fall.

"Well, Elena's grandparents were a bit worried, and as far as the house itself goes, Six gave the all-clear. We're not really bothered about the history of the place, and it's a good opportunity to land a house of our own."

"And what a deal!" added Elena. "We don't even have to pay for upkeep or renovations, so it didn't take long for us to decide to just go for it."

I took in Haring's easy smile and Elena's joy, then realized that Haring hadn't referred to her by any sort of title. My brain short-circuited for a second while it tried to put the pieces together... First, the way they seemed so close, and then the way they kept saying "we" like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Wait," I uttered. "Are you...*two*...moving in...*together*...?" I asked.

"Well, that makes more sense in terms of optics, for one thing," replied Elena. "Having my grandparents close makes it easier for me to check in on them too. The opportunity was too good to pass up, so we just decided to go for it. Reinald even gave us a monetary gift to celebrate the occasion!"

"But I'm glad we got meeting the parents out of the way..." muttered Haring.

Are these two...? Are they...?

"Whoa. Wait," I said. "Were you two *always* a couple?!"

"Yep!" replied Elena. "We've been together a while, right?"

"Probably close to five years now. It's about time," said Haring.

"The timing was perfect!"

I hadn't picked up on it at all. But when I thought back to the

practiced ease with which Haring held back a struggling Elena, it did make me think of a couple who'd known each other a long time.

Still reeling in shock, I offered the couple my congratulations and, as fate would have it, Wendel and Emil returned home just as Geoff and I were at the door to our own home. Both of them held in their arms things that could not be overlooked.

Though I think "creatures" is the more apt term.

"Wendel, Emil," I said, stopping them in place.

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

Hil remained silent, his face the dictionary definition of "Don't ask me." Humphrey, for his part, at least muttered some excuse about trying to stop them.

"What are you holding?" I asked.

"A cat," replied Wendel.

"A dog," replied Emil.

Both animals had clearly only been born recently, and the boys didn't mind at all that their clothes were all dirty. I could tell by all the dirt and grime that the animals hadn't been picked up from a house somewhere, and were in fact strays.

"Why wouldn't you at least discuss things with me?" I demanded.

"It's so lonely here without pets," said Wendel.

"And it's not like we could just leave them there," said Emil.

It was true that, what with Conrad being a countryside location, dogs and cats were a common sight among the neighbors. And then there was the cat that Wendel had looked after when we lived there...

"This kitty is going to be beautiful!" Wendel declared, holding her out toward me. "She's going to be all fluffy and gorgeous. The dog might grow up to be quite big, but that just means it'll make a good guard dog. What's the harm in looking after them?"

"I just wish you'd told me!" I said. "There are matters to discuss! Food! Baths! Whether we're going to raise them as indoor pets or not! They're living creatures, and that means they're a responsibility! They're not just toys you can leave to their own devices!"

"You see, Emil?" said Wendel. "I told you she'd be fine with it."

"And you were right. I guess she doesn't hate animals after all."

"Would you listen to me?!" I cried. "I'm scolding you right now!"

And yes, I'll admit it; I *had* been thinking about how nice it would be to have a pet around, I just hadn't actually moved on those feelings. I also hadn't ever even *dreamed* that this would be the way we'd welcome them into the family. So no, I most certainly didn't hate animals!

But when you raise pets, you get attached to them! And that will only make it harder for me to leave when the time finally comes! That's the only reason I never looked to get one!

And so, in this way I arrived home to be at first shocked by Elena and Haring, and then to be further shocked by Wendel and Emil. The quiet I had hoped for was now the stuff of dreams.

"Hil! Humphrey!" I cried. "Why didn't you stop them?!"

"You're no better," shot Wendel. "It's just that for you it wasn't a cat or a dog, but two humans instead."

"Wendel!" I snapped.

It was as if all the signs of a future upheaval fell into the background, replaced by the ranting and raving of the most pleasant of arguments.

4: Settling in as Rumors Swirl

I am...so...tired...

"Lady Karen!" announced Hil, keeping a watch on the perimeter. "Look! The imperial capital is in sight!"

"We're here already?" I replied. "Can I finally bid farewell to nights sleeping on hardwood?"

"You'll have a soft mattress to indulge in this evening, my lady. A delicious meal before it too, I imagine."

"Delicious food..." murmured Humphrey. "I can hardly wait!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, you dolt!" shouted Hil. "You've got a job to do!"

"Aw, at least let me look forward to a good meal, boss. I don't think I can stomach another piece of jerky. I'll need at least a year to recover."

"Yes, I think we're all looking forward to freshly grilled ham and eggs," I said. "And a salad to go with it."

"We've scarcely had anything in the way of vegetables," added Humphrey.

The two of us were practically salivating as we spoke; we were very much over the food we'd eaten on the road. Hil wore an exasperated frown at the behavior of his subordinate, but there was no doubt that even he was just as excited for some wine or ale upon our arrival home.

"It's certainly a quicker trip without all that luggage," I commented, "but the food is always going to be a struggle."

Unlike when we moved to the imperial capital—complete with the better part of our lives as we knew them—this trip was one in which we could move with more haste. There weren't any children or elderly to worry about, and no carts either. With the three of us on horseback, the trip was considerably shorter, though that came at the cost of a bed and decent meals. On the plus side, I improved as

a rider and learned a lot about camping. I also developed the ability to get changed in a flash. Unfortunately, my butt felt like it was red raw from the constant riding. I would have to see that well rested upon our return home.

I was dressed light for the trip, complete with a hooded cloak to keep my face mostly hidden. By riding in the midst of Hil, Humphrey, and our few other guards, I looked like nothing more than any other ordinary traveler at a glance. This also made it easier for our guards to keep me safe.

"I wonder if the boys are settling in at school?" I mused.

Humphrey, however, wasn't concerned in the slightest.

"What happened to Wendel in Falkrum was a special case," he said. "He has Emil nearby, and he's always been the friendly sort. I'm sure he's doing fine."

"All the same, I can't help but worry, especially because my absence meant I couldn't be there for him."

Let me provide some context: We were on our way back to the imperial capital from Falkrum. The trip had come about due to the discovery that Arno was siding with Princess Wilhelmina. As a member of the Conrad family, I had promised to do my utmost to support Reinald, and that made it *especially* painful not to have noticed what his sister was up to in Falkrum. I apologized directly to both Reinald and Moritz and returned to my former home so as to confirm the state of things firsthand. Whateley remained in the capital, and I brought along Hil and Humphrey to lead our guards. Geoff would have been just as effective, but Falkrum was off-limits to him.

In summary, returning to Falkrum was the right decision. Nothing especially serious had occurred, but Wilhelmina *had* been making inroads with the nobility. Upon my arrival in Falkrum, I enlisted the help of our aides Aubin and Barraque and a number of discussions were arranged. No major conflicts had developed, nor any dire circumstances, but it seemed that the best course was to build stronger ties with the governor general. This matter, too, played into many of my discussions while I was in Falkrum.

That this was all it took to see matters settled was due largely to

the fact that Falkrum was still in turmoil after the loss of the king and had yet to truly calm. Prudence would clearly be the name of the game for the next two to three years.

"The present grand dukes even asked us to pass along their regards to Reinald..." I uttered.

I hadn't noticed it before, having only met the grand dukes on a handful of occasions, but the current lords of their families were nothing if not fiercely loyal to Reinald. They were enthusiastic and passionate, and it had been their work that had seen Wilhelmina's efforts held at bay. I made a mental note to share this with Reinald when I next saw him...though I believe the grand dukes knew I would, and it was why they'd approached me in the first place.

Our group was nearing the main gates into the imperial capital. As usual, soldiers manned the area and kept watch over everyone entering. A number of people had gathered nearby.

"A moment, please," I said.

"Is something wrong?" asked Hil.

I noticed a man a short ways from the gate. He was hunched over and down on one knee. Even when I hopped from my horse and approached, he did not turn at the sound of my footsteps and instead simply kept a hand pressed against his own chest.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Oh, er... I apologize," replied the man. "I have heart trouble, and it caught me by surprise..."

The man's hair was black with streaks of gray starting to show. His features were soft and kind, and judging by his outfit and luggage, I guessed that he was a merchant. I had to assume that no one else had bothered checking on him because of his slightly poor, dirtied appearance. A well-worn bag sat by his feet.

"That's not good at all," I said. "Shall I get you a room at an inn within the gates? Do you have any attendants with you?"

"The others are already at the inn," replied the man. "I plan to meet them just as soon as my heart calms."

"All the same, you look to be in pain, sir, and clearly unable to walk on your own power. Will you tell me where your lodgings are? I'd like to see you there safely."

"Oh, okay... I'm so very sorry..."

His chest heaved with ragged breaths, and his gentle features were twisted with discomfort.

"Humphrey," I said, turning back. "Could you lend this man a shoulder, please?"

"Leave it to me."

We entered through the gates, bid farewell to our hired guards and horses, and then helped the man to his lodging. The guards we'd hired for the trip were the same ones who had accompanied us during our move to the capital, and so it was enough to simply assure them that their payment would arrive in the following days.

The man we were helping was indeed a merchant. When I asked about the bruises I noticed, he told me that before I had spoken to him he had been pushed aside by other merchants. When we neared the shopping district, he gave his chest a pat.

"Thank you so much," he said. "I feel much better now, and I'll be fine to go the rest of the way on my own."

"Are you sure you don't need any further assistance? Perhaps we should call a doctor for you?" I offered.

"Or perhaps I could head to your lodging now and call your attendants for you?" said Humphrey.

"Oh, there's no need. I can tell that you've just returned from a journey of your own, and that you're a person of noble lineage, no doubt. You two are the young lady's guards, yes? I'll be fine from here, and I apologize for the trouble I've caused you."

He bowed profusely as he refused our offers of help, and because the man insisted, we decided to head home. Before that, however, the man asked my name, so that he might later send a token of his thanks.

"You might not think so, given my appearance, but I've connections in the capital," said the man. "I beg of you, may I have your name?"

"Oh, you really needn't worry," I replied. "I only wanted to help because you looked to be in trouble."

And in any case, Humphrey had been the one who did the actual helping, not to mention the fact that we only saw the man back part

of the way. I told him we didn't need any such thanks, being that we hadn't really done anything, but this only served to further move the man's heart. He was nothing if not expressive.

"How astoundingly kind you are!" he exclaimed. "To think that I would meet such a beautiful trio in a world as forsaken as this one! But now I *must* know your name. Please, won't you share it with me, that I might carve it upon my heart?"

I tried to laugh it off, but Hil and Humphrey were just as surprised by the man's theatrical reaction. I gave in and told him my name.

"Ah! That explains it!" exclaimed the man.

Exactly *what* it explained, I did not know.

"Thank you ever so much, really," the man continued. "For people like yourselves, who do good for the sake of goodness itself, the fates are bound to smile upon you."

And with that, the man left, though I could only watch him go with my head tilted quizzically to the side. Something about the encounter hadn't quite felt right, though I couldn't put my finger on exactly what had been off about it.

"Is something wrong, my lady?" asked Hil.

"Just a stray thought," I replied. "And probably just my imagination."

I hadn't felt anything when we'd just been talking, but I felt as though I had heard that boisterous voice before somewhere. It was silly to think about, being that we were meeting for the first time, and yet Humphrey too seemed to feel the same incongruence.

"That man had awfully clean hands for a merchant," he said. "Could be from a rich family."

"You can tell?"

"It's not entirely uncommon for merchants to dress shabbily on purpose. Doing so can keep you from being targeted by bandits. He might have been telling the truth when he said that he has connections."

"Be that as it may, we have our hands full enough just dealing with things in Falkrum and here," I said.

I wondered for a moment if I should have instead accepted his

offer of thanks, but there was no point regretting what was already in the past. That, and we still hadn't had lunch. I was starving. We made for home as quickly as our feet would take us and found Wendel and Emil with their textbooks open, deep in study.

The two boys rose to greet us, with our new family member and pet dog Jill close behind. Charlot remained on the table, her ears pricking up at our arrival.

I was only gone for a month, but they've both gotten so big. But Charlot is still clearly on guard. Must be because I left so soon after she was named.

"Hello boys," I said. "How is school going?"

"We're on break for a while," said Wendel. "The teachers are on holiday, and classes will restart when they return."

The break was a chance for the teaching staff to rest and recuperate. There was nothing in the way of a summer vacation in the capital, and instead the schools here held small holiday breaks periodically.

"Have you made any friends outside of Tom?" I asked.

"Tom introduced us to a great group, and we've been hanging out together. We saw them all just the other day."

I was glad to simply hear that things seemed to be going smoothly. Wendel was bright and happy, and I saw no signs that he was putting on an act or under any duress. I knelt down to give Jill a pat, her tail wagging as she ran over. The woman at the table stood awkwardly to her feet. She'd been a rather quick hire, and she was part of a number of workers that we'd had to employ in haste before my departure for Falkrum.

"Martina," I said. "There's no need to stand on my account. Please, sit down."

"I couldn't possibly," she replied. "More importantly, I'm glad to see you back safe and sound."

"Thank you. But please, really, there's no need to be so formal. Whateley is preparing tea as we speak, so why don't you join us? Er, that said, the three of us *will* be eating..."

"Oh, don't mind me. Please enjoy your meals when they arrive."

Martina's bright red hair was done up nicely behind her head,

highlighting her glasses. She was twenty-five, and we'd hired her as Wendel and Emil's home tutor. Though she originally hailed from abroad, she had lived in the capital a long time, and was very knowledgeable in matters of study and etiquette. Whateley had invited her over when he'd learned that the boys were on break. We'd decided on Martina because she came from an ordinary family, and we wanted a gentler touch when it came to Wendel, who would want only to flee if faced with a teacher who was too stiff or formal.

"Emil, you may think I'm blind, but I won't have you indulge in any cheating under my watch," said Martina. "I'll take that answer sheet off your hands, thank you."

"Oop. Caught in the act, huh?"

"That's enough of that. To think you'd be so brazen in front of your own sister..."

This interaction told me that Martina was settling in comfortably and the boys were fine with her. She was pretty, though one got the sense that she'd been through much. She was also beyond shocked when we let her know that she'd gotten the job. So shocked, in fact, that she had to confirm it multiple times before she believed it. I couldn't understand it at first, but according to Whateley, the beautiful didn't often make for good home tutors because there was always the chance that they'd catch the attention of one of the home's residents. All I knew of Martina, however, was that she lived apart from her parents and raised her younger siblings alone.

Martina didn't have much to do when the boys had classes, but we hadn't hired her just for the purposes of revision. Martina could play music—quite a rare quality among commoners—and we were having her teach Emil.

Outside of Martina, we'd also hired a live-in cook by the name of Rio and a secretary to aid Whateley with his work. The plan was to find a similar assistant for me upon my return.

Geoff, Chelsea, and Ben came in from outside to say hello. Chelsea remembered my face now, and it filled me with joy to see her greet me with open arms. She'd come such a long way since we first met.

A simple array of food was placed upon the table, including bread

with diced cheese and ham, soup with a nice pepper kick, and roast meat that melted once it hit the tongue. Hil and Humphrey couldn't hide their delight at the sight of it.

"There really is nothing like a home-cooked meal," I remarked.

We were well past lunch by that point, so we were quite surprised by the feast laid out before us.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Rio, grinning as he laid out the table. "When I heard that you were due to return, it was time to put my skills to the test."

Though Whateley and I had bumped heads a little on the issue, in the end the cook we hired was a former traveler who'd been to a number of different lands. Some said that a man in his thirties was too young for a cook, but I persisted. After all, delicious food was hugely important when it came to making the most of one's days.

Since moving to the capital, I'd become aware of the fact that the flavors of the capital were a good match for my own personal preferences. This was not so with the boys nor with our staff, however, all of whom preferred the stronger tastes of Falkrum. This was where Rio came in; he had a good understanding of both regions' food. He still had to learn the ways of noble cuisine, but he was enthusiastic to get started, so I didn't expect any problems.

I watched Emil struggle with a math problem while we talked about the state of Falkrum.

"Is Gerda doing well?" Wendel asked.

"Her stomach is big enough now that it's causing her some problems, but she says she's enjoying herself," I replied. "She said to say hello. She was very worried about you too, Emil."

"Sounds like you've got a message for me," muttered Emil.

"One from father, yes," I admitted. "He said that if your grades aren't up to scratch, you might have to return to Falkrum. So don't neglect your studies, okay?"

I didn't expect father to do any such thing, but I didn't see any harm in driving the point home either. Emil, however, seemed to believe that if push came to shove, father might act on his word, and so he glumly took pen in hand once more. Jill rubbed her head against his leg. Charlot was wary of me but didn't leave Wendel's

side. The boys had taken care of the two animals since their arrival, so it was no surprise that they'd grown an attachment to them.

How dare you get all close and comfortable after I gave Charlot her beautiful name. Not that I'm jealous, because I'm not. I'm sure that with enough time they'll both grow just as close to me too.

"Lady Karen has a rather envious look in her eyes," said Whateley. "Perhaps it's about time you allowed her a chance to pat Jill and Charlot?"

"There's no need to say such a thing, Whateley," I remarked. "And besides, I'm *not* envious."

"Is that so? Very well. And while I hate to bring this up so suddenly, I believe it best that you report to either Reinald or Moritz before the day is through."

This was indeed quite sudden. And while I intended to visit Reinald soon, I had planned to visit early the following morning.

"Hil, Humphrey, you two stay here and rest," I said. "I'll have Geoff cover me from here."

"Please don't overexert yourself, my lady," said Hil.

"Wendel! Emil! No making life tough on Martina!" I added.

"Yes, ma'am," came the choral reply.

I barely had time to even taste my food before I headed to our renovated conference room. With me were Whateley and Geoff.

"I do apologize," Whateley said. "I know you must be exhausted."

"Don't worry about me; I'm fine now that I've had a chance to eat," I replied. "More importantly, is there some pressing matter I should know about?"

"Not quite *pressing*...but more...yet to be confirmed. Let me start by reporting on the not-so-pressing matters."

The not-so-pressing matters?

This turned out to be the matter of Conrad's future enterprises. It had been our intent to import wine as a commodity, but this was a long way from becoming a reality. We had thus turned to the idea of trading in easy-to-transport spices in the meantime, but this had suddenly been paused.

"With Falkrum becoming a part of the empire, travel between the capital and Falkrum will become much easier," explained Whateley.

“Many expect that roadwork will further improve travel, and so naturally the imperial capital’s merchants cottoned onto the same idea as us...”

In other words, others had beaten us to the punch. One of the capital’s larger trading companies had made inroads and was already securing an import infrastructure. Attempting to carve out our own piece of the market would prove very difficult, which forced us to make use of said larger company’s structure. Whateley had gone ahead with this, but doing so would cause our forecast returns to plummet.

It was not a pleasing thing to hear, unfortunately.

“They knew there was an opening,” Whateley continued, “and nobody in the business turns a blind eye to potential profits.”

“A larger player cornering the market makes it that much harder for us to make inroads on our own too. Still, allowing a minor player like ourselves such access is rather generous of them, no?”

“I expect it comes down to two factors; firstly, we are under Reinald’s protection. Secondly, we have influence and connections in Falkrum.”

“I didn’t expect things to be easy, but I feel like I should have seen this coming.”

“I apologize that it has come to this...”

“You made the right call, Whateley. Electing to join them was a far better decision than rejecting them outright.”

“We’d only be in more trouble trying to build relationships with another partner, and so I agreed to their terms. I thought I could use the time from now on to strengthen our other relationships.”

“It doesn’t seem like you had much other choice. When do they expect a reply?”

“We still have some time. I explained that it was not something I could decide on by my authority alone.”

“Then they can wait a few more days. It only benefits them to have Conrad among their ranks, but we’ll spend what time we have left considering other possible options.”

Embarking on new endeavors was not going to be a walk in the park. We also had to be wary of what moves the Kirstens and other

such families would make. Still, it was unlikely that the circumstances would abruptly shift over the course of a few days. The capital's major trading companies would want to ensure good relations with Reinald.

Whateley had bought us time, but now I knew how cutthroat business could be. Whateley went on to report a few matters that could not be spoken of downstairs, and I informed him of the situation in Falkrum.

"And your sister is in good health?" asked Whateley.

"For the present moment, yes. I know it sounded like we met over tea or the like, but in truth we barely spoke."

Gerda had made an effort to meet with me, but I'd refused. I didn't want to place any further stress on her shoulders. As for my brother and the matter of the Kirsten family proper, I'd spoken with my father.

"And what did your father have to say?" asked Whateley when I told him.

"Arno had kept his meetings with the princess a secret even from him. As the former lord, however, and now retired, he will follow the wishes of the current lord of the family."

"Having given up his position, he will not interfere any further... Under ordinary circumstances, one would consider such behavior that of an exemplary father..."

"But expecting him to talk Arno around is out of the question."

A tiny, *tiny* part of me had wished that father had told me *something* when he found out, but I knew there was little else that could have been done. Things were complicated for my father, and he had not been capable of stopping what happened. He still loved his children and wished only that our positions did not see our relationship sour.

I knew that my father was a tightly wound ball of anxieties, and for my part, I wanted him to be focused on his first grandchild anyway.

"I concluded talks with the Kirstens quite quickly and was able to visit the Conrad domain," I said. "I had everyone's grave sites moved and also arranged for what remained in the margrave's room to be

brought here."

"I see. I assume that the land is still expected to go to Latoria?"

"Unfortunately, yes..."

The story for the public remained unchanged: Latoria had invaded, and the empire had agreed to give them Conrad on the condition that they ceased any further military action. All of this was decided by way of a treaty, and so I'd made it a point of getting to Conrad while I still could.

My former domain had become an eerily quiet place, my home a ghost town visited only by wild animals and thieves who came by the cover of night. I was aware that the area might be repurposed, given its advantageous location, and so I'd had the family's graves moved.

The manor itself was a shambles, having been ransacked and run roughshod by thieves and bandits. It was disquieting and discomforting to be among empty, broken homes, and the only thing that kept us there were the memories. Hil went to visit the graves of his family and friends, and Humphrey did likewise; returning in tears. He was uncomfortable in the place, likely due to the bitter memories it stirred in him.

"I didn't say anything to Wendel about it, but I found the cat he was looking after before...the downfall."

"You must be joking. You found Blacky?"

"I'm certain it's him. The poor thing had lost a lot of weight, but he had somehow managed to get by. We set our minds on bringing him home."

"Ah, I see. Then should I assume that...?"

"Yes. It's the reason our return was later than originally scheduled."

The change in schedule was something of a concern, but I made the decision to see Blacky brought back with us. The cat was a bundle of nerves when we found him, and so catching him took a lot of work. Thanks to Humphrey's fine efforts and trap making, however, the cat was captured. I explained to Whateley that we couldn't bring Blacky back on horseback due to all the shaking, but he was due to arrive with the cart carrying our souvenirs and the

margrave's mementos. Whateley was delighted, and I knew then that the man was an animal lover. I pictured Charlot and Jill growing plump and chubby from all the excess feeding, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

"You won't inform Master Wendel?" asked Whateley. "I'm certain he'll be moved to tears."

"To be honest, I'm a little worried about whether or not he can bear being trapped in a cage on a cart for so long," I admitted. "I don't want to get Wendel's hopes up just to have to dash them..."

It would have been best to let Blacky rest for a few days, but our schedule simply didn't allow for it. After discussing things with Hil and Humphrey, we agreed to keep Blacky a secret, though the two guards were practically bursting to tell Wendel the news.

"Well, I am at least glad to hear that our homeland is beginning to settle," remarked Whateley. "Civil war, uprisings...such things are dreadful to even think about. I'm glad you're all back safe."

"We can discuss the finer details later," I said. "Now please, let's get to the pressing matter you mentioned earlier. What is it?"

"It concerns the origins of the Conrad family, and more specifically *yours*, Lady Karen."

"Oh, why would there be any issues with such things now?"

Whateley looked uncomfortable. Why would my birth have anything to do with anything?

My mother was unfaithful, yes, but exactly who my father is has yet to be...

"Rumors have been going around that you are the daughter of the Bahre family's adopted son, Bertrando Lorenzi."

Oh.

"I gather this is not entirely new to you, then," continued the steward.

I *had* thought about discussing the matter of my parentage with Whateley, but in the end I'd stayed silent about it.

"Wait," I said. "It's not like I was keeping any secrets. I don't even know for sure if it's true. How did it get out into the public? And where did the rumors even start?"

Stop. Hang on. Wait. I only talked to one *person about it before I*

left. Nobody else. And I didn't go poking my nose where I'd get myself in trouble. I was careful!

"The source of the rumors is unclear," said Whateley. "But we know for certain that it's getting to all the concerned parties. That, and Sir Abelein contacted us asking whether there is any truth to them."

"M-Moritz?!" I exclaimed.

"The Bahre family is incredibly distinguished, and they have deep historical ties to the military. In the past, members of their family have risen to the rank of general. That they adopted Bertrando Lorenzi indicates he is an individual of considerable status."

"Is that...so...?"

"Indeed. He's famous. You didn't know?"

I had no idea!

Whateley nodded gravely to himself. That was when it clicked for me.

So that's *why Moritz is so interested!*

"Moritz has said that he will make time in his schedule, and he asked that you visit him as soon as you are able."

"Oh. I guess that means... Very well..."

"He contacted us three times while you were away to inquire as to whether or not you had returned."

Which I suppose translates to "Get your ass over here on the double."

I sensed that Whateley would soon be saying something similar.

"Firstly, can I ask you to give me some more detail?" Whateley pleaded. "If I don't have a firmer grasp on the particulars, I'm not going to have any idea how to respond to such requests. I had assumed that all of this would be news to you, but if it *is* in fact true, then we may well have to revise how we choose to respond."

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything..." I muttered.

And so I opened up to Whateley and shared everything I knew about the story of my (potential) fathers. Whateley probably wanted to scold me about the whole thing, but he likely decided that heading to the royal palace was the more urgent task to address. He agreed to accompany me, but before we left I made a request.

"I'd like to go to the Badinter Detective Agency first," I said. "I promise it won't take long."

"Lady Karen, why would you want to visit Claude?" asked Whateley.

"I'll explain, I promise, but first I have to make sure of something regarding where the rumor might have started."

The Badinter Detective Agency was run by Claude Badinter, once a diplomat in the service of the Falkrum Kingdom and Whateley's former superior. He was an eccentric and fashionable old man who now worked primarily as a private investigator.

"You know as well as I do that we don't have enough aides," I said, "and so I asked Claude to investigate the Lorenzi brothers before I left for Falkrum. I was going to talk to you about everything just as soon as I received the results of Claude's investigation."

"My goodness," uttered the steward. "But when...?"

"In my free time. Oh, but don't blame Geoff for any of it. I made him promise not to say a word, and he didn't even know what I was asking of Claude either."

You've probably worked it out by now, but yes, Claude Badinter was the one person I had spoken to, and the only other person who understood my personal circumstances. Truth be told, he couldn't have chosen a better time to drop by our house and pass me his business card. When I met him, he seemed to have already heard rumors about Bertrando Lorenzi, but when it came to the Bahre family, he said only that he would look into them.

In terms of where the rumors of my parentage had started, Claude was the only possible suspect as far as I was aware.

"Yes, he's money hungry and he often shoots off his mouth, but he's never been so stupid as to reveal the private lives of those he works with," said Whateley. "Outside of those who might neglect to pay him what he is owed, he'd most certainly protect his clients' confidentiality."

"Then it's just a matter of working out who else might have potentially shared the information," I said. "If we can confirm that it wasn't Claude himself, it should give us a clearer idea of where *else* the rumors might have started."

"A fine point, my lady. But if in fact it *was* Claude who let the information slip, then we'll demand adequate compensation for the inconvenience that this has caused us. That's the best way to hit him where it will hurt."

Nothing like an old friend to keep track of all your weak points for a rainy day.

Our carriage trundled along hurriedly until it came to a stop in front of an impressive apartment building that faced the main road. There was a sign on the first floor, in front of an office built from several remodeled rooms.

"Badinter Detective Agency," it read.

The receptionist led us to Claude immediately. I had a perhaps stereotypical image in mind that each private eye worked closely with a single assistant, but in Claude's case he was at the head of a group under which were all his investigators and aides. Claude owned the entire apartment block, in fact, and his income was supplemented by rent paid from those residing on the second and third floors.

"Hello there, Claude!" I said.

"I've been waiting for you, Miss Karen," replied Claude. "I expected that you'd visit, and here you are."

He sat on a long leather sofa, dressed in his usual black with gold embroidery. He was nothing if not a most fashionable gentleman. He crossed his legs with a touch of theatrical flair, ease permeating his every gesture. It shocked me somewhat to see him completely unfazed by our arrival.

"I gather you know why I'm here, then?" I asked.

"But of course. But rest assured that I am anything but the type to let a client's confidential intel leak. However..."

However, what?

Claude paused to click his fingers, at which point his receptionist arrived.

"Cups for four, please," he said simply, then turned to me to continue. "Panic always scatters a person's ability to think. Before we let our emotions get the better of us, let us ease our souls with a cup of tea, and then start by looking within. This is so very

important, and all the more so when it comes to the young, burdened with responsibilities."

He looked like he was posing for a painting. The first person to respond was none other than Claude's old friend.

"Oh, knock it off," said Whateley. "Tell us why you didn't say a word to her about the Bahre family, and be quick about it, man!"

"Some people never change," said Claude with a frown and a sigh. "Ever the impatient one."

"We're due at the royal palace once we finish here, and we don't have the luxury of time. Certainly not enough to go along with this piece of theater you're insisting on!"

Claude's eyes went wide.

"Oh? You're heading to the palace, you say?" he asked, his head tilting to the side as he stood to his feet. "You should have said so. If that's the case, I'll explain on the way."

"Please do *not* tell me you intend to join us," stated Whateley.

"I said, 'on the way,' did I not?" replied Claude. "It's far too early for senility in the likes of you, my friend. Best clean your ears and get that brain of yours some proper stimulation."

I couldn't get a word in edgewise, but I wasn't sure what I would have said anyway. Still, Claude gave every impression that he was serious about joining us. He told his receptionist he was going out, took his hat and cane, and boarded our carriage as if it were his own. The receptionist didn't so much as flinch; I gathered that she was used to such occurrences, regardless of the request for tea.

He does know that we *hired that carriage, yes...? Hmm. No matter, I suppose.*

"Let me get straight to the point," said Claude as our carriage rolled onward toward the palace. "The source of the rumors is the Bahre family. It struck me as strange the moment they began floating around, and so I looked into it personally. There's no doubt. Bertrando Lorenzi isn't personally involved."

"Lorenzi... The man might be Lady Karen's father," said Whateley. "He's a ranking military official, yes?"

"Yes. Bertrando Lorenzi leads the tenth division from among the military forces. His division falls under the banner of the Bahre

family, but he got to the rank of captain on his own, even before the Bahre family adopted him. They played no hand in his rise."

"Claude," I said. "You speak as if the family and the man are completely separate from one another."

"That is because they are not as close as one might surmise. The Bahre family appears odd even at a glance, but the truth is the family is strange through and through."

Claude then removed a pipe from his jacket pocket, but sadly returned it when he saw the resolute shake of Whateley's head.

"Surely you can see how strange it is," continued Claude. "The Bahres are a most distinguished family. Even when such a family is looking to adopt a son, it's exceedingly rare for them to take in a man well into his forties. It just doesn't happen."

"And it isn't because...the family is in some kind of dire need for an heir?" I asked.

"Not in this case, no. The Bahres are nothing if not proactive when it comes to acquiring talented individuals. They also hold themselves to the highest of standards; if their own children show nothing in the way of ability, they're denied the family name. Adoption is a means for them to address this, and indeed, the present lord of the family and the one previous aren't even related by blood."

Claude said that this was how the Bahre family had seen successive generals within the family ranks. To help wrap my head around it, I summarized what I'd been told.

"So the family doesn't always adhere to its bloodlines; it gathers the most talented individuals so that one of them can carry the name forward."

"That goes for the present too," added Claude. "They've adopted two others along with Lorenzi. It would appear that he is the front-runner for head of the family, however."

"Wouldn't bringing in a number of adopted sons and daughters for the purpose of settling on a head of the family lead to fighting?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. All of them compete for the family crest, and it is through such competitions that the best among them is decided."

The system was built to reward whoever emerged victorious with the honor of the Bahre name. A literal survival of the fittest.

"I must apologize, but I was unable to ascertain exactly who within the household let the rumors leak," admitted Claude.

"You said that Bertrando isn't involved, but how can you be sure?" asked Whateley.

"You mean that either he or his younger brother Bernardo spread the rumors themselves? No, highly unlikely."

"But what makes you so certain?"

"Bertrando has shown no interest at all in claiming the family name. He has no motive for letting people know he has a connection to the Conrad family and, by extension, the crown prince. As for Bernardo, he's only a member of Bertrando's platoon thanks to his older brother's generosity. He will not go against his brother's wishes."

So, Bertrando Lorenzi was one of three adopted by the Bahre family, but he had no interest in inheriting the family name. Claude saw him as very much a free spirit.

"The two remaining adopted children have set about making connections to the powerful and influential by way of the Bahre family name. Only Bertrando has done nothing. He rolls into town to drink at the bar, or otherwise he fights on the front lines...even though he's in a position of leadership. He differs noticeably from the other adopted sons."

"And he used to be a mercenary, yes?"

Were his troops frustrated to have a captain leading them with no desire for promotion? It was a thought that bothered me, but Claude said it was unlikely. And though I wanted to ask his reasoning on the matter, we arrived at our destination before I could.

"Claude," I said as I hurriedly made sure my hair was in place. "It pains me to say this as someone so much younger than your wise self, but if you are accompanying us any further, I must insist that you take care with how you conduct yourself."

"You have nothing to worry about," he replied. "I am a master of all things etiquette, and I am fully equipped to converse with anyone of considerable rank."

He sounded awfully sure of himself, and his smile was just as confident.

"Very well, then..." I uttered.

I wonder...

"We're almost there," said Geoff as I neatened my lapel.

Our carriage continued deeper into the capital's center until it arrived at a building I hadn't seen before. I stepped from the carriage with a look of awe at all the military personnel on guard at the doors.

"The magistrate's office," said Whateley. "Do keep your wits about you, Lady Karen."

I managed to at least *look* as if I had my wits about me (thanks in large part to Whateley's support), but the inner reality was something else entirely. Inside the office, soldiers and civil servants alike walked the hallways. Geoff and Whateley were directed to another room, but for whatever reason Claude remained by my side.

"I have been told that only Lady Conrad is allowed through," said the person leading us. "May I ask who you are?"

"Lady Conrad has requested that I act as her consultant in this matter," replied Claude, straight up threading lies. "I am here only to serve."

I really wanted him just to back down, and I hadn't imagined he'd be nearly this insistent. And the twitching of Whateley's eye didn't escape my notice either. But then again, *I* was the one responsible for getting him involved, and so I had to take responsibility for it.

"Claude, I apologize, but we're at the magistrate's office," I said. "I couldn't possibly ask any more of you, especially when you're not personally involved in any of it."

"How very kind of you to be so considerate of one my age!"

"Huh...?"

"You need not worry, Lady Conrad. My body might have aged, but my heart beats with the passion of one half my age. You can count on me, I promise. Now then, let's hop to it!"

Oh...okay...

His vigorous zest couldn't be stopped. So, he remained by my side and was allowed to pass. I sent a silent apology to Whateley; I

had clearly underestimated his old friend in this particular regard.

"If you happen to have any concerns or worries in your work, do come by my office," Whateley said to the civil servant guiding us. "I promise you; if it's assistance you need, I'm your man."

He casually whipped out a business card while he spoke and passed it over.

This guy's using my visit as a promotional tour!

We were led to a large set of double doors. This did not appear to be Reinald's office. Our guide knocked on the doors.

"Come in," came a voice from inside.

We entered to find Moritz sitting at a stately antique desk, in a finely upholstered chair. He took me in with a quick, piercing glance.

"I apologize for the trouble," he said, "and thank you for responding so soon, Lady Conrad."

"It has been quite some time, but I am glad to see you looking so well, Sir Abelein," I replied.

"Who is that gentleman by your side? I don't believe we've met."

Internally, I was beside myself; I had no idea what Claude had planned, though he remained completely silent.

"This is Sir Claude Badinter," I said. "I approached him personally regarding this matter. I know little of the Bahre family and thought he might provide some insight..."

Before I could say another word, Claude bowed gracefully. When he spoke, it was with a charm and elegance completely missing from our earlier talk in the carriage on the way here.

"I am Claude Badinter, and it is my honor today to serve as Lady Conrad's advisor."

"Badinter...yes, I've heard of you," said Moritz. "Quite highly regarded, it would seem."

"I merely do my work to the best of my abilities," replied Claude.

"I see. I'll bear the name in mind. Unfortunately, I'd like to speak with Lady Conrad in private, if I may. Your counsel will be unnecessary. You don't mind, I'm sure."

"Not in the slightest, good sir."

Claude had succeeded in the task of putting his name in the mind of a potential new client, and so with a polite bow he promptly left.

While it might have looked like he'd been brushed off in mere moments, the truth of the matter was that he'd managed to achieve what he set out to do with considerable ease.

And on top of that, his introduction came by way of a closely connected party. Namely, me!

I would be wise to learn from Claude's audacity.

"I have heard that Badinter is quite the slippery customer," said Moritz. "A rogue of sorts. How did you come to make his acquaintance?"

"We hail from the same homeland," I replied. "But more to the point, he and our family steward are old acquaintances."

"Ah, yes. Your steward, the former diplomat. One might say you were blessed with good company."

"Thank you very much," I replied, and rather awkwardly, I might add.

I took a seat on one of the long sofas, with Moritz sitting opposite me. Never one for small talk, Moritz uttered not a word until our tea arrived. It was only after he added two spoonfuls of sugar and a generous amount of milk did he open his mouth to speak.

Does Moritz have a sweet tooth?

"Given that you've been consulting an advisor on the matter, am I to presume that the rumors are in fact true?" asked Moritz.

"It's rather complicated," I admitted. "We still haven't confirmed anything."

"I would like to hear more about this."

"Before that, *I* would like a question answered. Why is it so important to you to ascertain whether or not my father is this Lorenzi man? I would like you to tell me why it is necessary that you address the matter *personally*."

I was here because I had been summoned, but as far as I could tell, the issue of my parentage was a family matter. Nothing more. There was no need for Moritz to involve himself in it, and it was unthinkable to believe he was doing it out of the goodness of his heart. If I'd been called all the way to the magistrate's office, that meant Reinald was likely involved too.

Moritz massaged his temples with his fingers and sighed.

"Lady Conrad... Ah, I see. You *did* mention that you know little of the Bahre family, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't say I'm entirely clueless, but I quite literally returned from Falkrum earlier today. Even before my departure I had my hands full simply adjusting to life in the capital; I haven't had the luxury of taking in the finer details."

Moritz' frown continued to crease his brow, and perhaps the man needed more sugar in his system, because he added another spoonful to his cup of tea. After a quick stir, he finished the rest of the cup in a single gulp.

"I'm sure you are already aware that within the capital, there exist two potential future rulers: Prince Wilhelmina is one, Lord Reinald is the other."

"Such a fact cannot be ignored by any who live here," I replied.

The scenario of two heirs facing off was easy to imagine. I had also heard that Wilhelmina was not yet ready to simply relinquish her chance at the throne.

"Then I will be concise," said Moritz. "The Bahres still occupy a neutral position, and they have yet to make clear which faction they will put their support behind. They are a most distinguished family, such that their decisions and actions will sway many others."

It was too late now to ponder over why Claude hadn't told me more about the Bahre family. Moritz, however, laid it all out.

"The Bahres hold considerable power in their influence, and they are unique in terms of their ideology and origins. A great many families have tried to make inroads with them. And while the Bahres remain steadfast, their current head of family has contacted us directly of late, asking for information about *you*, Lady Conrad."

"And such a request cannot be ignored, I imagine. And while I do not wish to doubt them, are you certain it was not Lorenzi himself, and indeed the head of the family?"

"There's no doubt. Now, have I adequately impressed upon you the importance of this issue?"

Okay. So the Bahre family possesses way *more influence than I thought.*

"You're thinking this might be a chance to make inroads with the

family and put them to work for Sir Reinald, then?"

"A wiser woman would choose her words more carefully," replied Moritz, scolding me.

"Oh, right. My apologies."

Both my father and Arno had issued similar warnings in the past. With his cup of tea now finished, Moritz's brow settled into a conflicted frown.

"I understand the circumstances now, thank you," I said. "And I apologize for not having a firmer grasp on the inner workings of the capital. Still, I must ask: Is Reinald in a more disadvantageous position than people seem to think?"

"He is a little on the back foot, one might say."

"Judging by our discussion so far, am I right to say he's on the back foot and perhaps down on a knee, even?"

"Lady Conrad," said Moritz, nonplussed.

"*I'm* not the one insisting on secrecy," I shot back. "Stop it already, please. However bad Sir Reinald's position might be, the Conrads will *not* betray him."

"Things are not *that* bad. However, it *is* true that many have opted not to pick a side at all; they're waiting to see how things play out."

His reluctance to admit as much said a lot about the true state of things. Moritz went on.

"I do not believe Lord Reinald will lose to such cowards. He is not playing the fool without reason."

"Playing the fool, you say?"

"Though he's been seeing to his responsibilities dutifully since attaining the rank of crown prince, the rumors tell a different story; one of a prince consumed with decadence and the negligence of work. You haven't heard?"

"I haven't. I've heard almost none of the rumors drifting about town. I haven't been here of late either."

That explains his sigh earlier. But I can see how people might think that way. Reinald has a job to do, and he shouldn't have time to go traipsing through haunted houses and prancing through the city whenever he feels like it.

So why is he?

"But knowing Sir Reinald," I continued, "he's almost *certainly* got another scheme up his sleeve."

"You sound like a woman with an opinion on the matter."

"Nothing of the sort," I said. "Just my impression, nothing more. I wouldn't dare speak poorly of him."

Thanks to his explanation of current affairs, this was the most time that Moritz and I had ever spent together. Perhaps it was something he was willing to do when he realized just how little I knew. It was hard to imagine him being so kind under any ordinary circumstances, and it impressed upon me just how important the Bahre family really was.

It had long been assumed that Wilhelmina would be the empress after her father stepped down or passed away. Reinald's arrival threw a spanner in the works, resulting in much unexpected confusion. Those who didn't think highly of the princess aligned themselves with the new challenger, but Reinald was still in the midst of organizing and structuring his political authority. However, this alone was clearly not enough to triumph over Wilhelmina, and so Moritz wanted to draw the Bahre family to Reinald's side.

"I understand what it is you wish to do," I said, "but from what I've heard, Bertrando Lorenzi, who may or may not be my father, has little interest in inheriting the Bahre name. Are you okay with that?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters to us is drawing the Bahre family's interest and securing a foothold with them. Even if the family itself were to choose not to side with us, Lorenzi's military authority is still of great importance... And what exactly do you mean by 'may or may not be my father'?"

"I'm happy to talk about it with you, but I don't want any further rumors spreading. For that reason, I ask that you speak to nobody of what I'm about to tell you. It's for the sake of my father in the Kirsten family. I don't want to see him hurt again."

I explained to Moritz that my real father was one of the Lorenzi brothers and that I had only learned this recently. It surprised Moritz to learn that there were two prospective suspects when it came to

my father, but he said nothing else on the matter.

"By the way, why did this conversation come by way of Sir Reinald?" I asked. "Is it because he is the acting Conrad guardian?"

"Are you quite all right, Lady Conrad? You should know that I couldn't possibly leave him out of such a matter."

"Oh, I suppose I must be tired upon my sudden return," I said. "I'm sure I'll be able to think more clearly come tomorrow."

"I apologize for calling upon you so suddenly. It was imperative that you understand the weight of the situation."

"I understand. That's why I came here on the double."

He's so much easier to talk to today. Everything's proceeding so smoothly.

"Does Lorenzi really have such sway over the military?" I asked.

"Speak to your steward and adviser on that matter. As for the Bahres' request, you don't mind if I reply, do you?"

"Not at all. Please do. I'm just as curious to learn more."

"Then I shall follow up with you in a few days' time."

Moritz made it clear that we were done, but that was when a different matter came to mind.

"If you don't mind me asking, how do things look on Princess Wilhelmina's side?" I asked.

"How do things look? Could you tell me exactly what it is you want to know?"

"Well, for one thing, did you know that she was on favorable terms with my brother?"

"You mean his appointment as her second secretarial aide? I haven't heard any of what he's been up to since his arrival, but I would assume the silence indicates he is doing well."

"Doing well, you say?"

"A bond of blood does not always mean that family members share the same views. With a difference of ideals comes a difference of standing. All the more so when a house is already split. I would not overly worry about the matter."

That was Moritz's take on things. While he had let his opinions be known when it came to how we Conrads had acted in Falkrum, he showed no anger at my brother having sided with the imperial

princess. There were rumors that Moritz's own family—the Bachems in charge of the imperial treasury—was also split into factions, discord having torn them apart.

"Oh. I don't suppose... Are you trying to comfort me?" I asked.

"Why would I? What reason do I have to do such a thing?"

"Quite right. Thank you."

I elected to leave before any more could be said.

"One moment, please," said Moritz. "You are friends with Ern Quach, yes?"

"Yes, that's correct..."

"She hasn't been an easy one to pin down of late. Tell her I'd like her to report to me, should you see her in the near future."

"As you wish. You can also expect my report on the state of Falkrum, which will need your confirmation."

Hmm? I wonder why it's so hard for someone of Moritz's rank to meet with Ern?

The question tugged at me, but I didn't follow up. Moritz had another matter ready for me anyway.

"His Highness's magisterial office is nearby. He should be returning soon; see him before you leave."

"Understood. In which case, I'll take my leave and see to it."

How easy things would be if all of our conversations were as casual as this one, Moritz.

Still, as I made my way back to Whateley, I couldn't help wondering why I was getting looks of sympathy from all the civil servants I passed. Fortunately, Whateley and Claude had an answer for me: Everyone felt awful to see a young woman subjected to Moritz's pressure. They felt it was too heavy a burden.

"But everything went swimmingly," I stated. "No troubles to speak of, so nothing to worry about."

"I see," replied the steward. "While it is a good thing that Moritz doesn't discriminate, he does exude the same pressure on both young and old alike. I'm glad to hear it didn't bother you."

Well, see the guy enough times and you start to get used to his ways.

And besides, given how loyal he was to Reinald, I didn't think he

was a bad person at heart.

"I'm to report to Sir Reinald before leaving," I said. "I apologize after having the two of you accompany me, but would you mind heading home without me?"

"Understood, my lady," said Whateley. "I've already spoken with Moritz's aides, so that won't be a problem."

"Oh, and Claude," I said. "If you've time, would you like to join us for dinner?"

"A most generous offer," replied the old gentleman. "It would be my pleasure."

He made no attempt to force his way into Reinald's office as he had Moritz's earlier. I was fully prepared for such behavior, and so I was admittedly surprised when he did nothing. Claude must have read my mind, for his features formed a grin that hinted at the good looks he would have boasted in his youth.

"Moderation in all things is essential, my lady," he said.

He was very much his own man, but he would be a trustworthy ally while he remained on our side. Whateley glared at him, and I got the strong sense that the ride home for them would be one filled with arguments.

Geoff and I were granted the use of another carriage, and so we bid Whateley and Claude farewell and headed for the building in which Reinald's office was located. There were many coming and going, and by the time I stepped out from our carriage I felt a tension in the air. This was the magisterial office of the crown prince, after all.

As we walked the corridor to Reinald's office, I noticed an entourage coming from the opposite direction. At the head of it was a truly eye-catching woman. She was stunning. Hers was a charm almost beyond comparison, her lush black hair and slender frame highlighted by her dress. The use of sheer lace drew attention to her chest and legs, emphasizing their allure. Combined with her strong, determined gaze and her deep scarlet lipstick, one couldn't help but think of a runway model. It was rare for a woman to inspire awe before jealousy, but this one did, and it was clear that she was far more than just her showy outfit. As our eyes met for a brief instant,

her lips curled into the hint of a grin.

Who is she?

Whoever she was, I wasn't going to just bump into her on the street somewhere. She was well beyond that level. The aide guiding us stepped to the side, and Geoff and I followed suit. Those who worked in this building were no fools; in each of their actions was meaning. The woman seemed slightly surprised, but the subtle smile on her lips softened as she passed. The scent of her perfume lingered in the air even after she'd gone.

I couldn't even feel a hint of jealousy. Such feelings felt beyond me. I was used to seeing beautiful people, but this was the first time I had encountered a woman of such lavish luxury and opulence. The women of the imperial capital were as gorgeous as they were discerning.

"Good afternoon," I said when I was taken to Reinald's office. "Or I suppose now it might be closer to evening. It has been a long time, Sir Reinald."

"That it has. You have returned from Falkrum, I see. I know it was rather sudden, and I am glad simply to see you in good health."

"Thanks in good part to you, Sir Reinald. I am glad to see you are the same as ever."

The window was open, but the scent of that woman's perfume tickled at my nose, all the same.

5: A Most Mysterious Friendliness

"I noticed you had guests," I said. "I do hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Oh, you mean Lily?" replied Reinald. "She is an influential figure, yes, but one of many. Nothing to worry about."

"Lady Lily. That's her name, is it? I happened to pass by her in the corridor earlier. She's very pretty."

"Extravagant in a number of ways, indeed. The two of us will likely be working together more often well into the future, and I'm sure you'll be introduced in good time."

"Are the two of you close, then?"

I couldn't help but ask. Lily did not appear to be one of Reinald's subordinates, and yet he referred to her by her first name. No title. That he did so with a woman tickled my suspicions.

"We've known each other a long while, and we're on friendly terms. Lily understands this too; she came even though she hadn't scheduled a meeting."

"Oh, I see. A busy day, then."

Perhaps I shouldn't be saying it, but first she had those looks, and then she had that name to go with it. It was like the very definition of charming. All the same, I put aside any questions that would probe too deeply; I had duties of my own to see out. I gave my report on Falkrum and received thanks in reply. It seemed as good a time as any for me to offer my apologies again.

"I'd like to express once more how sorry I am," I said. "You put your faith in us and have supported us all this time. I regret that we did not see out the duties you entrusted us with."

"It is a pity we could not match them in intelligence, but you have already apologized for the matter. It was enough that you were able to keep things from getting out of hand. I expect you will do a much better job now that you know of the relationship between your

brother and Wilhelmina."

"We will do our utmost to meet and surpass your expectations."

Reinald was firm but generous. When it came to our duties he had to be strict, but I was grateful he was willing to overlook some things.

Reinald had noticed that Arno was going to side with Wilhelmina. Somehow, he had known, but I wasn't so stupid I was going to confront him about it. That said, I didn't think he was toying with me in keeping that information to himself, and I felt certain he would have given me warning if the situation was truly dire. That he didn't do so could have meant one of two things; either he did not deem the problem a critical issue, or he wanted to get a sense for Conrad's capabilities.

I was, of course, grateful. I didn't bear any grudge against the man. I had a little more life experience than most, what with my rebirth and all, but I knew full well that I was, first and foremost, an ordinary citizen under his employ. It might be a strange way to think of it, but you could understand the nobility not unlike running a large enterprise. And in this area, I knew woefully little. There was much I could still learn from Reinald's patience and abilities. Both he and Moritz had shown as much in their support.

"You need not apologize any further," said Reinald. "Your family may be assigned a different duty pending circumstances, so do make sure everything is in order should such a decision come to pass."

"I have nothing but gratitude for your generosity."

"I'm sure there are finer details to discuss, but we don't have to get to those today. It's been a long trip for you, and I thank you for delivering your report so quickly."

"It was nothing."

"As for the Bahre family..."

Yeah, I saw this coming.

I was about to launch into an explanation, but Reinald raised a hand to stop me.

"Moritz will get me up to speed," he said calmly.

"I am prepared to report on the matter, if you would like," I said.

"You must be exhausted. And while I *would* like the support of the Bahres, it is not yet a pressing concern. That just leaves a personal matter of interest to me..."

He was quick to shift his focus. I had always felt that Reinald's emotions were easy to read, but he never let his anger simmer. His jumping from topic to topic was also a mystery to me.

Maybe he simply wasn't angry in the first place?

I had never seen his anger firsthand, and so part of me wondered if he ever got angry at all. In this, I was as clueless about Reinald as I was about his friend Lily.

Which, I have to admit, is quite vexing.

It was a part of him that I could not gain access to, no matter how I tried.

"Karen, were you listening to me?" Reinald asked.

"Oh, I was lost in thought for a moment. The former Rodenwald domain, was it? Yes, let me explain."

"No. That will be all for today."

"I thank you for your consideration, but I'm quite all right."

"You were called here the moment you returned. Push yourself too much further and you'll only fall ill. Let's arrange for another time to meet; you can tell me all about it then."

I tried to reassure Reinald that I was fine, but he wouldn't hear it. He sent me out of his office with an order to rest. It was very depressing. I had very much wanted to talk some more, but my inability to stay focused had clearly hit a nerve.

As I walked the halls for my carriage home, a voice called out to me.

"Lady Conrad, do you have a moment?"

"Nika! It's been so long!"

She came running over with a message from Reinald.

"He'd like to invite you for a meal in the near future," she said. "He forgot to make it clear before you left and sent me in his stead."

"Please tell him that I'd love to, and I can easily make time in my schedule."

"Many thanks. I'll pass along your reply."

"Thank you, Nika. I suppose even Reinald forgets things every

once in a while."

"I daresay it's because he's had so many unexpected guests, including the duke. I'm just glad I reached you in time."

"The duke?"

"The lady he met before you. I imagine you would have seen her as she was leaving."

"Wha...? Oh... Oh?!" I exclaimed.

That woman was the duke?! Not the duchess, but the duke*?!*

Nika looked confused by my response. I, for my part, couldn't bring myself to confirm things with so many people around, and so I slapped on a smile and simply plowed on through.

"Oh, er, I see," I stammered. "Yes, quite right, that was the duke. I apologize, I think I must be tired from all the traveling. I didn't even have the chance to exchange a word with her. Excuse me, Nika."

Later, when I returned home and explained it to everyone, Claude told me the following:

"You made the right choice, not confirming what you heard. The duke is very well-known, even at the royal palace, and you'd have only brought embarrassment on yourself by admitting aloud that you had no idea who she was."

"So she really *is* famous, then," I muttered.

"More infamous if the rumors are anything to go by, but yes."

Claude had been enjoying himself immensely while I was out, and he had spent a good amount of time chatting with Wendel and Emil, who had finished their studies for the day. Chelsea was playing nearby, and she seemed unbothered by the boisterous conversation. Claude sat on one of the room's long sofas and bent over to scratch Charlot's temple with a finger.

Wait a damned second. Why is Charlot getting all friendly with Claude? She still won't come anywhere near me...

Claude went on to share with me some lesser-known intel as we waited for dinner to be served.

"Duke Lily Ingrid Tuna is the lord of the southeastern region," he said. "As the emperor's niece, she has a considerable amount of land. She's not much of a public figure, but I suppose the present

circumstances demand action of her."

"You mean because the rivalry between the prince and the princess has also gone public?" I asked.

"Indeed. The duke's name is widely known, for a number of reasons, and she likely felt it necessary to meet with the new potential heir to the throne."

Lily's official stance was a neutral one, but the fact that she had visited Reinald's office caused one of Claude's eyebrows to rise.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps the rumors really *are* true."

"Claude," I said. "Be as surprised as you want, but if you don't say anything I can't follow what's going on. You proclaimed yourself our family advisor, so perhaps you could do some of that advising."

"Hmm. Well, I suppose if it's for you, young Karen, this old man could teach you a thing or two, yes."

He was a troublesome one to have among your allies, but nonetheless useful. His line of work made him very much a man of the world, and this was reason enough to have him on our side. Whateley and the aides would disagree, but having Claude around was a boon.

For one thing, he told me more about the duke, revealing that she was not just the emperor's niece but a figure even more influential than I ever could have imagined. Duke Tuna was formerly of the military and extremely wealthy. She had tried her hand at a number of businesses to great success, but scandal followed her wherever she went. The rumors were like a constant flood, and none of it was flattering; first, there were the sexual relationships with minors and same-sex partners, then the drug parties, and then the fact that her husbands continued to die on her.

"She's for the production of drugs, in fact," said Claude. "The emperor indulges her bohemian ways, but the next emperor might not be so lenient. She is a duke of great influence, and whoever she sides with will share in her authority."

"Wow..." I uttered. "She's really something, isn't she?"

"But I am right to assume that you showed her no disrespect, yes? Many who don't know of the duke see her lavish appearance and assume she is like a glimmering star in the night sky;

unattainable. Others, however—and more than a few, I might add—have seen themselves expelled from noble society entirely for their mistakes."

"I did nothing rude, no," I said. "I daresay she would have barely even registered my existence."

"Steering clear is likely the best option. Having come from another country, you're all the more likely to make mistakes, and the duke has many supporters. So do be careful; the duke's fans have made people outcasts for their discretions."

Whoa! Talk about not even realizing the danger I was in! Imagine if I'd stood my ground, put my hands on my hips and puffed my chest out, then demanded that she get out of my *way...*

Not that I would have done any such thing, but still!

"Claude, Lady Karen would never be so rude," said Whateley. "And what of more recent rumors?"

"Nothing especially juicy, but I *did* hear that the crown prince attended one of the empress's lunches with the duke as his second."

By this point in the conversation, dinner was being served. To celebrate my return and welcome our guest, our finest wine was put out, and opening bottles of Falkrum's best proved to be the right call; Claude broke into a wide smile at the scent of it and wallowed in the nostalgia as he continued talking.

"The imperial princess has always been very much the squeaky-clean type, and from what I'd heard, it was likely that she and the duke wouldn't see eye to eye. However, it seemed unlikely the duke would quickly side with the crown prince, being that his arrival on the scene was so sudden. She knows just as well as anyone how fickle the emperor can be and just how quickly he can change his mind and reverse his decrees. This is why everyone assumed she would sit back and watch things play out for a time...and why it seems so suspicious that she would be seen on the arm of the prince in such a public place. Then she was at his office today. It's very possible we may see some shaking of the social order at the ball next month."

"Claude," said Whateley, chastising his former colleague.

"Oh, my apologies. There are children at the table."

"Don't mind me, I'd love to hear what Claude has to say," said Wendel. "I'm glad to hear more about the workings of society here."

"And I would also like to..." added Emil, considering his words for a moment. "Yes, I *want* to hear more about it too."

Whateley didn't like the way Claude's talk brought with it uncertainty and unrest, but this only served to further intrigue Wendel and Emil. Claude let the hint of a grin rise to his features and lifted his glass to the two boys. Emil, meanwhile, was at a point in his life where he was embarrassed about sounding too young in his speech, and so looked to either sound respectful or confident depending on the conversation. I felt that confidence fit him better, given the way he was growing into that big body of his.

"There's a ball next week?" I asked.

"The whole nation is bustling during the emperor's birthday," replied Claude. "And well beyond anything you see in Falkrum. It's far and away much larger in scale."

The day was one of much singing and drinking, it seemed. The royal palace, too, held a lunch during the day and a ball that same evening. The evening festivities continued well into the night. And while many influential figures were invited to the lunch, only the most distinguished were allowed to the ball.

"While it is just a day of fun and fervor for the general public, for a select few it is a day that promises great excitement the likes of which dreams are made of. It is a day upon which many make allies and form important partnerships."

"Tilting the balance of political power, I imagine," I said.

"I've only attended once, and for simply indulging in the celebrations, the lunch is more than sufficient. While many of great standing attend the ball, it can also be very overwhelming. It is not an event that one attends half-heartedly."

Claude explained that the Conrad family would be welcome at the lunch but was not likely of high enough standing to attend the ball.

"But enough of such frightful parties. Let's talk of something a little more fun, shall we?" said Claude. "Have you made many friends in the neighborhood, boys? The day is also one of celebration for the youth who carry the future on their shoulders, and people are

encouraged to give such young ones treats. Gather some friends and knock on a few doors; I'll bet you get slices of pie and other snacks in return. Perhaps so much you'll grow entirely sick of eating them all."

"Did you hear that, Emil?!" cried Wendel. "We have to ask Tom and the others what they're up to!"

"You're not actually going to do it, are you?"

"Are you kidding? Who wouldn't? You love desserts just as much as I do!"

"If you've the time, stop by my office," said Claude. "We give out our finest scones, and this year we're even going to use some of that fancy chocolate that's so popular these days. I can assure you, young ones, that the scones are a true delight with a little cheese and chocolate cream to go with them."

"I am *so* there!" said Wendel.

Claude was an excellent conversationalist, but he made time to enjoy his meal too. I, however, felt a certain impatience about the whole thing. I desperately wanted to learn more about the Bahre family and Bertrando Lorenzi, but the boys couldn't get enough of Claude's stories. Fortunately, we were able to speak about it a few days later, but by then an entirely different problem had arisen, throwing our home into chaos.

"Why does this sort of thing always happen to you?" asked Ern.

She looked exasperated.

"I don't know!" I exclaimed. "I don't understand any of it!"

I was looking down at an invitation to the ball that would be held on the evening of the emperor's birthday. It did not come from Reinald, however.

The person who invited me to the ball was none other than the emperor of Arrendle, one Karl Noah Balderas.

There was good and there was bad in the days before the arrival of the emperor's invitation, and all of it had stirred an odd feeling in me.

Call it ominous.

Let's start with the good. Ern came to stay with us. She arrived

with so much luggage it took my breath away, but we had the rooms to spare and she promised to pay rent, so everything was fine. She was planning to commute to the House of Magic, so in essence she was using our home as a lodging.

I spoke to the servants about it, and they responded with a thumbs-up as soon as they learned it was Ern. The lamps she'd given us as a housewarming gift had made the basement a much brighter place, for which they were eternally grateful.

"I'm over the moon to be able to see you more often," I said to Ern, "but why aren't you with your parents? They don't live that far from the House of Magic, and won't they be worried about you?"

"You sound just like another one of the neighborhood's housewives when you talk like that," she replied.

"But I'm worried about you too..."

"Sorry, sorry, my bad. But look, my parents won't worry if the person I'm staying with is you, Karen."

"Well, that's a relief, but still...how about taking a room on the third floor?"

"But ordinarily that's where the lord of the house is. Put me where you'd put your other guests."

"But if we're on the same floor it'll be easier for us to stay in one another's rooms... You know, just like we used to."

"What are you, a child? It's the same house. Just come and see me whenever you feel like it."

I was still a bit worried because I knew that Ern adored her parents. I asked if maybe there'd been an argument or the like, but Ern shook her head.

"I'm going to talk to you about this because you're letting me stay with you, but I can't go home because of a huge project that's come up. And you're not to speak a word of this to anybody, okay? Not a peep. Ever since I entered the House of Magic here, I've told people that I don't get along with my parents, so I don't want you speaking about our relationship to people."

"But why would you go through the trouble of spreading a lie like that?" I asked.

"I don't want people knowing that they can use my parents

against me. I can't afford to show any signs of weakness."

"Is that what you're up against? People you have to be *that* cautious around?"

"The House of Magic is a mess of different factions. They're all out to steal a piece of the limelight for themselves, and for a whole bunch of them that means trying to make me screw up."

"By that logic, you're putting *me* in danger."

"You'll be fine. My rivals aren't idiots, and they know the difference between messing with commoners and messing with the nobility. They might try to stir up some trouble, but I've got you covered."

She sounded very sure of herself. In any case, it wasn't reason enough to turn her away. I was more interested in the "huge project" she'd mentioned, anyway. I knew it was confidential, but I asked about it anyway.

"Look, soon enough I'm going to have to tell you about it, but I can't just yet," said Ern, looking a bit awkward about it. "I think it's better you don't know anything at this moment."

"Fine, then I'll wait. But talk to me when you can, okay?"

"Okay, and sorry..."

From the moment I'd returned to the Kirsten family, something of a distance had opened between Ern and me. It made me all the happier now to have her nearby and to have her put her trust in me.

And I mean, let's be honest: I had so few friends! With Elena and Haring moving in next door, I'd gained a few more, but in terms of the average, my numbers were dismal.

"I'm curious about something, though," I said. "You said that the house is broken up into factions. Is it split between those siding with the prince and those siding with the princess?"

"There's that too, but it's more internal than anything else. A bunch of worthless mages looking to one-up one another and brag about how many assistants and pupils they have."

"That sounds...complicated."

"Once you're in, you can't escape it. I've managed to make things work just by being capable, but as soon as the others don't like you, they come to knock you down a peg. A whole lot of mages have

been made outcasts that way."

Ern told me she had stopped serving under Reinald too. Apparently there'd been some squabbling when she first entered the House of Magic, but now she was in a position where she didn't have to take orders. She and Reinald still had a friendly relationship, however, and they still made deals from time to time.

"And I am way higher up than you probably think," Ern declared.

I had to assume from her puffed-out chest that she meant it too. It was because of this that she told me I was not to touch the safe in her room under any circumstances.

Anyway, let's move on to the bad news, shall we?

It all started with a funny feeling I had when Ern and I were just hanging out. She didn't have a set start time at the House, and I didn't have any work to speak of. We were pretty much like sloths with books, one of us lying on the bed and the other the sofa, munching on the occasional snack while we read. It was heaven, in other words. It was rather nostalgic for me, because it was what we used to do as students when Ern would stay over. When I stayed with her, Ern's father would cook up delicious meals for us. I had many fond memories of the times.

It was here, while I felt a tad guilty for my laziness, that there came a knock at the door.

"Lady Karen," said Whateley in a panic. "I've bad news."

I went downstairs followed by Ern, who promised not to say a word of what she heard. Whateley took in my slovenly appearance and declared the following:

"Hugo & Co. have gone out of business."

"What?" I replied.

I couldn't believe it. Ern, for her part, tilted her head quizzically.

"Isn't Hugo & Co. one of the imperial capital's leading trading companies?" she asked. "They're as safe and secure as it gets. A company like that doesn't just go out of business."

"You are correct," said Whateley. "And ordinarily they would be far too large to just go under, so to speak. It's why we put our trust in them."

"Oh dear..." I uttered. "That's going to throw the market into

uncertainty. A lot of people and companies are going to be in dire trouble."

"It's only been half a day, but already the markets are showing the effects. But it's not just the markets, Lady Karen. Without Hugo & Co., we're going to lose our trade investments."

"I know. I've been trying to stay on top of things."

Hugo & Co. were the trading company that had beaten us to the punch when it came to establishing spice trade between the empire and Falkrum. We'd literally just come to terms and signed a contract with them, only for *this* to happen. Fortunately, no money had exchanged hands, and the price of spices had remained unchanged. In that sense, we hadn't taken any losses, but...

"Hang on a second," I said. "How does a company so large go out of business without any sort of warning? There are always rumors before something like this happens. How is it even possible?"

"It would appear that the president of the company was arrested on suspicion of treason," replied Whateley. "All reports say they've discovered proof of it too."

"But surely there's the vice president, Ural, no? He can take over from the president."

"He and his entire family have been arrested on the same charges. Their accountant, too, is either already imprisoned or has fled..."

The whole company had literally crumbled to pieces over the course of an evening.

"It would be one thing if it were just *suspicion* of treason," said Whateley, "but now that they've been taken into custody it's a very different matter. According to eyewitnesses, the imperial knights' first squadron was on the scene."

Ern was the first to respond when she heard that the knights were involved.

"Oh, then it's all over," she said. "The first squadron is fanatically loyal to the emperor. Basically, if he says a red rug is black, they do too. And if the suspected parties are in custody, there's nothing else to be done. If it had just been local police, they'd have had a chance at clearing their names."

"Lady Ern is correct," said Whateley. "It's what everybody is saying. Regardless of the truth of the accusations, the fact that the arrest was ordered by the emperor himself makes the situation that much more difficult."

The knights who had moved against Hugo & Co. were not under Wilhelmina's nor Reinald's control; they were an especially loyal squadron serving directly under the emperor himself. Hugo & Co.'s president was originally a merchant for the Allied Nations of Yaw, made an honorary imperial citizen. He'd even gone on the record saying that he would not return to his former home and would be buried in the empire. Now, he had been taken in for questioning under suspicion of having sold drugs and weapons, the latter of which supposedly went to anti-imperial factions. The empire was not on friendly terms with Yaw at present, and now that the emperor had made Hugo & Co. a target, there was no coming back.

This, however, was where the real problems began, and the situation grew yet more confusing. What had occurred to Hugo & Co. was nothing if not unfortunate, but we could not afford to let it get the better of us, as the market had. We weren't hampered in terms of money, but potential sales of zero still hurt. We had to take action.

"We must find another trading partner," I said. "Either that, or perhaps we look to claim a portion of the market for ourselves."

This was everything we knew of the situation on the day itself, but the following day brought with it further updates, which in turn caused Whateley confusion to the extent that he could not hide it.

"A separate company has plans to move the same materials we'd planned to sell through Hugo & Co.," he reported. "They've already reached out to potential partners."

"After just a day?" I uttered. "Regardless, it still hurts."

The timing was a little too perfect as far as I was concerned, but we didn't have the luxury to complain about it. Rather, we had to decide whether or not it was worth making contact with them.

"As for the company shouldering this trade and the people running their operations..." started Whateley.

"Do you have any connections who might set up a meeting for

us?" I asked.

"Er, it would seem that is unnecessary," Whateley muttered.

He sounded reluctant in a way that was unusual for him. It was as if he was about to share something he still couldn't quite believe himself, and so his words carried with them that same apprehensive weight.

"Our name is among them," he said, finishing his earlier sentence.

"Yes, so can we set up a meeting, or..." I replied, stopping only when Whateley's words actually sank in. "I'm sorry, what did you say just now?"

"They've made plans for large-scale trade between the imperial capital and Falkrum, and the Conrad name is already listed among its participants."

I required a further ten seconds to truly comprehend what the steward had just said. The meaning of his words simply did not sink in.

"Whateley?" I said.

"Yes?"

"What is the name of the company taking on the spice trade?"

"The West Burhan Trading Company."

"They're easily as big as Hugo & Co., perhaps even bigger. If I recall correctly, they cover a wide range of paints and foodstuffs, and they have a large number of shops that sell wheat and the like."

"That is correct, yes."

"And Conrad has never had a formal meeting with any of them, yes?"

"Not once. Not at all. Not in any capacity. I combed my memories, but as far as I can tell, we've never made contact at all, not even when the margrave was alive and well."

"So why is Conrad listed on their business plan?"

"I do not know."

"Is it possible you read it wrong?" I asked, hopeful.

"I double-checked. I checked it five times, in fact. Then I inquired with Burhan itself. There's no mistake. The president has also made it clear that they'd like to arrange a date to meet *you* in person."

"Uh, why...?"

Seriously. Why?

"Just to be certain, let me ask you this, Lady Karen: Have you ever made contact with anybody from the West Burhan Trading Company?" asked Whateley.

"No! No! If I had, I would have made use of the contact already!"

We were at our wit's end. It made so little sense that we ended up asking Wendel, Emil, and the entirety of our staff if they knew or had ever met someone from the West Burhan Trading Company. No one had. Ern knew all of the major trading companies through her work, but she had never spoken of Conrad to any of them. We then proceeded next door to put the question to Elena and Haring, but they were simply shocked to learn that Hugo & Co. were now out of business. That made it unlikely that Reinald or Wilhelmina were involved.

"The first squadron doesn't ever take action except under order of the emperor," said Haring. "Neither Reinald nor Wilhelmina have the authority to control them."

"Hugo & Co. were also on good terms with the Bachem family," added Elena, "who would have moved in to help had they known something was coming, and our chief of staff would be beside himself. How about asking him directly?"

"Good call. I'll drop by Moritz's home."

"You can do that? Just stop by?" I asked.

"We're on good terms, actually. He'll make time."

We learned soon after that, even for Moritz, the news had been like a pail of cold water to the face. He'd been frantic all morning. The going theory was that the emperor had acted entirely on his own authority, without any consultation. His actions had resulted in considerable losses for a great many families, and while they voiced their frustrations, they also gave up on the situation very quickly; the emperor's direct involvement left them with no other options.

This all meant that our hands were tied. There was nothing anyone in our network could do. All we had was the business plan upon which our name was already listed; a plan we were not entirely comfortable with. Under different circumstances we might have refused it, but with Hugo & Co. essentially crushed into dust and

Burhan on the rise, cutting off our involvement in the plan meant saying goodbye to any potential spice trade. It did not take long for us to realize that, for the sake of the future, our only choice was to go along with the proceedings.

We were quick to organize a lunch meeting with Burhan, but I recognized none of the people who participated. They were friendly and courteous throughout, but also extremely well-versed when it came to keeping their cards close to their chest. The company president let no meaningful intel slip and in fact told me that we'd done well—words that felt packed with a meaning I still didn't understand. It was clear they wanted a long and prosperous partnership, and yet I couldn't rid myself of the uncertainty I felt about it all.

Case in point, when I tried talking to Moritz, his first assumption was that I'd played some part in the whole mess. Clearing *that* misunderstanding was quite the undertaking. Once that was done, however, he promised to send word of any further updates.

The discomfort only increased as things grew in scope. It didn't help that Conrad only looked to profit all the more for it; after all, that which feels too good to be true usually is. I feared the arrival of some hidden downside, and it was then that an invitation arrived.

The man who delivered it appeared to be a soldier in the service of the nobility. Even at a glance one could see that his cloak was a tailored fit, and he held himself like one who'd come from a good upbringing. Everything about him screamed "gallant knight."

"I come bearing an invitation from my lord," said the man. "Please accept it with my humble thanks."

His were the kind of strong, refined features that a woman could fall for in an instant. He was like something out of a fairy tale, and yet the moment I saw the wax seal on the back side of the envelope he handed me, I froze on the spot. I double-checked, but there was no mistaking it; the letter had come directly from the imperial family, and inside of it was an invitation.

Ern told me later that the man was the vice captain of the imperial knights' first squadron. With that in mind, I'm sure you can guess who the invitation had come from. And I'm sure you can

imagine how very perplexed I was.

"My apologies," I said, politely but still reeling, "but exactly *what* is this about? We are but an ordinary noble family that has only just moved to the capital; we've done nothing worthy of an invitation of such magnitude."

"My lord says he eagerly awaits the chance to meet you. Given that you will need to prepare for such an occasion, please make use of this to cover any expenses."

You did not answer my question.

The bag that was brought from the man's carriage was big enough that it had to be carried in both arms. When I heard the sound of it as it was placed on the ground, I assumed it was money, but in fact it had been stuffed full of jewels and other valuables. That made it worth some twenty or thirty times what it would have been in money alone. I supposed we were expected to sell it.

"Wait just a moment!" I cried. "Please, won't you at least explain the reasoning for all of this? I mean, this invitation, this bag..."

Is this a good thing...? No, it's ominous... I feel sick!

Keep it together, Karen!

"I don't recall our family contributing anything, at all, of any worth to His Majesty!" I said.

I struggled to remain calm, but I felt my voice nearing a wail. Can you blame me? The letter came from the emperor! All I'd heard about the guy was horrible rumors! And the vast majority concerned his womanizing! And now that same emperor had delivered me a bag full of valuables!

You don't think this means...

But it might! And I hate it!

The man at the door let a grin slide to his lips, perhaps amused by how flustered I was, but there was something of a kindness in it too.

"There's no need to be worried," he said. "While my lord is known for being as fierce and uncompromising as a raging fire, this is not such an occasion. Rather, this invitation is a means for showing gratitude and rewarding you for your good deeds."

"Good deeds?"

"I must take my leave, but like my lord, I too look forward to seeing you again."

And with that, he took my hand and placed a kiss upon it.

How long has it been since that *last happened?*

In that way, the storm came and went, so to speak.

"Karen, wash that hand immediately," said Ern. "You don't know where that guy's been, but I bet he's filthy."

"Filthy? Ern, really, I think that's the very *least* of my..."

Ern's disgusted expression was, in a word, overwhelming.

"Shut up and wash your hands already," she demanded.

"Yes, ma'am."

I was now in the possession of a bag full of gold, silver, and jewels, and an invitation from the emperor *himself*. Whateley and I were practically going insane while Ern simply sucked on a lollipop and watched us.

"Wow, that's all genuine," she remarked as she took a look in the bag I'd been given. "How do you keep attracting all this trouble, Karen? Do you emit some kind of scent that pulls in all the weirdos?"

"Don't talk about me like I'm some sort of bug! I didn't ask for any of this! I don't need it!"

"Well, it's true that at least bugs can usually choose what they draw in. They're just going about their lives as best they can."

"Knock it off! I'm being serious!"

"I know," replied Ern. "That's why I figure at least *I* should remain calm. So, what did you do to draw the emperor's attention?"

"That's what I want to know!" I screamed.

6: A Rather Pushy Vice Captain

That was the question: Why did the emperor have his eyes on me?

I racked my brains ad nauseam for some kind of answer, and it was then that a certain person came to mind. Or more accurately, a box, I should say.

"Karen, just where do you think you're going?" asked Ern.

"I'm going to see Six!" I cried.

And if he didn't know anything, I'd go to Reinald next. I had to get to the bottom of things if I ever wanted to rid myself of these feelings of impending doom.

"You called?" said Six.

"What the...?!" I screamed.

"Whoa!" cried Ern.

The mage's voice had come from out of nowhere. Ern dropped her lollipop the moment I screamed. Geoff arrived on the scene a moment later.

"What are you doing here, Six?!" I shouted.

"You called me. Why else would I come?" replied the mage. "So anyway, hello... Ah! It's a dog!"

Geoff had arrived in a flash, and Jill was right behind him. He relaxed when he realized it was just Six who had arrived unexpectedly, but the mage was having a fit.

"Put it away! Put it somewhere else! I can't do it! I can't stand dogs!"

The mage floated up and away from Jill, whose fur was standing upright as she barked in Six's general direction. The whole room was a storm of confusion.

What a mess.

"Uh, Ern..." I uttered. "Please, I'm begging you, stay calm. Violence isn't the answer!"

I knew my friend bore a deep hatred for the mage, and so I spoke to calm her before the situation grew even more complicated. Ern, however, remained totally calm; her lips pursed and she toyed with the ends of her hair, but she didn't make a single comment.

"Ern?" I asked.

I couldn't help but try to get her attention. I'd never seen her like this before; she looked so adorable. So cute.

"What?" replied Ern, her voice devoid of emotion.

"Um... Six is here. Are you okay with that?"

"I don't care. I'm not going to waste energy on the likes of him. But forget about me; do something about Jill, would you? My heart's breaking just listening to this."

"Ah, Ern, you know me so well!" said Six. "But there's no need to be so sad on my account."

"I don't care about you!" spat Ern in response. "I care about Jill!"

"Geoff, could you please take Jill outside and settle her down?"

Ern wasn't herself. She was flying off the handle in a second, and she wouldn't even glance in Six's direction. But I also sensed...

No, not the time for it, Karen.

Six relaxed the moment Jill was taken away, and that was when I grabbed him.

"Six!" I shouted. "I received an invitation! To the emperor's birthday party! It's from the emperor! Why?! How did this happen?!"

"Oh... You did, did you?" replied the mage.

"Don't act so indifferent...!" I growled.

"Well, I don't keep tabs on *everything* the man does, and I don't want to either. I mean, eww. If he's cast the spotlight on you, then it's probably just his usual whimsy, no? The man is fickle. That said, I feel for you. I'd *so* hate to be you."

"I don't need your pity," I said, "I need you to tell me anything you might know about it. Please!"

"I don't know anything. I'd make myself sick if I had to watch Karl every second of every day. In any case," said Six, lying down as he remained floating in the air. "I'm guessing you're of the mindset that there is a reason for everything Karl does, yes?"

It was as if there were an invisible bed right there underneath

him. When his eyes met my own, I got the sense he was looking at me with an amused curiosity.

"Are you saying there *isn't* a reason for him inviting me to his party?"

"Haven't you listened to any of the rumors? Karl is driven by his impulses. He's arrogance personified. Malevolent. He doesn't care about things like commoners and nobility; if he's interested, he's interested—and if he wants something, he'll take it. You'd have to be as crazy as he is to find reason in his actions."

"When it comes to the emperor, I think he's right," said Ern. "He's not a man of reason."

"You think so too, Ern?" I asked. "Really?"

"Ah, yes," mused Six. "You were made to sing in the center of the inner palace, weren't you? From morning to night, with no accompaniment whatsoever."

Ugh, what kind of bullying is that?

"Stop. I'm trying to forget," said Ern, turning away in disgust.

"Who cares?" said Six. "You're lucky that that was the extent of it. Whether it was a song or a dance, nobody there cares in the slightest. It's just another day at the office. Just be grateful you only had to go through it once."

"It's not about that," said Ern. "It's just not a fond memory. Karen, your lips are sealed, you hear?"

Both Six and Ern were in agreement, and the message was clear: Don't go looking for reason in the actions of the emperor. Neither appeared to be lying, and Ern really did look horribly uncomfortable, so I didn't push the issue any further.

On a different note entirely: Why did Six just appear when I mentioned his name?

Surprisingly, Six was all too happy to answer my question.

"I was just looking in this direction when I heard you call," he said.

I think when he said "looking," however, it wasn't in the ordinary sense of the word. It didn't seem like he was going to tell me any more than he already had, though. So in the end, I had simply called the guy over unintentionally.

"Just lay it all out for me," said Six. "If I find it all intriguing, then sure, I'll lend you a hand. And if you leave me rolling on the floor laughing, I might even help you out of the situation."

"Well, okay, I can do that much, at least..."

It was then that I remembered Whateley did not know Six especially well. That explained why he was so cautious and on edge as he watched the mage lazing about in midair.

"Whateley, would you mind leaving us to speak alone for a moment?" I asked. "We've something important to discuss."

"As you wish. Don't hesitate to call should you need anything."

I wasn't sure about Ern, but when I glanced in her direction to silently ask her thoughts, she shrugged.

"I already know, so it's fine," she said. "I'm actually more surprised that *you* know so much, Karen."

"Aren't you two friends?" asked Six. "Don't you share things with one another?"

"Some topics aren't exactly simple to bring up!"

"Oh? I wouldn't have minded in the slightest if you had. I've told some people myself, after all."

"But access into the tower is restricted, and the emperor keeps tight control over who knows and who doesn't, no?" I said.

"When I was going through a rebellious phase, I pushed back," said Six. "Karl seems to think I'm unable to disobey him, but there are loopholes. It's me, at the end of the day; I'm not going to just sit around and let others have their way."

Ern knew all about Six, which I suppose was to be expected. What surprised me, however, was that the emperor had given her permission to enter the Tower of the Eye.

"The upper ranks of the House of Magic were ordered to mend the box Six is in," explained Ern. "I saw it not long after I arrived here; the issue seems to weigh heavily on the emperor's mind."

"You were allowed into the tower *that* quickly?"

"Oh my," remarked Six, realizing something. "Could it be true? Karen, you don't know?"

"Don't know what?" I asked.

"Why do you have to have such a big mouth, Six?" muttered Ern.

She glared at the mage with a pressure I'd never seen before, but Six himself couldn't have cared less, by the looks of things.

"A select few mages—only the best and brightest—are given the title of Elder. Usually, one can only attain such a rank after many years of service, but Ern here is the youngest mage to have ever received the Elder title."

"What the heck?" I cried. "I had no idea!"

"Because it's not public!" replied Ern. "Imagine all the trouble it would cause!"

"Well, it's most certainly anything but an ordinary promotion," mused Six. "She wasn't even raised here in the capital, and then there's the fact she doesn't have patience for anyone who isn't of use to her, regardless of rank. She hates the house factions, and no matter where she goes people hate her because they think she's going to usurp them. It's the very reason that those at the top of the House don't want to offer their support."

"The last person I want lecturing me on my personality is *you*," Ern growled.

"But get this," Six continued, "she's so good at what she does that they can't just get rid of her either! The Elders are of a rank that allows them a say in the running of the House, which means they're all afraid of the young girl!"

And apparently, she'd had to take out a number of mages to get where she was now. With Six filling in the blanks, everything finally fell into place: Ern having enemies on all sides and her coming to my place to protect her parents. But she shouldn't have kept it from me; if I'd known she'd been promoted, I would have made an occasion of it. She was my best friend! I wasn't going to skimp out on celebrating her achievements!

"You could have told me!" I said. "And I know you haven't seen your parents recently, which means you didn't do a thing, did you? But it's a big deal! We should throw a party!"

Ern looked away with a sulk.

"It's just..." she muttered.

"It's just what?" I prodded.

"I thought that if I told you, things between us would change."

"Whoa, honesty alert."

Seriously, whoa. But what? For real? That's her reasoning? Since the moment I got here to the capital she's been all out of sorts, full of frustrations, and with her tongue as sharp as any sword. Now look at her, she's just adorable*.*

"Nothing could ever change what we have," I cried. "Oh Ern, I. Just. Love you!"

"Ugh, wait, Karen," Ern groaned in response. "Not while there are people around! Stop!"

She struggled within my hug, but really she was just being coy.

"Ah, the joys of youth," remarked Six. "How wonderful. This is a girl who they speak of as reaching my own lofty heights. She's on the path to the top. You truly are blessed when it comes to friends, Karen."

Coming from Six, I could not tell if the words were a compliment or an insult, but regardless I chose simply to say thanks. Ern was clearly embarrassed by the ongoing conversation (the blushing gave her away) and opted to change the topic.

"Moving on, there's the invitation you received," she said. "I've been invited too, so I'm sure we'll be fine if we're both there."

"You're going too? What a relief. But what about an escort? Have you already decided who you're going with?"

"An escort?"

"You don't need one here? In Falkrum an escort is a must."

"Married couples attend such parties together, but you're a widow, Karen. I suppose it can't hurt to have one to avoid unwanted advances, but a partner is by no means a necessity."

I learned that noble parties in the capital functioned differently from those in Falkrum. Single people were welcome to attend parties on their own, which certainly made things simpler for me.

"If somebody were to invite you because they were ambitious and looking for an opportunity, you could turn up with them by your side, but you could just as easily refuse their offer. That said, because you've been invited by the emperor, only fools would be so bold. This is especially true given that the emperor has invited you out of the kindness of his heart, if that soldier is to be believed."

"Oh? You mean that Karen wasn't invited as a prospective concubine?" asked Six.

"No!" I snapped.

"No, you idiot!" added Ern.

Even if he was joking, neither of us wanted to hear it.

"Oh," muttered Six. "Karl is recently down two concubines, you see. I thought he was looking for replacements. And how interesting *that* would have been. Alas..."

Jeez, this guy...

Just how bad was the emperor if even Six had issues with the guy's personality? Thinking about it gave me a headache. But with the issue of my real father and everything else on top of it, things felt very much like they were out of my control. Still, as I talked more with Ern about the party, my thoughts were consumed by a different problem altogether.

"There's no getting out of it this time..." I muttered.

Though I had once escaped humiliation thanks to Reinald, the truth of the matter was that I still could not dance. There was no point staying silent on the issue, and so because Ern and Six were simply bickering by this point, I called Whateley back and explained my predicament. None of them could believe it. Six burst into raucous laughter, and Whateley wisely opted to say nothing to the still-floating mage.

"I never imagined it possible," said the steward.

"What if we scheduled practice from now until the party? Could I learn in time?" I asked.

"Martina can teach you the dances common at the palace, but...the party is next month. That's still scarcely enough time. There's your dress fitting to consider too. We can spread your workload out, but you'll still be required to attend meetings with the West Burhan Trading Company. It's going to be a rather tight schedule, but I suppose there's simply no other way."

"I'm so sorry..." I muttered.

"Instead of apologizing, turn your attention instead to reviewing the common etiquette of the palace. Some of it differs from what you were used to in Falkrum."

I apologized because I'd taken my problem and shoved it out of sight, thinking it would remain out of mind. It vexed and worried me now, and Ern could see it on my features. Being a friend, she of course knew exactly where I hurt most and decided to stick her finger in the wound.

"Karen, you were born with two left feet. You're so awkward it hurts to even watch you *try* any form of exercise. Are you even capable of dancing in time to music? And with a partner to consider on top of it?"

"I may not be an athlete, but I can run just fine if necessary!" I pouted. "Do you really have to be so harsh?"

"I do. Running isn't dancing, Karen, and dance steps aren't something you just remember overnight."

"And anyone who knows how to dance will recognize a klutz in an instant," added Six. "If you tumble and fall, you'll be so humiliated you'll never be able to show your face at another party again! My, even *I* feel sorry for you. But if it comes to the point that you simply can't bear to be in the capital any longer, I'll help you make a hasty getaway."

"He's not being very nice about it, but even *you're* aware of it, Karen. The worry is written all over your face."

"Yes, but with practice, I... Well, let's be honest—I just *have* to make this work, one way or the other."

"I know you've been through all sorts of turmoil in your life until now, but this is perhaps the most worrying challenge you've ever faced."

Please, stop it. Don't make me even more worried. I'm already the most worried person here! There was no escaping it now, but who could have possibly seen this coming?

"Martina will be here tomorrow," said Whateley, "and I'll work out the schedule when she arrives. As for a dance partner, I can help, but I think Geoff is your best option."

"I had a feeling that giant was more refined than he let on," said Ern. "So the masked man can dance?"

"Geoff is experienced in quite a wide range of topics, Lady Ern," replied Whateley.

“Huh...color me surprised. I guess he must have come from good stock.”

Whateley was too busy arranging my schedule to pay Ern any extra attention. He was nothing if not reliable, but still I felt fear creeping up my spine; the days ahead were set to be the very definition of rigorous.

“Very well,” said Six, “I will come by when Karl isn’t aware to help out too. And rest assured, I’m a far better teacher than you might expect. And call over your neighbors too; Haring and Elena both know how to dance.”

I was intent on using any and every tool at my disposal. Six was mostly doing it for his own amusement, but he requested food as payment, so I had to assume he would take the teaching part seriously. I would have been far more suspicious of the mage if he’d offered his services for nothing.

After letting out a sigh, Ern raised her hand.

“Okay, count me in,” she said.

“But aren’t you expected to be at House most of the—” I started.

“I can work from home, and I can send my assistants for anything I need. And besides, I could do with a refresher course on etiquette and dancing too!”

“You can...dance...” I uttered.

“That girl can do pretty much everything,” said Six. “It’s why she’s such a thorn in the other Elders’ sides.”

But Ern had another another reason for it. I’d been watching her, and I couldn’t help getting a sense that something was up. In any case, the plans came together startlingly quickly, with Haring and Elena agreeing to assist us that same evening. Then a request came in from Nika, who also wanted to take part. Apparently she’d been invited to the ball too. In truth, she’d been invited numerous times, but—true hero that she was—had always had an excuse up her sleeve or otherwise a reason to escape on horseback.

“Now that Lord Reinald has returned to the capital, however, her old tricks will no longer help her,” explained Elena. “So she needs practice too. But every time I’ve tried to help her, she always complains about her heels; they’re either too high or they’re too

hard to walk in. Her rage never ends...”

Nika was so very wonderful. In her, I felt a unique camaraderie. And while it was a shock to hear that she couldn’t dance, I won’t lie; I was happy to have a sister-in-arms, so to speak.

Martina was shocked to hear that I would be attending the party the following month, but she was happy enough to teach me the basics. That formed my coaching team, which consisted of Whateley, Martina, Haring, Elena, Ern (who could dance), and Six (the self-proclaimed *masterfully excellent teacher*).

On the day of our first practice session, we met in the dining room and shifted all the furniture to make adequate space. While we waited upon Nika’s arrival, I sat with documents in hand and mentally counted through everything that had to be addressed; there was our fractured relationship with the Kirstens due to Reinald and Wilhelmina’s rivalry, the contract with Burhan and everything that came with it, a meeting with the Bahre family, then a dress fitting and, of course, the emperor’s birthday. Our dancing practice sessions were to be held in between all of this, but however you looked at it, it was all too much and far too soon.

And I bet I’m forgetting something. I just know I’m forgetting something!

Of course, it was at this moment that Humphrey saw fit to burst into the room.

“Bad news!” he cried.

“Oh no, what is it this time?!” I cried.

Hil was right behind Humphrey, and neither could hide the panic etched into their faces.

“The carriage of goods due to arrive here from Falkrum was attacked by bandits!” said Humphrey.

My blood ran cold. The carriage carried items I’d gathered in Conrad: the margrave’s books, various keepsakes, and most importantly, the cat Wendel loved so dearly.

“What happened? What else do you know?” I asked.

“We only just heard about it,” replied Humphrey. “Word of Hugo & Co. going out of business has spread outside of the capital. Apparently, their formerly contracted guards and couriers are

abandoning their posts..."

"That wouldn't have been an issue on its own," said Hil, noticeably calmer than his younger squire, "but we decided to inquire about your carriage when we noticed it appeared to be running late. We were told that bandits have been far more active as a result of recent happenings, and it's highly likely that our carriage was hit."

I hadn't left our items with Hugo & Co. directly, but they had been a large enterprise, and likely connected in some way to the delivery service we'd hired. Confirming an incident that occurred outside of the capital would take time, and it seemed there was little else that could be done. That is, until Hil spoke again.

"I'd like to visit the military district," he said. "And if possible, I'd like you to accompany us, Lady Karen. It will take far longer if we are on our own."

"They will aid us in some way?" I asked.

"It's where they store any stolen goods confiscated during bandit raids," Hil explained. "We've been told that includes anything that cannot be identified as a specific person's belongings. We heard a rumor that they're keeping items picked up between Falkrum and the capital; it's possible they might be our items from Conrad."

"We can't know for certain, but it's certainly worth visiting and putting in a report," I agreed.

With the deliveryman and the bill of goods gone, there was no way to know where our items had ended up. Hil and Humphrey thought it possible that our things had fallen under possession of the military. Apparently this kind of thing was not entirely uncommon in the capital, and so the process was relatively simple.

"I'll get ready right away," I said. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to look Wendel in the eye again if something happened to Blacky..."

I apologized to everyone for having to skip practice, but our lost items took priority. It was a collection of keepsakes—memories, if you will—and a living creature's very life hung in the balance. The news would have left Wendel a trembling mess, but fortunately for us, he and Emil were at a friend's house at the time.

"Lady Karen, shall I go in your stead?" offered Whateley.

"No, I'm the one who arranged everything while we were in Falkrum, and they'll be more likely to listen to the person themselves than a representative."

"In which case, I'll accompany you," said Ern, standing to her feet. "I've got some influence here, and it could come in handy."

"Are you sure? That would mean the world to me," I said.

"When you're in trouble, you use everything at your disposal, doofus," replied Ern. "That's the smart move, especially here in the capital."

"Then I, too, shall accompany you," announced Six. "A little peek is all we'll need to be sure."

"She's got me, and that's enough," Ern shot back. "You'll only complicate things."

"Fine, fine. I suppose I'll just indulge in more time with Charlot here. She may be a kitten, but she's got a talent for charming those around her. She'll be a stunning beauty when she grows up."

Six couldn't stand dogs, but it seemed that cats were another story. And though I agreed with him, I couldn't help feeling that the words felt like lies coming from him. Then there was the fact that Charlot still wouldn't let me hold her. Jill, on the other hand, was happy to be around anyone, and she was in that sense a source of healing. Charlot simply felt so far, far away.

"I don't think we'll be back late," I said, "but please put out tea for everyone and start without me. Martina, I'm so sorry to do this to you after you made time in your schedule for me."

"Think nothing of it. Do be careful while you're out."

Martina had also asked for a word when our practice session was over, so I did truly hope we'd be back in time. I asked Geoff to accompany me on guard duty.

"There's a good chance they don't have our things," I said to Hil and Humphrey, "so I'd like you two to continue your intelligence gathering."

At the end of the day, it was merely a possibility that our possessions had ended up at the military district. It wasn't that Geoff didn't know how to gather intel, but when it came to blending in

with the general public, Hil and Humphrey were the better options.

Though I had quite a few acquaintances among the military's ranks, asking Nika or anyone else I knew to look into things wasn't a simple, straightforward matter. After all, each military department fell under different leadership. So while asking associates for help wasn't out of the question, for the sake of speed we'd get our answers quicker just going ourselves.

We hurriedly arranged for a carriage and headed for the military district. Each district had a dedicated station for issues relating to lost items and patrol-related incidents, so most of the capital's citizens rarely had need to visit the military district. I had expected us to get lost, but fortunately there was only a single entrance for the citizenry. We alighted from our carriage and passed through the central guard station, which acted as a reception area. It was full of people, and judging by what I heard, the vast majority of them were merchants who, like us, were inquiring into the potential whereabouts of their lost goods.

A number of paths branched out from the central station, each with its own set of guards. Their role was easy enough to understand: no entry without permission. The station was large and designed around an atrium to give a sense of space. The stairways leading up to the various floors were also manned by guards.

"From here on out, security does not allow for swords to be drawn," said Ern. "Be careful."

As a mage of her standing, Ern knew the place well. But what she described was a magical system; a spell that allowed station employees to draw their swords but made it physically impossible for anyone else. I was impressed; it was a surprise to learn the ways in which magic permeated everyday life.

"The mages of the imperial capital are capable of such intricate spells?" I asked.

"Of course they are," said Ern. "I designed those spells myself."

"You did? Wow, you really are active all over the place," I remarked.

"The military wanted to ensure safety in this district, and they came to me for help. I was only half joking when I offered to make

it so that visitors couldn't draw their swords, but they jumped on the idea."

"I've been wondering for a while now, but how do you just 'come up' with spells like that?"

"Hmm... When I stumble on an idea, usually the spell just comes to me. But most of the time the mages here can't really keep up. I don't know why they can't wrap their heads around it."

She really can *do pretty much everything...*

I always knew she was intelligent, but since coming to the imperial capital she'd only gotten smarter, and she was constantly displaying her genius. It was times like this that I could totally agree with her mother about Ern looking so alive and truly enjoying every day.

But at the same time, I couldn't help but worry about what Six had said. Maybe it was because I didn't share her unique brilliance, but was she making too many enemies of those around her? The thought made me anxious. Ern knew who she was; she was fully aware of her own abilities and carefully thought things through. This was the mindset through which she spoke, but it was frightening to think that others might mistake her intelligence for arrogance. On the other hand, I imagined her bold confidence also drew others to her.

And sure enough, some officers approached Ern the moment they recognized her. I had expected our visit here to take time, what with all the discussion and potential paperwork, but with Ern at the helm everything proceeded smoothly. We headed up a set of stairs to a waiting area complete with a number of benches. You could even order drinks. I noticed that some of the people there were citizens like us, while others in military uniform used the place to chat whilst on their breaks.

"The rumors of stolen goods have already reached us," said the officer accompanying us. "I'll see that the person in charge is informed."

"Apologies for the bother," said Ern.

"Think nothing of it. We're only too happy to aid a friend of the great Lady Ern. As for your kitty ca— *Ahem*, your missing feline, pets

stand out in such situations; I'm sure we'll have an answer soon. Wait here, and I'll be back as soon as we have something."

Lady Ern, huh? And a cat lover for a guide, to boot.

Ern told Geoff to attempt to draw his sword, so he did as he was told. The sword remained stuck within its sheath.

"I don't believe it," he uttered. "It's like the sword and the sheath have melded together. The blade won't budge."

"Right? Right?" replied Ern excitedly. "It's set up so that the moment you climb the stairs, the spell is cast."

"Wow," I exclaimed. "What about smaller blades like daggers?"

"They have to do body searches for that kind of thing."

Swords only, then.

"I *can* make the spell more intricate, but go too far and the spell takes much more work. The higher-ups said that limiting the spell to swords was enough."

"Indeed," agreed Geoff. "You at least put a stop to any serious fights breaking out."

I could see Ern was very proud of herself. The spell gave me pause for thought, and a question rose to my mind.

"The military's upper ranks have clearly put their trust in you," I said. "Does that mean you know a lot about the weapons situation here in the imperial capital?"

"To some extent, I suppose."

Perhaps it was because the conversation had turned to a topic a little more disquieting and dangerous, but Ern's brow furrowed as she responded. Nonetheless, I went on and asked about something I'd been long curious about.

"Then do you know what types of bows the imperial capital has for hunting purposes?"

"Uh, Karen...?"

"Like, say, a crossbow capable of firing multiple shots," I continued. "Oh, and really I'm just asking out of curiosity."

I'd learned a great deal since coming to the capital, and one such thing was the existence of crossbows. They'd advanced at an astounding rate over the last few years and were starting to become more common. Crossbows that you could attach to a forearm were

prohibitively expensive. The first time I'd ever seen one, however, was...Sven.

"But why are you even asking? You're about as far removed from such weapons as it gets."

"Oh, you know, I just thought I'd keep one in my room, just in case."

"You don't need one," stated Ern. "You've already got me. I've already set things up so we can rid ourselves of any potential intruders. I won't let anything happen to you or your home."

"I'm happy you feel that way, really, I am, but this is the first I've heard of any intruder countermeasures."

"Because it's the first I've ever mentioned them. You should be more worried about your cat than that, anyway."

"Of course. I'm already working out details for if we don't find Blacky here. Hiring people, having them search the roads that our delivery man took, that kind of thing."

"You'll go *that* far for a cat?!"

"I will. Wendel has been dying to see his friend again."

I knew, too, that it still pained him that he'd been unable to find Blacky and was still uncertain of the cat's fate. Even now, Wendel avoided any cats that resembled Blacky, and Hil had told me that Wendel picked up Charlot largely because her fur was entirely different.

I had thus decided that if I could find a way to return Blacky to Wendel, I would do it. If bandits had taken the cat, then I wanted it returned, even if I had to pay for it. If push came to shove, I was prepared to dig into my own personal savings, and I had even considered how long I had before the banks closed.

"I get it. It's important. But then, I knew that the moment you adopted your son."

"Of course it's important!"

I was so wrapped up in my conversation with Ern that I didn't realize someone was approaching us. Geoff was kind enough to let me know, and Ern shot me a meaningful glance.

"I apologize for the interruption, but might you two be Ern Quach of the House of Magic and Lady Karen of Conrad?"

The voice was one I had heard before. Yesterday, in fact. Ern quickly turned her gaze elsewhere, but the man simply responded with an easy smile.

"You are as indifferent as they say," he said. "But please understand, ignoring a newly appointed Elder is the very height of disrespect, and how could I ever look His Majesty in the eyes if I were to behave in such a way?"

It was the vice captain who had delivered my party invitation just a day previously. He looked as friendly as ever, complete with the kind of smile that would easily send a woman's heart aflutter. After offering Ern an impressively respectable bow, he turned his attention on me, though I was in no position to respond as Ern had.

"Hello," I said. "I apologize for yesterday. I was so very flustered I didn't even introduce myself."

"Do not let it bother you," replied the man. "I know exactly how you must have felt. The whims of the emperor surprise even his loyal servants."

It wasn't often that I met men like this in places so public. Perhaps that was why I felt so acutely the prickle of pointed gazes all around. I had thought the vice captain would quickly take his leave, seeing as his subordinates were behind him and waiting patiently, but he showed no signs of that. Rather, the enthusiastic glint in his eyes only seemed to brighten.

Er, why...?

Given how Ern, a House Elder, had responded to his approaching us, I couldn't exactly offer him a seat, but I couldn't just drive him away either. That left us both standing.

"Just as with Lady Ern, when I saw you I felt compelled to say something," the man said. "But I must say I'm surprised to see you in such a place. What brings you here today?"

"Oh, well..."

And now I have no choice but to tell him...

I explained that we had come about our things, and how they'd been robbed.

"Items from your home that were being transported here, you say?" said the man, shocked. "They must be very important if you've

come all this way yourself."

"Yes, but thanks to my dear friend here, it's all being looked into, so you need not worry yourself."

"Perhaps I could lend a hand?"

It was a tempting offer, but not one I could easily accept. I was skeptical of it, for one thing, and when I thought back to what I'd heard of the first squadron, this man was not a person I wanted to be involved with.

"Though it pains me to admit it, when it comes to requisitioned goods, there's far more here than you likely think," said the man. "Some of it would have been taken back to the bandits' basecamp, and so it won't all be in the same place. I fear it won't be easy to find."

I had tried not to go into detail, but it now proved impossible.

"While it's true that the books and other keepsakes are of great value to us," I said, resigning myself to the truth, "we're actually looking for a living creature... That is to say, a cat. Comparatively easier to find, I'm told. Still, thank you ever so much for your generosity."

"A cat," uttered the man.

"It meant the world to my stepson," I said. "So while I'd be glad to retrieve all of our things, my hope is that we can at least recover his cat. Books and other such things are of course difficult to determine at a glance, but an animal should be far easier to recognize, yes?"

So please, Mr. Cat Lover who is looking for our cat as we speak, please come back! And hurry!

Ern was sipping at the fruit juice she'd ordered and showed no signs of lending me a helping hand. Geoff for his part, simply maintained his watch over the proceedings.

"Extraordinary," the man uttered.

I didn't think I'd said anything especially strange, but you wouldn't have thought that if you saw the man's surprise... Or was it joy on his face? Whatever the case, he was filled with emotion and, it seemed, completely awestruck.

"Extraordinary," he said again. "You are just as good-natured as

His Majesty has described. You are brilliant like a pure, newly bloomed flower, unsullied by the realities of the world. Ah, how it fills one with such hope."

His comparing me to such a thing left me completely blank as to how to appropriately respond.

"Oh, erm, uh... Thank you...?"

How did we go from missing cats to this*...?*

That he could say something so overblown and theatrical marked him as all the more troubling.

7: How I Longed to See You

If it had been Achim I was dealing with, I could have shrugged the words off with a laugh. With a member of the first squadron, however, it wasn't nearly as simple.

"What, pray tell, do you mean when you say it is...'as His Majesty described'?" I asked.

"I was told all about your strength of character before I left to deliver your invitation yesterday. You are one of pure heart, a person who reaches out to help even the powerless. It is clear to me now that you are exactly that sort of person."

"Oh, but I am not nearly worthy of such high praise..." I started.

"You are an amazing individual," said the man, cutting me off. "Why, I felt it the very moment I saw you. 'This woman is special, there's no doubt about it,' I thought."

"While I appreciate the kind words, surely there's been a misunderstanding."

Seriously though. Overboard much? Ordinarily, I'd assume he was being mean or sarcastic, but I'm not getting that feeling at all.

"Nothing of the sort," he said. "Your good deeds, the very core of your person; I can see exactly why His Majesty sees fit to show you favor. You are worthy of all the praise, I believe that with my entire soul. Your invitation to his birthday party is only natural."

"Oh, thank you...ever so...much...?"

I had no idea how to handle all of this. I was just here to find a cat. My intent wasn't to be showered in undeserved praise.

"A thought occurred to me yesterday," said the man, changing topic. "Have you decided who would tailor your dress for the birthday party? It struck me that you haven't lived here in the capital for all that long and might not know the tailors all that well."

"I haven't decided yet," I admitted. "I'm not terribly knowledgeable when it comes to such craftsmen, and I thought the

birthday party was a good chance to start looking into it."

It wasn't something that had to be decided immediately, and I'd planned to ask Elena about it. Still, the man noticed the awkwardness of my reply and nodded to himself. He then took from his pocket a coin and put it in my hand. He refused to take it back even as I tried to return it.

"Take it to Garnier, the Bud of the Blue Rose," he said. "They'll see that you're all set."

"You mean this coin will act as an introduction? Why, I couldn't possibly..."

"You've received a personal invitation from the emperor, a man with a most discerning eye for beauty. Anything less than Garnier is unacceptable. His Majesty has already seen to it that you have enough to cover the expenses, so do be sure to make use of their services."

Whoa, talk about subtle use of force.

The words were polite, but in essence they were an order. I felt my cheek begin to twitch but kept my wits about me and responded politely.

"Assuming they do not refuse my request, it would be my pleasure."

"Refuse you? They wouldn't dream of it. I swear it on the Lubeck name."

Finally, I had his name. Lubeck. I'd had a feeling he was well-known—after all, he was rather young for one in the position of vice captain—but unfortunately I had no idea how influential his family name was. I'd been doing my utmost to keep abreast of who was who in the imperial capital, but there were just *so* many people. I had my hands full just keeping track of those around Reinald and those connected to our potential spice trade, and it was times like this that I suffered for my lack of knowledge. Lubeck saw my awkward expression and had to have known I had no idea who he was, but he did not respond with outrage.

"I apologize. It was beyond arrogant of me to assume you knew who I was," he said with an easy smile. "It's no wonder you're confused."

Lubeck stood up straight and formally introduced himself. He cut quite the charming figure.

"I am Walter Lubeck, vice captain of the imperial knights' first squadron. Forgive me for the terribly late introduction."

Try to imagine it. Imagine how I felt, standing there in a public space as an already conspicuous young soldier brings even more attention to us with a grandiose bow. I wanted to scream for Ern to save me, but that wasn't an option. The only paths to easy escape required that I be either a) a child, or b) someone of superior rank than Lubeck.

"Oh, no, I pray that *you* will forgive *me*," I said. "I am Karen of Conrad, in the region of Falkrum, though I believe you already know my name."

"That I do. From the day I first met you, it struck me as a most beautiful name. I feel nothing but gratitude to His Majesty that in serving my duty to him I came to make your acquaintance."

Uh, thanks... I think...?

Perhaps it's best to assume that this guy's behavior is a direct result of the seemingly favorable way in which the emperor has chosen to see me...

There's literally no other possible way to explain this excessive behavior.

"Walter, just how long do you intend to keep my friend tied up like this? I've been trying to avoid even looking at you, but my neck is beginning to cramp."

"You know, I *was* beginning to wonder how long you would keep up that loathing of me," replied Lubeck.

"How long? Do you really think I could ever *stop*? I can barely stand the sight of you."

"Such a pity, really. I feel no such hatred, on my part."

"I can't say the same. I wish you would just leave."

Ern's harsh words were like a ray of light from the heavens, piercing through the clouds. It seemed that even with his rank, Lubeck didn't want to ruffle Ern's feathers. He responded with a playful shrug, but I felt I was one step closer to being free.

"If you're going to hit on someone, at least consider the person,

the time, and the place," said Ern. "The girl is a widow, for goodness' sake."

"Your words of wisdom are appreciated, but I've already heard more than enough from His Majesty himself. Kindness is not a crime."

"And yet it can be incredibly annoying when it's unwanted."

Whoa. Ern is really giving the vice captain a piece of her mind!

But why was he even sweet-talking me in the first place? I understood that the first squadron had considerable authority, but the reality of that felt just slightly out of grasp. Still, he was the vice captain of that very squadron, and handsome too; I didn't imagine he'd have any trouble finding female company elsewhere, and hoped he might do exactly that.

It was at this time the soldier looking for our cat returned, though unfortunately by this time he was far too late to save me. I noticed his movements grow suddenly stiff and awkward the moment he saw Lubeck's face, but all the same he brought with him good news.

"Apologies for my tardiness," he said. "I talked to those handling the bandit-hunting operations, and they informed me that they did indeed encounter a cat recently. They're bringing it over as we speak."

"Really?!"

"Yes, they discovered it in among some recovered goods earlier this morning. Ordinarily this would require an inspection and transfer paperwork, but seeing as it's only the cat on this occasion, we've been granted special approval to hand it over. Ah, there they are now."

A young man and woman appeared carrying a cage, and I recognized the two of them. How could I not? I'd noticed them spying on me from afar. I saw immediately that they recognized me too; the young woman offered a gentle smile, while her counterpart did what he could to avoid my gaze. The two offered very neat salutes.

"Rehnkvist of the tenth squadron," said the woman by way of introduction. "We come bearing the missing animal."

The tenth squadron? If I remember correctly, that's the squadron

headed by none other than my (potential) father, Bertrando Lorenzi. Does that have anything to do with this?

She was surprised to see Ern with me, but neither she nor her partner forgot to show Lubeck the appropriate respect.

"Lady Conrad," she continued. "My apologies for the wait. We've already heard about the circumstances from the soldier here. Is this the cat you're looking for?"

"If I could just take a look..." I said, peering into the cage as the young man opened it. "Yes, this is the one."

Inside the cage was a black cat with white fur around its feet that resembled socks. He had clearly worn himself out crying because his voice now was little more than a dry whisper, but this was definitely Blacky, Wendel's cat. But what worried me was that he was so completely and utterly exhausted that he didn't even try to escape his cage.

"He's bandaged," I said. "Is he hurt?"

"There were signs that the carriage the cat was in toppled over, and it's likely that it was hurt there. That said, our squad happens to have a former veterinarian among its ranks, and they saw that the animal was looked after once it was in our custody."

"You saw to his injuries too," I remarked. "I can't thank you enough."

"Think nothing of it. We're simply glad to know that the cat's owner has been found."

There was no neat place for me to comment, "And by the way, you two were spying on me some days ago, no?" The two soldiers also seemed intent on behaving as though they had no idea who I was. However, now that I had a lead on working out exactly who they were and could assume they didn't mean me any harm, I settled for simply committing their faces to memory.

"However," said the young woman. "Please note that yours is a special case. We could return your pet to you today thanks to it being a living creature and the mediation of Lady Ern. Given that the delivery man is now deceased and the proof of goods document gone, the rest of your belongings will have to be returned as per the usual procedures. You'll need to be present for an official inquiry."

"Oh, yes, not a problem at all," I said. "I'll send someone to start on all of that first thing tomorrow. It's more than enough today that we simply have our cat back. I truly can't thank you enough. Please see to it that everyone involved in our cat's recovery is thanked for their efforts."

I had a feeling that Blacky was likely returned to us because he was clearly a common mixed-breed cat and not a purebred, but all the same I was grateful. Geoff took the cage from the two soldiers, and Ern stood to her feet. I thanked them all one more time before we took our leave.

"Please be sure to thank the person who gave us this special permission today," I said.

"Oh, you mean our captain... Yes, well, he's an animal lover..." started the young man.

Before he could go on, the young woman silenced him with a smile. It looked as though it had been crafted from steel.

"I'll be sure to pass along the message," she said. "The cat has been tense and terrified since he arrived here, so please get him home quickly."

"And I am relieved that we will not have to take up any more of your time on this search either, Lord Lubeck," I said. "I am so very grateful for your kind offer."

"Travel safe," he said. "And please, call me Walter."

"Oh, very well," I said, slightly surprised. "Until we meet again..."

Ern was already heading for the stairs. I wrapped up my goodbyes and quickly chased after her.

"Ern, wait!" I called out.

"If you don't hurry up, you're getting left behind," she said.

"You're walking too fast!"

"*You're* walking too slow!"

Ern made no attempt to slow down, and her mood did not improve even after we boarded our carriage. It wasn't until we were rolling down the streets for home that she aired her grievances.

"I've always known, but seriously, Karen...you are the *worst* liar," she said. "It amazes me that you've made it this far. I can't even bear to watch."

This came as a shock to me.

"Am I...really that bad a liar?"

"You're not a good one, that's for sure. You should at least be able to feign ignorance by now... I don't get it... You could have just shrugged all of that off earlier. You don't have to entertain *everybody* who starts a conversation with you. But as soon as it happens you're polite as can be, answering questions and whatnot. I mean, at least be a little more discerning about who you give your time. You don't have to put up with them."

"But if I'm not careful about lying to people it'll just come back to bite me later," I retorted. "And it's not like I could just look someone of such high rank in the eye and tell them to get lost because I don't want to put up with them. Especially not on a first meeting."

"Oh, come on, Karen... You're practically asking for some weirdo to get all clingy."

"Look, you're free to think whatever you want, but not everybody is as bold and confident as you are. You can't just expect people to do such things so easily. Sometimes you have to find a compromise."

"This isn't about me. It's about you needing to protect yourself better. Conrad was the perfect example. You're always so ignorant of your own issues."

That hurt. When push came to shove and when the situation called for it, I could do exactly what Ern was saying. It was all the other times that were the problem.

"In any case, it was all too clear that you have an issue with Lubeck. What's all that about?"

"Of all the people in the imperial military, I hate him the most. Well, him *and* the captain of the first squadron."

You could hear it in her voice. She looked out the window as she spoke, opening up about it. Back when she'd been made to sing acapella at the inner palace, Lubeck had been the one assigned to ensure that she saw through the emperor's orders.

"Just because he's part of a distinguished family doesn't mean you should let yourself be fooled by his appearance," said Ern. "He didn't make it to the position of vice captain in his twenties by twiddling his thumbs. He made it there by happily doing whatever he

was told, even if that meant killing his own subordinates."

So, it seemed that Lubeck was far more terrifying a person than I gave him credit for. Still, there were levels when it came to "distinguished family," and I needed to know exactly *how* distinguished.

"Like, way up there," replied Ern. "You don't know because you don't have any trade connections so it's not your fault, but they're extremely distinguished, and in some ways they even rival the level of the Bahre family. That's why I stopped you from moving in when Lubeck was speaking to Karen, Geoff. Sorry."

"I suspected you had good reason for doing what you did," he replied.

"And I appreciate your quick wit in that respect. If only my assistants had realized as quickly."

When Geoff had seen me looking so uncomfortable, he'd moved to help me. Well, he'd *tried*. What he found was that he couldn't move his legs. Ern's quick gaze in his direction told him that she'd been behind it.

"Thank you, Geoff," I said. "You might have been putting yourself in great danger for me."

"There is no need for thanks. I didn't do anything, nor could I have."

"You have the most amazing guard dog," remarked Ern.

"Oh, Ern!"

"Do not let it bother you," said Geoff. "Coming from Lady Ern, I take it as a compliment."

"You're allowed to be angry, Geoff!" I cried.

It was strange how bulletproof to insults he seemed to be. I wondered if it was the result of his serving under Prince Demyan. Occasionally, the sound of a sad meow could be heard escaping the cage on Geoff's lap. The poor cat had to be near breaking point, having been trapped in a cage ever since we first captured him in Conrad.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said to Blacky. "We'll have you home in no time, just hold on."

Blacky was a worn-out, weary mess by the time we made it

home, but the journey was every bit worth the hassle. Nika was at our home by then, and Wendel and Emil had also returned from their friend's house. Wendel was quick to notice the cage and the feline shape within it. His brow furrowed as it mewled softly from Geoff's arms.

"I heard that you rushed out to see to something," said Wendel, "but what is that?"

"It's your dear friend," I said.

Everyone jumped when they heard Blacky meow except for Wendel.

"No way..." he uttered in disbelief.

Geoff knelt down and opened the cage. Wendel peered in to see his beloved Blacky.

"It's really you," he said.

He couldn't grasp what was happening. He looked like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, and a moment later his features scrunched up. He took in deep breaths as his hands tousled his own hair, his face reddening with every passing second.

"But you... But you... But how...?" Wendel uttered.

"It's Blacky," I said. "We found him on our visit to Conrad and brought him back."

Tears flowed down Wendel's face, but he didn't care, even with so many people around. He reached out with a tentative finger to touch the black cat's matted fur, and it was then that he truly realized that the cat was not just a figment of his imagination.

"You... Idiot... How...could... I tried to... Aww..."

Speaking unintelligibly, Wendel wrapped Blacky in his arms and rubbed his cheek against the cat's face. He cried and cried. It seemed he was saying something along the lines of "You idiot, how could you? I tried to call for you but you never came." Blacky, meanwhile, stopped his meowing completely and went still in Wendel's arms. It was the first time I had seen the cat calm since we'd found it.

Wendel continued to cry, but no one said a word. It was, after all, the long-awaited reunion of two dear friends. It was all very good and very wonderful, but I knew that our next order of business

would be addressing Blacky's flea problem.

Oh, I hope he'll get along with Jill and Charlot.

"In any case, that's a job well done. Let's all celebrate over a cup of tea!"

...is what I *so* wished I could have said, but unfortunately the house steward had a job to do.

"Come now, Master Wendel, you take a seat over here and rest."

"B-Blacky..." murmured Wendel. "Y-You're so...so thin..."

"Let's ask Leo to whip up a little food," said Whateley. "Rosanne is going to bring a warm, wet cloth, so let's give Blacky a good clean."

"Okay!" replied Wendel, brightening considerably.

"Master Emil, if you could kindly take a seat with Master Wendel. We've another family member to welcome, so would you mind keeping an eye on things too?"

"Oh, yes, of course," replied Emil. "I think that's a great idea. Jill *has* been very curious since the moment Karen returned."

Jill's tail had been wagging excitedly since Blacky arrived on the scene, and there was every chance she might decide to leap in for a better look. Charlot, meanwhile, was frozen at the sudden intrusion, which Elena thought was adorable.

"I'll have somebody call for Hil and Humphrey," said Whateley. "Now that Karen's here, let's get straight into practice."

"Oh... Practice already?" I asked.

"Blacky needs rest more than anything else, and he won't get that with a crowd of people huddling over him," replied the steward. "With Nika here too, I daresay you won't want to waste any time."

It was no exaggeration to say that the true mastermind of the Conrad home—its string puller behind the curtain, if you will—was Whateley himself. He would not stand for any other course of action. Nika, too, had resigned herself to her fate; I could tell by the faraway look in her eyes as she sipped the last of her cup of tea. Still, it was the first time I'd ever seen her in a skirt, and though it was nothing particularly flashy, there was an alluring, head-turning charm to her all the same.

"We'll see the boys to another room," said Elena, "and be back as soon as they're all settled."

She and Haring gave Wendel a gentle push toward the door while I put on my practice shoes. When I was done, it was just Nika, Ern, and myself, with Martina standing before us all.

These heels are...very high!

"Well then," said Martina. "Let me say that it's an honor to be teaching you all the basics of dance. Elena will help you best apply it all to your particular party, but for the time being I'd just like to get a sense for how much you all already know."

We didn't have a piano or any such lavish instruments in our house at the time, so we danced to the clapping of Martina's hands. Outside of the first few steps—ten seconds or so, let's be honest—I was a disaster. Even the basics were beyond me, so I sat out while Ern and Nika showed Martina how much they knew. Once both had danced somewhat awkwardly with Whateley, we discovered that Ern wasn't a bad dancer and that Nika at least understood the basic steps.

"I get the sense it's been some time since you last danced, Lady Ern," was Martina's appraisal. "You clearly have a good foundation, however, so it's just a matter of time before you get the feel of it again."

Nika, then, was like a comrade in arms. It buoyed me to know that I was not alone in my lack of ability, and I felt certain that I could bear the strict guidance of our instructors.

Or at least, it was what I had *hoped*.

"Oh my," uttered Whateley when he saw me attempt to dance. "I had no idea it was *this* bad..."

"Whateley," I shot back. "I've literally only just started! You can't possibly have seen enough to make that judgment!"

"Er, Martina," he said, ignoring me. "What do you make of Lady Karen's dancing so far?"

"It's rather...stiff. No, creative is the word for it. But we shouldn't raise the white flag yet. We can fix it!"

"I agree. With time we could indeed see improvement. However, we've only twenty days to work with. We've no time to spare, so we at least have to get to the point that it looks passable. We'll have to move straight to practicing with a partner. We simply don't have the

time to take the slow path and prod her along with praise. Look at what we're working with."

"Oh, well... Yes, you're quite right...but..." uttered Martina.

Don't let it discourage you too much, Martina. I'm counting on you!

Ordinarily, one would first practice the steps on their own, after which a partner would be brought in. Nika and I both had to juggle our practice with our work, however, and that left us short on time. Unfortunately, the others quickly informed me that I had both two left feet *and* no sense of rhythm.

"Bad is an understatement," said Ern. "Disastrous is what we're looking at."

"It's not my fault!" I cried. "It's the rhythm and the tempo! It's impossible to grasp!"

"Then how do you explain Nika? She's just following along, but she's doing just fine."

"Ah! Ah!" I sang loudly, blocking her voice out. "I can't hear you!"

"Face reality! You're a klutz!"

"I am not! I can still make it in time."

"Wow," uttered Six. "I mean, really though. I haven't seen this horrendous a dancer in I don't even know how long."

I didn't need Ern voicing aloud what I already knew full well, and Six's weird admiration wasn't helping. We'd literally only just gotten started, and I wasn't about to throw in the towel. By this time Elena and Haring had returned, and they offered a demonstration of what dancing was supposed to look like. It was otherworldly, it was so pretty.

Nika continued to step on Geoff's feet, but she mastered the basics in no time. She was like Superwoman compared to me. Geoff had been chosen as her partner because he best matched her height. Ern brushed the cobwebs off her own steps by practicing with Six and Haring, which left me, once again, entirely on my own. After running through the basic steps, we entered a discussion about what to do for our next session.

"If things really don't look like they're going to improve," said Six, offering a suggestion, "I do know a special practice method I can

recommend. Perhaps you'd care to give it a try?"

"Oh? What is it?" I asked.

Elena clearly did not like the sound of this, but because he'd been harmless until now she settled for warning him to be careful what he said. Six paid her no mind as he consumed the cookies and baked treats at the table. He ate far more than you would have expected for his appearance, and so we had a table filled with light snacks. Far more than usual, at that. Six hadn't stopped eating since he started, but he'd also decided that the clapping simply wasn't cutting it and had cast a string accompaniment for our practice. His service in this sense was commendable.

"It's simple," he replied. "You practice with someone you can't afford to fail with. How about Moritz? Given how busy your work schedule is, I bet you'd practice like your life depended on it."

"Moritz? Give me a break. He wouldn't show up even if we invited him," said Haring.

"Who said anything about inviting him? We'll just bring him here. Then he's ours."

Six seemed confident he could make it happen.

"Let's leave kidnapping off the table. He's very busy at the moment, and we'd only be causing him trouble," said Nika, who seemed sympathetic to her superior. "That, and our duties come to a complete halt if he were to collapse out of exhaustion or the like. And I don't want you anywhere near him anyway, Six. As soon as he hears your name his eyebrow twitches."

"If that's what Cap says, that's how it goes," said Elena.

"How rude," pouted Six. "He just happens to be involved in all the places I choose to visit."

"Because he's cleaning up after you, I bet," sniped Elena. "And you're always causing trouble for Cap too."

"It's not just you lot I'm causing trouble for. I cause trouble for everybody in equal measure."

It was true, however, that if I was told I'd have to share a dance with Moritz, fear would definitely have helped fuel my motivation. The idea of it sounded sadistic, however; I could imagine every click of the tongue for every time I stepped on his feet.

"I'm sure Reinald would be intrigued. Should I call on him instead?" offered Six. "If we made it so that each time you stepped on his feet, you'd leave a bruise or injure him in some way, I bet you'd be extra motivated. Perhaps we could contrive a shoe that would pierce his own with each misstep..."

"That's horrible!" I cried. "And it would only leave him unable to walk. No!"

"Tch," muttered Six. "Genius is so rarely understood."

Genius?! Enough with the terrifying suggestions!

However, what terrified me more was that Ern looked on board with Six's thinking.

"Putting aside the question of who, I think it is true that unless we have a way to push you, you'll never make it in time," she said. "You could practice all day and night, but it's still just twenty days until the party. That's a very big ask."

"Ern! Not you too! It's! Our! First! Day! I'm going to make it!"

"Highly unlikely. Practice is one thing, sure, but I think you should be putting just as much thought into exit strategies."

But even then, I'd still be in dire straits!

Whateley and Martina both stood together by the wall, looking worried.

"Ah!" exclaimed Elena. "Karen! About Bertrando Lorenzi, of the Bahre family!"

I sighed.

"Elena, I'm truly sorry about that! I wasn't lying or trying to cover anything up, I was just curious about the man, I swear!"

"Oh, I'm sure you have your reasons, and I'm not going to hold them against you. I just heard something recently—a rumor—and I wondered if it had gotten to you."

Seeing as Emil wasn't present, I was all ears. It turned out that the stories of Bertrando Lorenzi's secret love child had made their way through the ranks of the military.

"He's a man with many enemies, so I'm sure some are just spreading talk out of spite, but trouble is brewing, that much is certain. Whatever you do, whether it's just ignoring the rumors or responding to them, I think it's best to decide sooner rather than

later."

"You know, I find Bertrando to be a most fascinating character," remarked Six.

"Yeah, of course you would stay that, Six," spat Elena.

With the rumors spreading across the capital, it was only natural that some would choose to approach the man himself about it. One had even done so sarcastically, in a public place, but Bertrando had responded with bold confidence.

"I've been far and wide and done a great many things in my past," he'd said. "If the girl is a stunning beauty, then no doubt she is indeed my child. Unlike you, beautiful women can't seem to keep their hands off me."

He didn't even try to shrug the rumors off, and he showed no fear of them either. The person who'd confronted Bertrando had been looking for a confrontation, but they received only a derisive snort and chuckle for their efforts.

"I kind of expected it, but he's a bit weird, isn't he...?" I muttered.

"He's brimming with confidence, that's for sure," commented Haring, finding a strange sense in the story. "I see why the Bahre family adopted him."

That was the entire episode, but it was enough to tell me that he would have been a terrible father. I found myself feeling incredibly grateful to the man I thought of as my real father; he'd been so good about his raising me within the Kirsten family.

Unfortunately, there was no denying that rumors of my parentage had spread even further, and I'd have to talk to Emil about it sooner or later. I just hoped that the rumors didn't make it as far as Falkrum.

"Nika," I said then, remembering that I'd wanted to ask something of her. "There's something I wanted to ask Sir Reinald about. Would you mind passing a letter to him for me?"

"Not at all. If it's something important I can ascertain his schedule too."

"It's a personal matter, but nothing urgent, so don't feel that you have to hurry."

And besides, a visit to the imperial palace was time-consuming, both in terms of preparations and the trip there and back. I couldn't afford a visit given my current dire circumstances. In any case, our first day of practice came to an end, and the true hell that was my lessons began in earnest the following day.

Snacks and tea were laid out to keep morale high, and practice began anew. My head and my body refused to work together, and when practice came to a close my whole body ached. Everyone ate together, and the food was delicious. The chef's ability was highly praised, and everyone enjoyed conversation with the boys while they indulged in our meal.

When the boys excused themselves, the topic turned to that of Walter Kurt Lubeck. Elena and Haring hadn't actually met him in person.

"You've probably heard this from Ern already," said Elena, "but his squad serves directly under the emperor, and the vast majority of their work is covert. My impression of him is that he's very capable, and equally as arrogant."

"The captain of the squadron is more well-known for being rather extreme," added Haring. "He's a far more prominent figure than the vice captain. That said, they work closely together, and I've no desire to get to know Lubeck any better than I already do."

Elena and Haring both worked on the front lines, and neither had a favorable impression of Lubeck. It was like hearing people who had built a successful business from the ground up talk about someone who had simply inherited his own business from his parents.

Nika knew Lubeck, but she didn't have much in the way of a strong impression.

"I haven't talked to him very much. He comes across as friendly and easygoing at first, but you get a strange feel from the guy. Perhaps it's clearer to say that you can tell why the emperor puts so much trust in him."

"I...see..." I replied. "I've never met the emperor myself, but I think I understand what you mean."

"You can at least rest assured that he is not the type to make

untoward advances on women, and especially citizens of the empire. I don't think you have to be as concerned as Elena and Haring are, but if he's shown an interest in you, I just want you to be careful."

"The thing is, I don't even know *why* he's interested..."

"Unfortunately, I cannot offer any assistance."

"No, of course, and I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Where the emperor's orders were concerned, it was like a roll of the dice; one could not know how things would go. With that in mind, I would endeavor to proceed with caution.

"In which case, best decide on an escort for the party quickly, huh?" said Ern.

"She's right, Karen," Elena agreed. "An escort would be a good idea. Do you know anybody of reasonably high standing who might accompany you?"

"I'll see what I can do, but would such a man even agree to join me at the party? As Ern said when we spoke, my invitation comes directly from the emperor, so I have to choose wisely."

"Anybody who knows Karl will probably shut you down outright," said Six. "They'll assume he's on the hunt for a new mistress."

It pained me to admit it, but Six was right. He also saw fit to enlighten me with regards to Garnier, the Bud of the Blue Rose. It was a top-class tailoring establishment. They worked by appointment only, and new customers were only accepted by way of reference. Even with a reference, however, dress reservations had to be made more than a month in advance. It did not seem likely that Garnier would accept any sudden requests, but I decided I'd visit the following day and, if refused, look for other options.

We chatted for a little longer before everyone eventually left. Elena and Haring retired to their home next door, where Nika was staying for the evening. I was desperate to jump under the covers of my bed and bask in the bliss of their warmth, but I wouldn't have the pleasure just yet. Martina had asked for a moment to speak with Whateley and me earlier in the day, and so the three of us gathered in the manor's reception room.

"I am so sorry for the time," I said. "I know you said you didn't mind, but I never expected us to be up so late."

"Please, don't let it bother you," replied Martina. "I'm beyond flattered that you would invite a humble tutor like myself to join you for dinner. My siblings are also being looked after by some relatives this evening, so the time is not a concern."

"In that case, why don't you stay here tonight?" I offered. "Returning home at this hour is awfully dangerous."

"I...appreciate your generosity, but..."

"Lady Karen," said Whateley, cutting in. "Perhaps we can discuss the matter after we hear what Miss Martina would like to discuss?"

I happened to think it was a fine idea. I didn't like the idea of sending Martina home alone. Martina, for her part, looked stilted by nerves as she resolved to say her piece.

"I asked for your time today because I have a request. Would it be at all possible to hire me in the role of Conrad secretary?"

Neither Whateley nor I were expecting her proposal. Martina was a home tutor, after all. She had no experience in civil or administrative service as far as I was aware. Had she been bringing the matter of wages to the table, we might have been able to more easily accommodate her, but this was not so simple.

"I'm sure you have your reasons for asking, and perhaps you might share them with us?" asked Whateley.

He gestured for Martina to take a seat. There was a tension in the air, the weight of nervous energy. Martina's worried expression showed that she, too, knew she was asking far more than her position warranted. It was the kind of request that, depending on the family lord, might have resulted in indignant rage, and perhaps even Martina being thrown out of the manor. But like Whateley, I also wanted to hear the motivations behind her request, hoping that it might help me better understand it.

"I know the request is very sudden, and I apologize," Martina said. "I have studied accounting and economics, but I've never applied those skills in a practical setting, and so I am fully aware that a request like mine could be taken as a show of disrespect."

"Well, it certainly took us by surprise," I admitted. "But why are you interested in a secretarial position? Are you having some kind of issue in your work as a tutor?"

"Oh, nothing of the sort! Please don't misunderstand; I love children, and it brings me great joy to share knowledge. Every day has been nothing but fulfilling since you were kind enough to bring me into your employ."

"Thank you, Martina. I have seen how well you treat the boys and your efforts to see them improve. So please, there's no need to fear any repercussions. Why ask for a secretarial position?"

"I applied for the tutoring position because it allows me to put my skills to use, but...in truth, I have always wanted to make a career in the field of my studies."

She made it very clear to both Whateley and me that she was very fond of both Wendel and Emil. However, Martina loved books, and so it had always been her dream to work as a librarian at the imperial capital's library. Unfortunately, it was a dream she'd had to give up, because she did not meet the job criteria.

"Though you haven't worked with us for very long, it's very clear to me that you're an exceptionally hard worker," I said. "What criteria could have possibly blocked you from acquiring work as a librarian?"

"As you can see from the color of my hair, I'm Latorian," replied Martina. "We moved here when I was just a child, and I still have yet to receive my Arrendle citizenship. However, to earn that citizenship and to apply for a position with some authority, I first have to have lived in the capital for thirty years."

"If I'm not mistaken, the only way to considerably shorten that time period is by contribution to the empire, yes?"

"Correct. But so few have ever done so. I was born into a simple immigrant family. My parents worked to the bone just to cover my student fees."

"And as I recall, your parents don't live here in the capital. Have they always been working elsewhere to save money for your family?"

"They rarely returned to the capital. As soon as they safely saw my siblings, my uncle and aunty, and myself to the capital, they left. Their options for earning money were terribly limited here."

Martina was hesitant to say it aloud, but she had revealed her

Latorian heritage, and that meant it likely that her parents were engaged in mercenary work.

"I must admit to being a little shocked to hear that your parents are mercenaries," I said.

"Both are highly regarded, even in Latoria...or at least, they were. When they saw my love of reading and books, they knew that I would not be able to make a living by following in their footsteps."

The ongoing civil unrest in Latoria was another reason that Martina's family chose to move. Her parents had continued to send their earnings until quite recently, when Martina learned from her uncle and aunty that they were dead.

"I don't know the details, just that it happened on a job. Defending and attacking others was part and parcel of their work, so I always knew that this was coming, sooner or later. As much as it shames me to admit it, their loss has made life for us very difficult."

Every single member of the family, adults and children alike, was working. Martina had some savings, but there was no doubt now that she would not be able to pay for her siblings to go to school. This wasn't surprising, given that she had four of them to think about. Whateley had also told me some time ago that the whole family lived in a one-person apartment.

Put simply, this was not a problem that could be solved with a simple onetime loan.

"I know that it's a big ask to give a home tutor the responsibilities of a secretary, but I just thought that you and Whateley would at least be willing to listen to me. I am grasping at straws, I know, but I have nothing else."

Unfortunately, we couldn't just nod our heads, smile, and welcome Martina as our brand-new secretary. Conrad's present circumstances demanded we find some experienced, who could get to work immediately. We couldn't train someone up; we simply did not have the luxury of time. As it stood, *I* was practically in training already, and Whateley had far too much to bear. It was our hope that we might pick someone up from the rubble of Hugo & Co.

"I see," said Whateley. "So in chasing a long-held dream, you're now looking to provide a higher income for your family."

"Yes," replied Martina, her fists clenched and her face red.

He did not mince words, but the situation was what it was. I understood Martina's feelings; she was praying for a chance, that she might snap it up in a heartbeat. The sad truth was that we could not give her an answer immediately. Whateley knew this too, and we asked Martina to let us think on the matter.

"As you know, we are fortunate to be under the guardianship of the imperial prince, but having come from Falkrum, our position is extremely precarious," I said. "And so our expectations for the position of tutor and secretary are naturally very different. The matter will have to be shelved for the time being."

"No, of course, and I wasn't expecting an answer immediately," replied Martina. "I promise you, I haven't forgotten the importance of my work as the boys' home tutor, so please, I beg of you..."

"You do not have to fear for your continued employment," said Whateley. "Right, Lady Karen?"

"Indeed. The boys adore you, Martina, and you get along well with everyone in the household. We are all impressed by your work ethic."

I couldn't help noticing a slump in Martina's shoulders as she left for home. It broke my heart. It must have taken so much courage for her to approach us as she had.

"Thirty years for an immigrant to attain citizenship," I commented. "It's just so *long*."

"The empire invades neighboring nations and consumes them. Their actions breed hatred and enmity, so it's only natural that they expect trust to be earned. Though it must be said that it is generosity on the empire's part that a system is in place for all to work without fear of discrimination."

"I suppose you're right. In other countries, slavery wouldn't be completely out of the question, would it?"

"In the Allied Nations of Yaw, in the desert, it is not uncommon for citizens of invaded nations to meet such a fate. They lose their human rights. In this respect, falling under the control of the empire is perhaps preferable."

"The lesser of two evils, I suppose..."

Thinking on the topic brought into stark relief just how much power Moritz had at his disposal, being able to just give me honorary citizenship *and* five thousand gold coins. It impressed upon me just how important it was to him to keep Reinald's secrets under wraps.

As for Martina, Whateley told me he wanted to look a little more into her past and circumstances, and at that we called it a night. Finally, I was able to dive into the heavenly bliss that was my bed.

"Charlot," I called. "You can sleep wherever you like! You're more than welcome here!"

Wendel slept with Blacky in his room, and that left poor Charlot with nowhere to go. She settled for the sofa. Have I mentioned how very adorable she was? It was my ardent wish to hug her over and over and over again while she was still so small and fluffy.

I fell asleep watching her and woke with my body screaming after the previous day's practice. Not that I was given any reprieve; it was straight into another day of the same thing. I suppose the only positive thing that could be said about it all was that I was finally getting the exercise I needed!

Elena dropped by after work, as she was now in central affairs after her marriage to Haring, and Ern made sure to finish work on time so she could check in on things. In that sense, it was nice that each day was so lively.

But am I ever going to get any better at this dancing thing...?

8: The Promise of a Home-Cooked Dinner

"So practice has been going well, I take it?"

"Er, I...suppose so? I'm still a long way from being able to dance in public, mind you. I still put everybody around me on edge."

"But it's simple once you have the fundamentals down, no? You might step on your partner's feet once or twice, but you just go on like nothing happened."

"Far easier said than done. And what if you injure the person?"

Unfortunately, dancing practice was the only update of note that I could share with Reinald. I had made good progress, but Martina and Whateley were still always convening after practice to discuss improvements for the following day. That and Elena assuring me that I would be fine were now practice staples.

"Was it difficult for you, Sir Reinald? Learning to dance, I mean."

"Difficult...? No, I didn't feel that it was particularly troubling. I practiced a few times, and after that it was just a matter of keeping in time with those around me. Isn't that how it works? You watch, you imitate, and in that way you learn?"

Clearly Reinald was a member of the naturally gifted club. I had known all along, but I still considered all of the club's members my mortal enemies.

"I envy people like you, who can say such things. It's so very difficult for me."

"Are you...*sulking*?"

"Most certainly *not*."

I muttered my grievances as I took in another mouthful of baby beef cheek stew. It was so very tender, but also the very height of opulence, when you considered the age of the cattle.

I was meeting with Reinald for the meal he'd promised me. I

arrived at the palace for lunch, and the plan was to visit the dressmaker afterward for fitting and finalizing a design. I'd then return home for another round of dancing practice.

Lunch was superb, and I was so grateful to Reinald for having fruit juice served instead of wine when I mentioned that I had an appointment following lunch. He was also considerate when it came to his entourage of guards, all of whom were in hiding. It made the whole thing more relaxing.

"But are you certain you'll be ready in time?" Reinald asked. "Given your sense of things, perhaps it might be best to come down with a sudden illness?"

"Oh, not you too..." I muttered. "Ern keeps telling me I should injure my leg. Everybody is far too worried about it all."

"Which is to say you're confident you'll be ready in time, then?"

"I..." I paused for a second. "I'll be fine."

What else was I supposed to say?

"I tried asking the emperor his reason for inviting you," said Reinald, "but I could not get a straight answer out of him. It seems highly unlikely he is looking for another mistress, but it is curious all the same."

"It is enough that you tried to find out. I am most grateful. I suppose I'll just have to make the best of it."

"Be bold, but do not be careless. The Lubecks' eldest son is yet another mystery."

Reinald did not speak the last part of his comments loudly, which told me it was not a topic to pursue. I decided to move on to something else that was on my mind.

"Ern mentioned that those who are single need not come with a partner. Will you be attending on your own?"

"Oh, me? I've asked Lily to attend as my second."

I was lucky I did not choke on my food.

"Which is sure to get people buzzing with talk, no?"

"I wouldn't say that. People know that Lily and I have met on a few occasions. It's more a step toward making our alliance more official. In any case, I'm more concerned with those who still maintain neutral positions."

"I can't make any promises with regards to the Bahre family. You know I want to be of service to you, but I have no interest in this potential father of mine."

I, of course, knew that I wasn't in a position to deny being involved in it all, regardless of my personal feelings. Still, I wanted to make them clear.

"And I respect your feelings on the matter. However, even if Lorenzi *is* your father, the Bahres will not be moved to action just because they've added one more member to their family tree. That's why I feel an introduction is meaningful."

"Which is to say the matter of my parentage is a secondary concern for them."

"I cannot say for certain. All we can do is wait until you meet."

Which reminds me—I was set to meet with the Bahre family three days after my lunch with Reinald. It was finally happening, but I was so exhausted from all the dancing that I couldn't muster much in the way of emotion for my (potential) father.

I say "much," but honestly, I mean "any."

More than anything else, I was worried about the impact it might have on my father back in Falkrum. I bet Arno felt very much the same way too...

"I was worried that perhaps it might have been too large a serving, but I'm glad to see that you're enjoying the meal."

"It is truly delightful," I said.

The cuisine was truly delectable. I couldn't help feeling a little jealous that Reinald was served such luxurious cuisine every day, but according to Nika he was not the type to slowly savor his food. Ordinarily, he preferred what could be prepared and consumed quickly. Taste was a distant, secondary concern. It was just like Reinald to be that way, but I bet it sapped the enthusiasm out of his chefs.

We were served custard with raspberries for dessert, and to my surprise a platter of chocolate to go with it. It was amazing, and it fired off a new topic of conversation.

"You mentioned partners for the party earlier," said Reinald. "Do you intend to bring an escort?"

"Yes. I'm thinking I'll ask Claude Badinter to accompany me. He isn't a noble, but he *is* an honorary citizen, and well-known at that. We also hail from the same home, which I think will be enough for most."

"Ah, that old gentleman."

"You know him?"

"To the empire he was a detested foe, and one who helped bring an end to the war. Now, he sometimes accompanies our diplomats. He even received an invitation from the emperor himself to serve as an officer."

"I did not know that."

"He declined, citing his age, and remarkably the emperor accepted that as reason enough. Badinter's impression, then, is a rather favorable one."

Claude was out of the capital on business, so I was still waiting upon his reply to my invitation. I'd considered my options carefully; I thought of Claude as appropriately bold and talkative. He was also my best bet when it came to keeping advances from other men to a minimum. Ordinarily a man of Claude's age wouldn't be particularly helpful in this regard, but that was not the case for me; after all, I was the widow of Margrave Conrad.

I knew Claude was the type who could easily shrug off any rumors that might arise as a result of us attending the party together, and I didn't think getting him involved would result in any trouble. Most importantly, Whateley had given his stamp of approval.

Now I just have to steer clear of Lubeck...

"I'm glad you would say as much, given that I've nobody else to invite. The only issue now is whether or not he accepts the invitation."

"I was going to recommend Moritz if you were struggling to find someone. That said, should you find yourself needing an escort, please let me know."

"Moritz? Oh, yes, thank you. The Bachems have been invited, I presume?"

"Yes, and he tends to find himself drowning in female company if he attends such parties alone."

"Then I may call upon that favor should Claude happen to turn me down."

"And I will make sure to tell him not to get angry should you step on his feet."

Reinald then stood from his chair with a chuckle and offered me his hand. It was picturesque, and if I hadn't known him as well as I did, I'm sure I would have mistaken him for a fairy-tale prince. He was a far scarier person in reality, but there was something about him that made you almost forget that fact.

I took his hand, intrigued, and felt myself pulled up from my chair.

"I find myself curious to see just how well your dancing practice is going," he said. "We won't have accompaniment, but we'll be doing little more than practicing the steps. Let's work off a little of that luxurious lunch with some exercise, shall we?"

"Eep!" I yelped.

"There's no need to be scared. Six has already informed me of your...awkwardness when it comes to physical activities."

Damn that mage!

Reinald led me to an open space, then wrapped his hand around my back. I'd practiced enough by now to know that dancing put your body in very close proximity to your partner's, but when I thought of the disgrace I might bring upon myself, I couldn't help blushing.

"B-But I'm going to step all over your feet!" I cried. "You know that, don't you?"

"Remember what I said; just go on like nothing happened. It's your partner who suffers, not you."

That doesn't make it any easier for me!

Okay, Karen. Focus. How do the first steps go again...?

"Just don't fall over and get injured!" I said. "I'm begging you!"

"Relax, I've got you."

Argh! Why don't I *have* his *boundless confidence?!*

I'd practiced with Whateley and Geoff, but the change in my usual partner made things feel entirely different. Reinald was nothing if not sure of himself, and I tried to explain to him that there were really no guarantees where I was concerned. Naturally, I ended

up stepping on his foot, which threw me into a panic.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry!" I shrieked. "Er, what's the next step again...?"

"Keep your eyes up, Karen. Don't let your posture break. You need to keep your back straight and your confidence high."

In heels, stepping on a pair of fragile leather shoes could result in great pain for your partner, but this could be avoided via judicial choice of footwear. The problem was that one mistake triggered the next; if I fell into a panic my mind would go blank. The result would be a cascade of errors.

"Don't get distracted," said Reinald. "Keep your arms straight and your gaze unwavering. Don't let your worry show in your face."

Panic was only going to invite a fall, and it was all too likely that I'd bring down whoever it was that was trying to keep me upright. If I were to trip on the hem of my own dress, the party was sure to end in tragedy. I'd never be able to attend a high-class social event ever again.

Reinald, however, was as graceful as I'm sure you can imagine. He'd said that dancing was simple, and it really did come easy to him. I felt as if I were at his whim, like a kite on a thread. When my steps saw me about to tumble he kept me upright, and while I gritted my teeth through his assistance, I simply couldn't find my rhythm.

I tried so very hard to do my best, but my confidence was utterly decimated.

"I told you, didn't I...?" I muttered.

"Focus on moving your feet rather than complaining. You're slouching again."

It did not escape my notice that Reinald had in him the makings of a strict teacher. I felt the palm of his hand tighten its grip on my back, and in that strength I found safety. Would that my feet could keep up. Unfortunately, even with the imperial prince's guidance, I found no miraculous improvement. I had hoped I might find a miracle in this dreamlike scenario, but alas, I was met only with harsh truths.

Thought etched itself into Reinald's features, and I felt hesitant to

speak. I was convinced that I'd proven myself even worse than his expectations, and I wanted to burst into tears.

"If I were going as your escort, then we'd be able to bluff our way through things," said Reinald.

"Oh, give me a break," I said. "We'd only stand out all the more."

"Then perhaps you might take my earlier offer and go with Moritz? He'll be far better at supporting you on the dance floor than an elderly gentleman."

I moaned. I knew he was doing his best to console me, but the truth of the matter was that I sucked. Reinald may as well have just told me that he didn't think I'd be ready for the ball in time.

"There's no need to be so down about it, Karen," he said. "Your case is...unique, but that's not to say there isn't still hope."

"That's what everyone says!"

And yes, I just stepped on your foot again! Don't blame me!

Ugh! Why am I so bad at this?! Somebody tell me!

I knew what I was supposed to be doing, but my body simply wouldn't respond in kind. Just when I thought I was on top of things, everything changed again. What was even the point of such social dances, anyway?! I wished we could just be done with them!

Reinald seemed to feel the pressure emanating from me, and his movements slowed to something more relaxed and easier for me to follow.

"It's okay, you can be honest," I said. "I'm horrible. You can say it. I'm well aware of it, which at least makes it less painful. And it's not like others aren't saying it almost every day anyway. Even my younger brother can't believe it."

"By the way," started Reinald. "About your request, in the letter you sent..."

"You're dodging the issue now, aren't you? You sounded so confident just moments ago, and now look at you."

I looked up and saw his troubled expression. He was looking for the right words. It was unusual to see him so lost in his attempts to be considerate.

I don't stand a shot in hell of being ready for the ball in time...

The moment felt like the final nail in the coffin that was my

chances, and I stopped dancing entirely.

"I... I apologize," said Reinald.

"It's okay. It's not your fault I can't dance."

"Be that as it may, with practice you *will* improve. Try not to let it get you down; you are not defined by your ability to dance."

Our differences in coordination were on clear display, and I felt mentally bruised and broken. I wanted to lash out at something, anything, but I swallowed the feelings and pushed them away. Reinald was the crown prince, the potential future emperor, and our relationship did not allow for such outbursts.

"I should be the one apologizing..." I said.

Can I even do another round of this when I get home?

I had no choice but to try, and yet a part of me was already praying that I might somehow break my legs. With my spirit broken, I stepped away from Reinald and sat down. Reinald was still feeling apologetic, and he passed me a cup of tea, which helped soothe my nerves.

"About your bracelet..." he said. "The one you mentioned in your letter."

"Oh, yes," I muttered, stirring from my malaise. "How did it go? Was it difficult for you to secure a letter of introduction?"

"No, but it will not be ready by the time of the ball, and I thought I should tell you."

"That's fine. It's not about the ball; it's just about having it."

This was the matter at the heart of the letter I'd recently asked Nika to deliver to Reinald. It broke my heart to realize that the bracelet had been stolen, but I knew that crying about it would not see it returned to my hand. However, I so loved the design and the subtlety of its colors, and I wanted another if it were at all possible.

All the jewelry and accessories I currently owned did not go particularly well with the formal dresses popular in the imperial capital, and so I needed something made up for the emperor's birthday party. To that end, I thought of asking Reinald to introduce me to the engraver who made my bracelet. I had considered other options, but the original bracelet had been a gift, and Reinald had even handled organizing the repairs for me. I thus wrote him asking

if he might secure me a letter of introduction to the original engraver.

Reinald already knew how the original bracelet had been lost, and I was certain he wouldn't mind doing this for me. The proposal he offered, however, took me completely by surprise.

"I will provide you the letter," he said, "but as for the bracelet in question, allow me to handle that. Feel free to order something different when you visit."

"I'm sorry? What? No, really, you don't have to..." I started, taken off guard.

"That bracelet was designed specifically for you," he stated. "Given the fact that you did not simply lose it, I insist that you let me gift it to you once more."

"But even when it last required repairs you paid for those out of your own pocket," I said. "You're even going to introduce me to the engraver who made it. Please, at least let me pay you for the service."

"I must refuse."

"But I'm begging you."

"Then let me offer it as an apology for today. I am sorry it left you so dispirited."

Weird. I was the overbearing one until now, but suddenly the shoe's on the other foot. But the guy keeps on spending his money on me...

"Regardless of how our practice went, I can't help but feel terrible that you keep doing such things for me," I said. "I only wish there was some way that I could thank you."

"You make a fine conversational partner," Reinald replied, as if that were reason enough. "Speaking with you is refreshing."

"But I feel I always come out ahead. I don't feel as though I am doing much to help you."

Did I have anything I could offer him? We'd just discovered that I was a horrible dance partner, but I also couldn't match him in terms of wealth and connections either. And it wasn't like I could offer him magically engineered marvels the way Ern could. I had elementary accounting abilities, and as the head of our household, I was

admittedly growing something of a thicker skin and becoming more confident.

Other than that... I can skin and dress deer and rabbits...?

How is that *any sort of a thank-you...?*

"Sir Reinald," I said. "I don't suppose you enjoy wild hare meat, do you?"

"On occasion."

The topic was nothing if not sudden, I admit. However, in terms of things I had any sort of confidence in, dressing wild animals was one, and so I powered through.

"I have a little experience when it comes to dressing deer," I said. "And I just so happened to do it not so long ago, at that. It went better than expected and, with some herbal flavoring, we whipped up a delicious stew. It's not gamey, as you might expect, and even Six, who lets his criticism be known even when you don't ask for it, thought it was delightful. I'd very much like to treat you to some one day."

I spoke the words as they came to me, and Reinald reacted with great shock. It wasn't an expression I saw often on the man. I probably could have counted the times on a single hand, in fact.

"I...might have been overstating my abilities," I admitted. "It was our cook who handled most of the flavoring with the herbs and whatnot."

I was confident when it came to flavoring for Japanese cuisine and the sort of simple soup I had once made for Arno, but even when I'd been alive in Japan, I wasn't much one for herbs and spices.

"That said, it *is* delicious, I assure you," I said in closing.

It was here, after having said my piece in its entirety, that I realized I might have been offering it to entirely the wrong person. It was a good example of when *not* to speak off the cuff, without forethought.

Oddly enough, Reinald brightened at the offer, and for some reason he even saw fit to ruffle my hair with a palm.

"Er, Sir Reinald...?" I uttered, confused.

I looked up at him, but he said nothing. His expression was placid

and his gaze was distant, as if chasing old memories.

"Forget it," I said. "I hope you'll come to have a dish sometime."

"I look forward to it."

I was a little perturbed to have my hair all messed up, admittedly, but when I saw Reinald's face I didn't have it in me to complain about it. In any case, it wouldn't take long to fix.

We spent the rest of our time discussing more serious matters. Reinald said he would attend the meeting with the Bahre family if he had time. His interest was in the lord of the family, and he seemed uninterested in the question of my parentage.

Then, of course, there was the matter of his father, Emperor Karl. This seemingly was *the* main topic of the day, and Reinald had some serious warnings for me. I could see in his eyes that this was not something he was going to joke about.

"It's unclear what he's thinking," Reinald said, "but in any case, be very careful how you answer him. Obviously you can't refute him in conversation, but you mustn't show too much understanding either."

So agreeing and praising the guy was out of the question too? I suppose that kind of thing was expected of someone in service to a king or emperor, but when I was about to ask Reinald about it, he put a finger to his lips. It was a way for him to make another point.

"You mustn't ask questions now," he said. "Understood?"

I wasn't sure why, but I knew Reinald had his reasons, and so I nodded along to the rest of his warnings to me. When he was done, it was time for us both to head off to our next appointments; Reinald to the palace, and myself to the dressmaker. On my way, I picked up a companion.

"You're late. Do you have any idea how long you kept me waiting? I even ordered a second cup of tea!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I replied. "But I'm not *that* late."

"You call *that* an apology?"

"I *said* I'm sorry..."

That's right, it was my cousin Marie. She looked as showy as always, but now that I'd seen the way Duke Lily Ingrid Tuna dressed, Marie struck more as cute than anything else. As for why

she was along for the ride, well, isn't it obvious? I wanted her opinion on the dress I was going to have made; she'd done a good job of picking out an outfit for me the first time we'd met, after all.

Still, when Marie realized that she wasn't going to get more of an apology out of me, she crossed her arms indignantly.

"Are you *really* getting a dress fitted at Garnier?" she asked.

"Yes, I assure you it's true. But I'm so clueless when it comes to fashion, so if you help me I'll be sure to see that you get an introduction."

"Then I will give you my very best, I promise you."

The fitting was taking place later than originally planned. I'd actually visited the day after Lubeck had given me that coin, but unfortunately the owner was out. The assistant manager had seen to me instead, but she told me what I had expected: They were fully booked, with no room for new reservations.

I could have simply walked out at that, but I had in my possession the coin that Lubeck had given me. Apparently it was a special currency unique to VIPs. That, together with Lubeck's name, brought out an entirely new reaction in the assistant manager, who promised me a reservation in an instant. However, without any seamstresses on hand, I was told to return home while they organized the schedule. They later sent a messenger requesting I visit on this particular day.

"I've always wanted to see the place," mused Marie. "It's so incredibly hard to get an introduction, you see. Oh, which reminds me, I'd like a hat made in addition to the introduction you promised. It doesn't have to be Garnier crafted."

"Anything as long as you help me with my dress. But if you're getting a hat made for yourself, then have a nice one made for me too. Something fashionable I can wear on formal occasions."

"I've got you covered. I am a true *master* when it comes to spending other people's money."

She sounded so confident as she hummed to herself that I could have cried with relief. After all, Garnier was the cream of the crop. The very definition of professional craftsmen. So who better for advice than Marie?

She *was* Marie, however, and her outspoken nature was irrepressible and on full display, even at such a high-class dressmaker. In fact, even when faced with the graceful smile of Lady Garnier herself, Marie didn't so much as flinch. When the seamstresses brought out the material for my dress, she made her thoughts clear.

"Wait just a moment," she said. "Violet just won't do for Karen. It's not an awful choice by any means, but it'll take away from her natural complexion. Go with a different color please."

"The Lubeck family is quite partial to purples, however..."

"All the more reason to show us something different. Karen isn't a high-standing noble on the level of the Lubeck family, she's a foreigner who only just arrived recently in the capital. It would be disrespectful to attempt to match the colors of such a family."

"Yes! What she said!" I piped up. "It was something of a whim that saw me given an introduction, and I'd hate to harm the Lubeck family reputation by wearing purple. So please, can we see a few other options? Oh, that vermilion is just gorgeous!"

It was a double-team tactic. The Lubeck family introduction had made me weary of Garnier, and this had proven my suspicions correct. I couldn't have been more grateful to Marie. I would have gladly kissed her feet had she demanded it. She was truly the best. She glimmered like the sun, spreading its glorious light upon us all.

"In the imperial capital, jewelry and accessories are all about subtle details, which means dresses appear rather uncomplicated from the front, without any excess puff. It's the back of the dress that displays the bulk of the lavish embroidery."

"This is to showcase the jewelry?" I asked.

"Exactly. It's because of Falkrum's layered, puffy dresses that the jewelry and accessories are so gaudy; it's the only way to make them stand out. Speaking of which, what are you going to do about a necklace?"

"I'm going to take a look around later, but I was also told that I'd be able to see some here. Isn't that right, Lady Garnier?"

"Why, of course. I've called our store engraver over. Take your time and enjoy all we have to offer."

Perhaps you've noticed why I was up among the clouds. You see, after days of dull, monotonous routine, it was here that I could truly indulge in the joys of just talking with other women.

"Seeing as you won't be matching your dress to the Lubeck family, hmm... Perhaps this embroidered hairpiece might be a nice addition?" offered Lady Garnier. "Tie your hair loosely with it and the strings will gracefully follow the form of your neck."

The relaxed Lady Garnier was a portly woman whose every gesture oozed elegance. She dressed lavishly, which I assumed was only appropriate given that her dealings were usually with the high-class nobility. I had thus assumed that she might have a hard time getting along with a walk-in pleb like myself, but she was the very portrait of calm and composed from the moment we met. This was in large part thanks to the fact that her shop always had seamstresses on standby, regardless of how busy they were. When I'd first visited, the assistant manager had actually been putting on an act when she'd said there were no seamstresses available. The truth was that she wanted to buy some time to discuss things with Lady Garnier herself.

"Our many quality seamstresses mean we can give every outfit the attention to detail it deserves," explained Lady Garnier. "And while we rarely accept work on a tight schedule, you are a young woman we have heard a lot about, Lady Conrad."

Or so she said. I felt that the impact of the Lubeck name was the far bigger factor. Still, Lady Garnier was quick to change things up as soon as she was made aware that my dress did not need to meet said family's preferences.

"How about this for the neck?" she said, displaying a piece for me. "Your skin is like marble, and it brings out the embroidered patterns."

"Oh my, you're so right," said Marie. "But it's a touch lacking with embroidery alone, don't you think?"

"A little gold and silver threading plus a few well-placed jewels will see to that. It's beautiful to look at from afar, and yet it does not take away from Lady Conrad's own beauty. You're free to choose accessories along with your dress as part of your reservation, so

shall I have it made?”

“Superb. I think it looks stunning. What do you think, Karen?”

“Yes. It’s very pretty.”

She could ask me all she wanted, but I was little more than an amateur when it came to this stuff. If it wasn’t too ostentatious, it was fine by me, and fortunately Lady Garnier was an expert in subtlety. Her shop was not one of generational reputation; she’d build her name on her own, with her exceptional work.

“You don’t seem entirely convinced,” commented Marie. “But it’s certainly not excessively lavish, and that style isn’t a good look for you anyway. Perhaps one of those flowers crafted from thin material? They’re in vogue at the moment, aren’t they? That, and with Garnier doing the work for you, nobody’s going to think it looks cheap.”

“In which case, might I recommend this as a suitable material? While a touch more expensive, it’s truly stunning. Depending on your budget we can also decorate it with crystal shards.”

“The budget won’t be an issue,” said Marie. “Show us anything and everything that might look good on her.”

“Oh my, how delightful. Then, allow me to show you the finest we have to offer.”

Marie and Lady Garnier were clearly having a ball. Their exchange on fashion and dress particulars continued, and they were careful to ask for my input as well. It was not at all the experience I’d been expecting. That said, I couldn’t help worrying about Geoff, who was elsewhere and left waiting while all of this was going on.

All the materials were picked out, all my measurements were taken, and with the main details all discussed, Marie and I left to do some casual shopping. The two of us both had new hats at the end of it, and we were all smiles as we chatted over tea.

“I’m so glad I found such a nice hat! Thank you, Marie!” I beamed.

“And if anything else should come up, Lady Garnier said that they’d send word, so everything should work out fine. But tell me; why did you buy two hats that are so similar? Did the design appeal to you?”

"One of them is for a friend of mine, Ern."

I'd found a hat that I just knew would look great on Ern. The decorative elements were quite different, but I suppose in terms of general design it was not too dissimilar from my own. When Ern's mind was elsewhere she cared even less about fashion than me, and so I'd thought that maybe if I bought her a nice hat, she might be a little more thoughtful in that area. And I didn't think it was all that big a deal seeing as it wasn't too expensive anyway.

"So it's true that she's staying with you at the Conrad home, then?" Marie asked, nodding to herself when I mentioned Ern's name. "You're housing one of the most famous people in the capital, you realize?"

"You know Ern?" I asked.

"She's the imperial capital's great hope for the future. Everything she touches turns to gold. Her inventions are like something out of dreams, and people clamor to get their hands on what she makes. Her name pops up all over the place, and when I heard that she hailed from Falkrum originally, I couldn't help it; my curiosity was piqued."

It was then, however, that Marie's expression darkened somewhat. She sipped on her tea—which she preferred straight—then asked me directly what was on her mind.

"They say she has temper issues. Are you quite all right with her in your home? She hasn't been making things hard on you, has she?"

"No, not in the slightest," I replied. "She has her issues, just like anybody, but she's a wonderful person at heart. I've known her since we were both students, so we know how to handle one another."

"And she hasn't been throwing plates around or anything like that?"

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It's just what I've heard," said Marie, shrugging. "Apparently, some soldier saw fit to insult her in public, and she saw him flipped upside down and dropped on his head. There are also stories of her throwing tools and whatnot at her assistants. There's no end to such stories."

"Maybe sometimes her words are misconstrued, but she's not the sort of person to do such a thing without reason. She's nothing but kind to all of our servants, and she's been great with Wendel and my brother; she even teaches them when she has time. If it's worrying you, then come by sometime and see for yourself; I'd be happy to introduce you to her."

"No, I'm just glad to hear that things are fine. She's garnered a lot of attention, and for a wide variety of reasons, so just be careful if any suspicious types get too close."

"She's fine. I'm telling you."

"I apologize. I don't mean to speak badly of your friend. Just be careful. You've kids at your home."

"Okay, I will. But I don't think anything strange is going to happen at home...probably."

Apparently one of Marie's lovers was a man in the military, which allowed her access to the rumors he heard at work. I was hoping we might end our cup of tea on more casual girl talk, but unfortunately we weren't done discussing more serious topics of conversation. Marie seemed to read my expression, and she let out a sigh.

"I know I can't really speak, given my direct family, but your brother, huh?" she uttered. "Yes, he and Achim are both doing fine. Neither look unwell, and life for both of them is going smoothly, at least as far as work is concerned. If anything, Arno looks healthier now than he ever did in Falkrum."

This, you see, was the other reason I'd invited Marie to my dress fitting.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"He still seems a bit pale, though. That said, his superior, Count Baillard, is known as one of the more generous among the imperial princess's faction. Pacifist that he is, I'm sure Arno gets along with the man just fine."

Ever since Arno had sided with Wilhelmina and become one of her secretarial aides, it was difficult for me to reach out to him directly. That was why I'd approached Marie to act as our go-between. She hated the idea at first. Abhorred it, even. After all, she'd come to the imperial capital especially to cut ties with her

family, and she wanted anything *but* contact with the Kirstens. Fortunately, when we discussed the issue further, she begrudgingly accepted.

"He's not good in positions of leadership," Marie continued. "He's built to take orders. I think being here in his new role takes some of the usual burden of responsibilities from his shoulders."

"What an awful thing to say."

"Prove me wrong, then. A coward is a coward, and that's the end of it."

"You don't think you've said anything awful at all, do you?"

"No. I'm just saying that some people are better suited to being a member of the nobility than others. I like Arno just fine if we're only talking about him being my cousin."

She was so very bold now. Fortunately, Marie was able to remain in the capital even after visiting Arno at his new home. Arno respected her wishes and even told her to call upon him if she ever required any further support.

"He told me to tell you not to work yourself too hard," Marie said. "Oh, and Achim was rewarded for something or the other and is all set to be granted knighthood in the coming days."

"Achim? Oh, but then again, he's so conscientious about his duties that shouldn't be surprising. He's moving up in the world."

"Do send him something to help him celebrate the moment. He looked so very earnest when he told me to pass the news to you. He said he'll come to see you as soon as he has the time."

"Thank you for letting me know, Marie. And yes, I'll send him something which I'll need you to pass along. Sorry, but I hope you don't mind keeping this up for us."

You might imagine that Marie would use this arrangement to her advantage, but when it came to maintaining ties between Arno and myself, she asked for nothing. I'd of course agreed to buy her the hats she asked for, but I knew she wouldn't have accepted them if I'd offered them as a thank-you for talking to Arno. She'd changed so much since we'd known each other in Falkrum.

"I suppose everything changes," I muttered.

The fact gnawed at me, because there was a time once where I

never could have imagined that Arno and I would be split by a difference in opinion. Marie, for her part, simply ate a little more of her dessert before finally deciding to speak.

"You realize that includes you too, yes? Or have you not noticed?"

"Huh?"

"You *actually* smile now. You used to be so uptight."

I thought back to the discussion I'd had with Ern about whether it was our bodies or our lived experiences that shaped our behavior and our minds.

"Just for personal reference, what sort of a person was I back then?" I asked.

"As a child, it was very hard to think of you as cute. What I mean is, your mother and father always called you that, but I always felt that your smiles never came from the heart. It was as if you were always on guard, and merely putting on a 'good child' act. You weren't easy to be around, if I'm being honest. You're *so* much easier to talk to now."

"Oh, I see. I... Well, I'm sorry, Marie."

"Yes, well, rest assured you're still as stupid and dense as you used to be."

"Why would you even feel the need to add that?"

Achim had said similar in the past. I suppose the people who thought to look saw a glimpse of who I really was. And yet I wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Still, I wanted to think that being where I was, chatting over tea with Marie was...ultimately a good thing. At the very least, things were easier for me in the capital than in Falkrum, though I thought Arno might cry were he to hear it.

"In any case, you've changed," said Marie. "Though, I suppose that's what love does to a person. The warmth of His Highness's heart has opened the door to your own."

Huh?

"He's amazing for having taken you in, so to speak," she continued. "Though I suppose one never can tell when love will strike, and in whom. But please, Karen, don't take it too seriously. I'm sure you know full well already, but a noble from a fallen nation

and a prince? It's just not meant to be. You'll only end up hurt, so be sure to break things off before it comes to that."

Now *this* was a topic that I could not ignore.

Did you say "love," Marie?

"When you say love, are you talking about me?" I asked.

"Who else is there? Why would I meet with you and discuss a stranger's love life?"

"Er, no, that's not what I mean. I don't understand what it has to do with the prince."

"Huh? Aren't the two of you a couple?"

"The two of who?"

"You and the prince."

Why in the world would she think that?

Marie noticed the furrowing of my brow and grew suddenly suspicious.

"You just told me that the two of you had lunch together. A lunch the two of you had to make time for. Alone."

"Well, yes, but that's just part of his official duties. I mean, it's not like he doesn't have lunch with other people too. You're getting things mixed up."

"But you've been close for some time now. Wasn't he the reason you moved to the capital?"

"You really *do* have the wrong idea. I came here because being in the capital makes the future that much easier for us."

"Sounds like a convenient excuse to me."

"I'm telling you the truth!"

So Marie had clearly gotten entirely the wrong idea. Yes, I'd met with Reinald for lunch and we'd chatted during it, but that was it. Had I really crossed any boundaries? Fortunately, for all the gossiping she listened to, Marie wasn't the type to go spreading it. Still, she looked troubled.

"Well, what now? Very few believe the rumors surrounding the prince, Duke Tuna, and the general's daughter, but everybody's talking about it," she said.

"Well, it's not like we can stop them."

"Yes, I know, it's just...you're wrapped up in that whole Bahre

issue too. Everything is so complicated when it comes to you."

Much of my problems were bridges I'd have to cross when I came to them, but I didn't think the Bahre family's issues were my responsibility. That there was talk about Reinald and a general's daughter was news to me, however. I had seen the duke myself, and so it didn't surprise me that she was the subject of gossip. I'd already heard that Reinald had something going on with one of his father's concubines, and there were countless such stories floating around, so I stopped digging into them entirely.

In the carriage on the way home, I felt it only right that I apologize to Geoff.

"I got so caught up in our chat that it went far longer than I expected. I'm sorry."

"As long as you enjoyed yourself," replied the guard. "You've been practicing your steps almost nonstop of late."

The man was a saint. It was his job, yes, but he'd essentially been waiting all day as I traipsed about shopping and sipping tea. He must have been exhausted.

"More importantly, thank you for the gift for Chelsea," said Geoff.

"I know it's nothing fancy, but she loves being in the garden, and I worry."

Yes, it's true; I actually bought *three* hats. Along with the hat I'd bought for Ern, I'd also bought another. It was comparatively simpler in design and more practical than the others, and for that reason I felt it wouldn't draw Chelsea any excess attention. That said, with its embroidery and decorative flowers, it was very pretty. Chelsea was still very uncomfortable leaving the house for walks, and so the garden was where she basked in the sun. Ben had even been working on a small area of the flowerbeds for her. I'd bought the hat for those occasions.

When I thought about it more, I found myself glad that the boys had picked up Jill and Charlot and that we'd brought the two animals into our lives. They just made for smiles, both in Chelsea and in the rest of us. Having Blacky there to greet him when he came home always brought a big grin to Wendel's face.

"Charlot and Blacky get along well enough, which is such a relief,"

I commented.

"Blacky is very used to being around other cats, dogs, and people. He knows how to handle Charlot."

"He's always been such a friendly feline, so I assumed things would be fine, but Charlot certainly was tense to begin with. Still, I never imagined that Wendel would be at the center of a struggle for love and attention. He's just...he's so popular with those two..."

"With all due respect, they're cats," commented Geoff.

"Yes, but aren't you just a *little* envious? *I* want cats fighting over me! Jill is always with Emil, and it's not like I'm complaining, but..."

"It's just a matter of time. Blacky is a fully matured adult, and Charlot has started letting her guard down more often of late."

"But she only slept in my room when she first moved in."

As for Jill, well, she was friends with everyone. Her tail was always wagging, regardless of which cat she happened across. She was usually by Emil's side, but she also liked to play with Chelsea, and she was a genius in that she was always there to greet me when I returned home. But in truth, all our family pets were just the best, and I knew that today, just like every day, Jill would be there to meet us at the door.

However, it was as I was on my way to said door that a woman called out to me.

"Er, my apologies for calling out to you so suddenly, but might you happen to be young Karen?"

Elena sometimes called me that, but this woman was not her. The plainly dressed woman's face immediately brought back memories, and I couldn't help but cry out as the waves of nostalgia fell upon me.

"You remember, I hope," continued the woman. "You came to stay with us back in Falkrum a number of times..."

"Oh, auntie, how could I forget?!"

She was older now than she had been then, but there was no mistaking her.

The woman was Ern's mother.

9: The Rage and Agony of the Prodigious

Ern's mother—whom I always called my "auntie"—had an especially big basket with her. Her eyes shone with the joy of reunion. When I realized it was her, I reached out a hand to share in her joy.

"It really *is* you," she remarked. "I can scarcely believe it. The little girl who came to our place for dinner has grown into a fine young woman. Ern kept me up to date occasionally, but you really are so much taller now, aren't you?"

"Oh, surely you're joking. I can't have grown that much since the times I visited you. In any case, I'm so glad to see you looking so well!"

"You'll always be that little girl in my eyes, young Karen. Why, I still remember lecturing you and Ern on the importance of a balanced diet."

"Oh, well, I imagine we must have been quite the handful..."

Even then, it was nostalgic. Sweets in this world trended toward the ultra-sweet (and gaudily colored, might I add), and Ern was a fan. At one point, her mother's lectures had been...quite stern. I'd stayed at Ern's house a number of times, and her family had treated me to dinner. They always greeted me warmly, and sometimes they even gave me gifts to take home.

Ern's mother seemed much tidier and neater in appearance now, and I had to imagine that her delicatessen was doing well. When both of Ern's parents had been working nonstop to save up for her school fees, they'd very much neglected to look after themselves.

"And how's my uncle doing? Is he well?"

"His knees have been giving him a little trouble of late, but we've the money to pay for good medicine. He's right as rain and happily

chopping up our vegetables. When I told him I was coming to visit you he wanted to come, but he couldn't leave preparations unfinished. Oh, he was so disappointed."

"You're running a delicatessen now, yes? I've been wanting to stop by. I'm so sorry I haven't, and that I was so very late in even coming to say hello."

"I heard all about the circumstances from Ern. I know you were busy, and there was no need to go out of your way. And besides, you sent us some wine and fabric from Falkrum. We loved it; it brought back so many memories."

"It was the least I could do... And you must excuse me; I was so excited I completely forgot where we were. Please, come inside, by all means."

It had been so long that I'd simply lost myself in catching up. I thought we might serve Ern's mother a cup of tea, but she responded with a somewhat awkward shake of the head.

"Thank you, young Karen. I appreciate the gesture, but I came uninvited today. Is Ern inside?"

"She went out this morning, and I presume she's still at the House of Magic. I'm not sure what time she'll be back, unfortunately..."

"I see. All the better, then."

To my surprise, Ern's mother looked more relieved to hear that her daughter was in fact absent. I knew that the two of them were very close, and so I was surprised. Ern's mother saw the look on my face and chuckled.

"We didn't get into an argument or anything like that," she said with the dismissing wave of a hand. "She told me that she'd be staying here with you, but she made it very clear that I was not to visit. I'm just glad she's not here to catch me out."

All the same, her shoulders slumped slightly as she spoke. Ern had told her why she wasn't coming home, but her mother hadn't bought it entirely.

"I'm sure she had a very good reason for staying here instead of with us, but...well, you know how she gets when she's focused on a task. She can't see anything else. She barely even remembers to

eat."

"Ah, I know what you mean. She even skips meals entirely."

"That's why I can't help worrying that she'll wear herself out..."

Her eyes darted around as she spoke, and I sensed what she was really trying to say. I sent Geoff a silent gesture. He was a smart man, and so he went inside, leaving us on our own. Only then did Ern's mother speak again, this time in a lower voice.

"Ever since we got here, she's been so much more direct and...biting in her manner of speaking. I'm worried that everyone will see her for someone she isn't. It used to be that I could give her a talking-to and she'd be better the following day, but I haven't seen her in a while. Her father and I both worry about her."

"She's very good to all of us at home. She's kind to our servants and generous when it comes to the children."

"Is that so? Well, all the same—if she's causing you any issues, you scold her good and proper, you hear? There's no need to hold back."

"I can't imagine it would ever come to *that*," I said. "She's always looking after me, in fact, and so much so that I worried our home wouldn't be a good fit for her. That said, it's been so much fun reminiscing on our days as students."

"Yes, Ern never had many friends, so it was always your place she was visiting."

It was worry that had brought Ern's mother here, and through our conversation I learned that Ern hadn't actually told her parents *why* she was keeping her distance from them. Not that I could bear to say it myself; telling Ern's mother that her daughter feared for her parents' safety would only make for further worries. And so I endeavored to sound as bright and cheery as possible.

"I like to think she's enjoying the memories just as much as me," I said. "She's eating a balanced diet while she's with us, but even then, she still sometimes mutters that she'd kill for a slice of her father's pumpkin pie."

"And to think that when she's at home, she won't shut up about how sick she is of it."

"She even told our resident chef that he was excellent, but simply

not up to her father's level. It's just like they say; there's no taste like home."

"Well, I never," said Ern's mother. "Showing some of her true colors, isn't she?"

Her laughter carried a certain relief in it, and yet even then I sensed a more deep-seated worry in her next quiet utterance.

"I suppose she'll be just fine, then."

"Auntie?" I uttered.

"Oh, it's just... I know I can be something of an overprotective mother, and her father and I aren't anywhere near as intelligent as the girl..." said Ern's mother, biting her lip as she thought back on the past. "I know she says all the right things for us, her parents, but there's a part of her that we simply can't understand. We don't know *how*. So even when things seem mostly fine, a part of me still worries. I can hardly sit still when it hits. I just start thinking that maybe Ern's intelligence makes her an outcast of sorts, and I get all anxious."

"Ah... I see..."

That I didn't have it in me to say more was due to the fact that Ern's mother and I shared the exact same anxiety.

"I know she's a respected mage now, I do, but she'll always be my little girl."

"And I'm sure Ern loves you just as much. You're her mother, after all."

"Thank you," said Ern's mother, smiling bashfully. "But it puts my heart at ease to know that she's staying with you, young Karen. She was always so talkative around you, and so bright and happy too. I'm sure it's no different now!"

"I'm just as happy to have her around, I can assure you. We're up to all hours of the night just chatting away."

"Well, you were separated so suddenly, back then. She never said a word to you, and I know she put on a brave front, but she missed you terribly. She was all holed up in her room, just sulking."

"I never see even a glimpse of that now!" I exclaimed.

I very much wanted to learn more, but Ern's mother decided it was time to take her leave.

“I really should get going,” she said. “We could be talking for hours if we keep this up. But would you mind giving this to Ern for me?”

Ern’s mother passed me the basket she’d been carrying, and I peeked under its cloth cover.

“Wow!” I said. “This looks just scrumptious!”

In the basket was all manner of bread and baked treats.

“Of course I don’t mind,” I continued. “She’s been missing the taste of home, so I’m sure she’ll love this.”

“I was worried that perhaps she wasn’t eating, and I got a tad too enthusiastic. There’s a lot in there, so help yourself to some too.”

“Oh, really? I’m getting all nostalgic about uncle’s cooking now. It was so good!”

“I’ll be sure to tell him. It’ll make his day.”

“But are you sure you don’t want to wait until Ern returns?”

“It’s fine, really. There’s work to be done at home, and now that I know she’s with you there’s nothing more to worry about!”

And with that, Ern’s mother walked off chuckling to herself. The bread in the basket she’d given me was all freshly baked, and the scent of it had me almost drooling. I had no doubt Ern would be delighted. Geoff opened the door for me as I made my way to the house; vigilant guard that he was, he’d been on standby the entire time.

“Lady Ern’s mother, I take it?” he said.

“Indeed. She took great care of me, long before I ever imagined I might move here. I couldn’t convince her to come in for a cup of tea, but I do hope we have the chance to speak again.”

I’d told Ern’s mother that I’d been busy, but actually Ern had asked me not to visit them. She wanted to keep her parents away from the capital’s nobility, so I’d had to settle for sending them a gift instead. In truth, her parents could have lived happily on just the money that Ern provided them, but the two wanted to share the joy of food with others, and they had opened a shop in one of the busiest parts of town.

“Looks like there’s something in that basket for everyone,” mused Geoff.

"Clearly all this was made knowing that Ern would munch on bits and pieces between tasks," I explained. "Auntie knows her daughter very well."

She and her husband had mainly traded daily goods in Falkrum, but in the capital they'd settled their focus on the delicatessen side of things, and they were known for their sandwiches. As I'd said earlier, the taste of home was Ern's favorite, so I had no doubt the basket of bread and pastries would put her over the moon.

Unfortunately, Ern didn't come back that day, and the following morning she sent a carrier pigeon letting us know that she wouldn't be back for a few days. Our manor had an icehouse, but in the warmer seasons food still went bad rather quickly. Bread lasted a little longer, but it would still spoil if Ern was away for days.

After some thought, I decided to change my plans for the day and visit Ern at the House of Magic. Fortunately for me, dancing practice wasn't until the afternoon, so I'd still make it home in time for the important stuff! Louisa offered to deliver all the bread for me, but I really wanted to do it myself. And besides, there was another matter on my mind as well, so visiting Ern directly was very much a two-birds-one-stone kind of deal.

As our carriage trundled down the streets, a frown etched itself upon my brow. The streets had changed throughout the various districts and the catacombs we passed on the way to the House of Magic.

"Such wide-scale change in such a short time," I remarked.

The tree-lined roads leading to the House of Magic, in particular, shocked me. They were always well-kept, but now there was an added element that was sure to surprise the people that used them. For me, it was a sight I had a history with, you could say.

"Ah, you're right," said Geoff, following my gaze. "Things have changed quite a bit, haven't they?"

Geoff couldn't have known about my history, of course. And while I, too, was seeing the view out the window for the first time, it nonetheless struck me with a certain nostalgia. Ern might have said it was because my soul had been steeped in the past.

"And they all light up in the evening, yes?" asked Geoff. "That will

certainly make the place brighter, and convenient for all."

"Yes, that's how they work."

We were talking about the lampposts placed neatly along the roadside. The people of this world, Geoff included, had never known the convenience of lamplit streets over evenings.

"Are you okay?" asked Geoff. "If you're feeling under the weather, shall we turn back?"

"Oh, no, I'm quite all right. Don't mind me."

I didn't have it in me to reply with much more, though I tried to muster a reassuring smile. We traveled the rest of the way to the House of Magic in silence. Upon arrival, we were allowed in after the guards conducted a quick check of my name. I must have been on the special permissions list; we were ushered in without issue.

"You've Lady Quach's express permission to enter, so head right in," said the guard. "Do you know the way to her office?"

"Yes, I was shown the way last time I visited," I replied. "I'm sure you must be busy, so there's no need to accompany us."

All manner of people were hurrying in and out of the place, and all of them looked to be in a rush to get wherever they were going. Fortunately, it wasn't difficult for us to reach our destination. Unfortunately, however, we met with quite the commotion upon our arrival.

The door to Ern's office flew open as we neared, and two men came practically tumbling out of it. Behind them, books, glass beakers, and other items flew through the air, colliding with the corridor walls.

"You useless idiots! You think you can just touch my things?! Who do you think you are?!"

The taller and lankier of the two men bent over double to avoid a mop, which flew past him and straight into a window, shattering it as it sailed out of the building.

"Whoa, scary much?" he muttered, whistling.

"Don't make it worse, you idiot!" said his partner, speaking in a low voice.

The other man was shorter, with the kind of face I imagined helped him make friends easily. The door slammed shut on the two

men, who both let out sighs.

"What in the world are you doing?!" said the shorter man. "You know we've been called upon, and now we've been driven straight out of her office!"

"You dolt," replied the lanky man. "You know as well as I do that when the almighty queen makes up her mind, it's final. She won't budge. And another thing—how about you take your eyes off her butt and actually focus once in a while?"

"What?! But *you're* the one who sent her into that rage!"

The lanky man gestured to Geoff and me with his jaw, and the shorter man quickly dropped into an apologetic bow.

"I-I-I'm so very sorry!" he said. "There's been a misunderstanding. We thought Instructor Quach was free, but she's been called upon for a rather important matter and is unable to see anybody!"

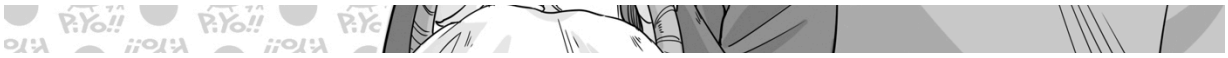
"Er, did Ern do something?" I asked.

"No, no, no! Nothing of the sort! Instructor Quach is *always* considerate of *everybody*, and she dedicates her every waking moment to the improvement of our nation! She would *never* go against the orders of the emperor!"

"Teddy," said the lanky man. "Are you even aware of who you're talking to?"

"Shut your mouth! Just! Shut! Up!"





The lanky man chuckled.

"Seriously, open your eyes. That young woman's no messenger. She's probably the instructor's friend."

"Whaaat?!"

Based on Teddy's gaping jaw and stunned expression, he'd clearly mistaken me for someone else. The lanky man moved in while his friend was still stunned.

"Why hello there. Greetings. You certainly chose a *wonderful* time to visit. My apologies. As you can see, our instructor is...just a *little* mad at present. The two of us won't be getting back in for some time."

"You're Ern's assistants?" I asked.

"I apologize that my friend here completely forgot to introduce us. We are indeed Instructor Quach's assistants. My name is Samuel, and my pathetic partner here is Teddy."

Both looked to be in their twenties, and I'd seen them both before. Samuel had a deep voice and struck me as one who didn't really care much for his studies. Teddy, meanwhile, had turned a pale blue as he continued to apologize.

"I can't believe this all happened in front of one of the instructor's friends! I am so very, *very* sorry! Oh, I can't believe that happened!"

"Look at you," said Samuel. "You're getting this young woman mixed up with one of our high and mighty haughty superiors."

"Please, stop talking! You've absolutely no idea who could be listening!"

"My goodness. You just *love* playing the good student act, don't you?"

Though the two assistants struck me as night and day in terms of personality, I got the sense there was a friendship between them.

"Do you think it would be okay if I went inside?" I asked. "I'm here to visit Ern."

"You can enter, of course; just bear in mind that, as you just saw, Instructor Quach isn't in one of her better moods at the moment," said Samuel.

"Her office is just...well, it's just there," added Teddy. "Instructor Quach's office is specially made, so no sound gets in or out, and she

just closed the door herself, so..."

"What he's trying to say is, when she slams the door like that, she's saying, 'Stay out.' So yeah, you can go inside, just don't say we didn't warn you."

Both Samuel and Teddy were in no hurry to go back inside. And while I had just seen for myself that Ern was in a foul mood, it wasn't so bad that I felt I should head back home either.

"Please wait outside for me, Geoff," I said. "Oh, but I'll take the basket, please. That's why we're here in the first place."

"I'll wait in the corridor," he replied. "Just be careful where you tread; the floors are covered in glass."

Teddy reacted with complete and utter shock when he heard me, though his reaction did nothing to change my mind. With basket in hand, I knocked on the door to Ern's office.

"Ern?" I said. "It's me, Karen. I'm coming inside."

I took one step into the office and was met by the rank odor of raw meat. At the far end of the office was a pile of books, and I could just make out a head poking out from above them. I flashed Geoff a glance to let him know I was going in and closed the door behind me.

"Ern?" I said as I made my way into the office. "What's with that smell? It stinks."

"Why are you here?"

"Is that any way to talk to a friend? I wouldn't come for nothing. You didn't come home yesterday, so I'm here to deliver this personally."

"Idiot. You have no idea what's going on here today, do you?"

"Now that you mention it, everybody *does* look rushed off their feet. What's the deal?"

Ern wasn't about to kick me out, but she didn't seem especially happy to see me either. The lack of any tone in her voice was as harsh on my heart as it was my ears, but rather endearing compared to her anger. All the same, we'd been friends a long time now, and her reaction to my arrival told me there was no need for me to make a hasty getaway.

"It's better you don't know," replied Ern. "I can't tell you anyway."

She made no attempt to look in my direction. Her fierce concentration drew in my curiosity, and I felt my eyes following Ern's gaze.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," warned Ern.

Ern's gaze was directed upward, to an object floating in the air. It was like looking at an enlarged chunk of milt, except that the fleshier color of it repelled my eyes. It had come from inside of something, but knowing that didn't make it any easier to look at.

"Don't worry," said Ern. "I'm not at the human testing stage. This is a pig's—"

"I know what it is! You don't have to say it!"

I'd dressed animals myself. I was used to seeing their organs. I was *not*, however, accustomed to the sight of a brain floating in midair. I had brought such delicious food with me, and yet Ern's office seemed to drain me completely of my appetite.

"So *that's* where the smell's coming from..." I muttered. "Ugh, even covering my nose with a handkerchief isn't helping..."

A number of silver skewers were poked into the brain at various angles. Ern's hands floated at a distance from it, as though she were a fortune teller with a crystal ball. Her fingers danced with a bluish-white light, writing letters that vanished into the air.

"What are you doing with it?" I asked.

"Work, of course. I wouldn't bring raw organs into the office otherwise. I mean, ugh, the smell is enough to make you sick."

At first I assumed it was another confidential matter and didn't expect any more in the way of an explanation. My question had been more about making small talk, but there was something different about Ern today; she looked terribly bored, and so I prodded her with another question.

"Wait, are you conducting neuroscience?" I asked.

"Kind of," replied Ern. "People have been developing brain-sucking magic for a long time now. I'm working on an improved version."

"I've heard of that."

"That's a surprise. It's considered one of the dark arts, so you don't hear about it often. You've been studying more than I thought."

Actually, I'd only remembered it because Six had mentioned it offhand on an occasion. The ominous ring to the name lodged it firmly in my memories.

"Much like the name implies, it's a spell that allows you a peek at a person's memories. That said, at present the spell only allows you access to the target's most prominent memories. I was told it might be possible to reveal more—perhaps a person's entire life—so here I am, running experiments."

"And this is for work, right?"

"Yes. The orders of that disgusting emperor. So you're just going to have to deal with the stench."

"Well, at least I know that you've got your own burdens to bear. But why'd you get so mad you had to throw half your office out into the corridor?"

"Because *somebody* tried touching my safe without permission. Just remembering it makes my blood boil."

"Calm down, it's just us. This brain-sucking magic, though, it's not easy to crack, even for you?"

"Ha. Where I'm concerned, nothing is impossible. I just need to add the finishing touches. But the idiots here can't stand it, and they're trying to slow me down."

"Well, do your work too fast and you'll only find yourself with more pushed on you, right?"

When I looked more carefully, I noticed that the brain was in a transparent box of some kind. Something like an...air box? All the same, I still didn't like that it was just there, floating above Ern's desk. Which led me to another thought: *Wouldn't all of this be better done in an* actual *research laboratory?*

"I don't feel like moving elsewhere" was Ern's reply when I asked her.

I mean, it was Ern's office so she could do whatever she wanted, but I had to imagine it was hell on her assistants. They'd lose their appetites entirely, and maybe even lose the contents of their stomachs at the same time too.

"And going back to my previous question, why are you here, Karen? What's with the giant basket?"

"Oh, so you *did* notice," I replied, holding the basket up.

Ern still hadn't even glanced at me. I had to imagine she had a third eye somewhere. All the same, I made it clear with my gesturing that it was far more interesting than a pig's brain.

"It's bread and pastries," I said, "delivered by your own mother. She made it all for you, but you didn't come home last night. So, here I am."

"Huh. My mom visited?"

Ern finally turned from her work to look in my direction. The annoyance once furrowing her brow vanished as she lifted the cloth from the basket to peek at its contents. She then turned to the brain and, with the deft wave of a hand, made it disappear completely. An instant later, the office windows flew open of their own accord.

"I'll put the tea on as soon as we get some fresh air in here. Let's enjoy the bread together."

It was a moment in which I understood the incredible power that lay in both magic and loving parenting. Ern hummed to herself as she pottered about boiling water, and the raw smell of brains was gone by the time she was brewing our cups of tea. She was in fine spirits as she munched on some bread, and that was how I learned that she hadn't eaten since early the previous day. I knew she was young and full of energy, but everyone had to eat sometime. I knew then that I'd made the right call in coming.

"Look, it's fine to lose yourself in your work," I said, "but at least eat properly. You *always* do this."

"I usually eat because Teddy reminds me, but I just didn't really feel like it. And besides, I was too busy yesterday."

"Is that what Teddy mentioned out in the corridor? Some matter coming up?"

"Yes. Some VIPs are visiting, and everyone is panicking like crazy, as I'm sure you've already seen. So it'll be a little while before I'm home again. If things go badly, you could find yourself bumping into the imperial princess out there, and you don't want that, do you?"

"No. Thank you for the heads-up. But if it's so important, then shouldn't you be there? Your assistants were a bit like chickens with their heads cut off."

"I should, yes. But if it's just an explanation that's required, then Teddy or Samuel can handle things. So my attendance isn't exactly a must. I'm sure my assistants have resigned themselves to the fact that I won't be there. They'll be doing all the talking for me."

She said it like it meant nothing. Ordinarily, openly shirking your responsibilities—important ones, at that—would get you far more than just a stern talking-to. But Ern showed no interest at all in setting a single foot outside of her office.

I noticed then that Ern could speak the names of her assistants now without growling. I put it down to the calming effects of the food. The two young men seemed used to Ern's eccentricities, and I had to wonder if her tantrums were just part and parcel of working with her. When curiosity got the better of me I asked, and Ern simply said yes. She didn't feel bad about it in the slightest. She answered so matter-of-factly that I might as well have been asking her if breathing was a part of her daily activities.

"Both of them know how to get on my nerves, but Samuel is especially...talented. I didn't ask for either of them, and I'd only be too happy for them to quit."

"You didn't pick them? Even though they're *your* assistants?"

"I didn't. Teddy was practically on his knees begging, so I didn't really have any other choice. Samuel was recommended by another Elder. Clearly it was done to poke at me, and that's why Samuel doesn't have any motivation whatsoever."

"All the same, perhaps don't throw anything at them that might result in a nasty injury?"

I didn't know what went on between Ern and her assistants, and it seemed like they agitated her on the regular, but anyone who didn't know any better would think she was hysterical. I spoke up because Ern's mother's worries were replaying in my mind, but it only served to sour Ern's mood.

"That's for me and my assistants to work out, okay? It's a work matter, so keep out of it."

"I'm sorry, I know I'm overstepping, but I just don't want people to get the wrong idea and think that you're some kind of terrifying monster."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but it's actually better to be feared, especially as a mage."

In that instant, the air grew heavy. The mood was shattered. Ern carried a lot on her shoulders, and I knew that. I should have been more careful about my choice of words. But even though the timing of it all was horrible, I still had another matter to get to.

"I came here today to deliver your mom's bread to you, but I also wanted to ask you something. If I remember correctly, you've set this room up so no one can listen in on it, right?"

I knew it was bad manners, but I took a seat on a nearby desk. I only did it because it was just the two of us. Still, what I wanted to ask her was something I'd pondered over. I never knew if it was the right time for it.

"Don't bring up anything weird," replied Ern. "I'm still working, you know. Even letting you in was an exception to the norm."

"You played a part in improving the weapons that were used in the assault on Conrad, didn't you?" I asked, coming right out with it.

I couldn't see Ern's face, but her whole body froze when my question hit.

"What makes you think that?"

"*I'm* the one who brought up bows in the first place, Ern. You knew I would have wondered about this. You must have."

"I never said anything about that for a reason. The *why* should be obvious."

"And it is. It is...which is why I never said a word about it until now."

Ern didn't deny it, which was an answer in and of itself. My heart fell into the pit of my stomach. All I could do was stand in silence and take slow breaths.

The thought had plagued me. After all, Ern had invented lampposts and all other manner of lifestyle improvements. But I knew that, depending on how she responded to my question, our relationship might fundamentally collapse. It was that fear that kept me from mustering the courage to speak. It was only now that I saw the direction the House of Magic was taking that I hit a limit. I had to know.

"And if I tell you, what next?" asked Ern.

"That's for me to decide when I get answers. Did you do it? Did you give those bandits the weapons they used in the assault?"

"No. I can promise you I did no such thing."

This, at least, was a far better answer than what I'd most feared. But could I really say that was a good thing?

"Then give me details. How involved were you in improving the bows here?"

"I helped with work on how to make them easier to use. I only learned that they were used in the Conrad assault after the fact. If I'd known they were going to be used where you were, I would have at least slowed their development."

So she was, in essence, the crossbow inventor. The topic was clearly an uncomfortable one for her, because she couldn't muster any rage.

"One more thing..." I said. "The walls around Conrad were destroyed. Reports said that it was magic, but anyone with any knowledge of our past world would have assumed it was explosives... Did you make gunpowder, Ern?"

"Even if I made the same thing here as *there*, some of it can't be used the way it is. I didn't make it as we knew it; I made something similar."

"Which was used in Conrad."

"Yes. I heard that the results were above and beyond expectations."

Right then, I heard an explosion. The whole building shook, and I jumped to my feet.

"It's okay," said Ern. "No sound gets out of the House. Nobody's going to panic, and nobody's in danger."

"Ern, is that...?" I started.

"I *told* them not to do a live demonstration," Ern muttered. "Now look at them."

In her face was annoyance at the fact her orders had been ignored, but no sorrow that I could see. Clearly they were testing gunpowder—or "something similar," as Ern had called it. Conrad had been the testing grounds.

Which means that the matter that Ern was called upon for today was...

It was getting hard to stay calm. I felt myself bending over, fighting the urge to hide my head in my hands. I had no voice save for my own deep breaths. There were things I wanted to say about Conrad. I wanted to make them clear, but I did not know if Ern was the person I should be screaming at. Finding words for the swirl of complicated emotions in my heart would require a few days.

So what I thought about here, and what I wanted to say, had to be something different, and much clearer.

I knew it. I always knew there was a clear split.

Ern and I could not come to a consensus on the matter of bringing the technology of our past world to this one. Ern had said she wanted to enrich lives here, and I'd never taken issue with that. There was no reason for me to stand against something that made life easier and better for people.

And yet. And yet...

"Ern, it's far, *far* too early for such a thing here," I said.

My voice came out with a rasp as I tried to keep my emotions from breaking loose.

But was there any stopping it? The prodigy known as Ern had been born, and Six had discovered her. She had all the knowledge necessary to spread various technological developments across the world, and so perhaps this was all inevitable. Unavoidable.

"We're making lives better. More convenient. What's wrong with that?" Ern shot back.

"It's rash. It's reckless. If you want to bring them into the future, you should at least take your time. There's just no telling what will happen."

"What does that even mean?"

"You can make tools and technology, but if people can't understand it, they won't use it correctly. Even if you're here to oversee, it doesn't matter; there's no point to it if nobody is ready for it."

But that wasn't everything; there was also the matter of rights as they pertained to the inventor. I'd heard that Ern had given some of

her findings to the House of Magic, but that ran the risk of a monopoly over it. That would make others very angry, and there were already enough who were seething with jealousy at her being made an Elder at such a young age.

Ern's head was drooped and I couldn't read her face.

"It's one thing if it's food or daily necessities or that kind of thing, but everything changes when you're talking about weapons that kill people."

Gunpowder raised even bigger problems, and when I pointed these out, Ern did not try to deny them.

"You're going too far," I said.

I could tell that Ern was angry. It was obvious. There were sparks in the air, and an argument felt inevitable, but I wasn't going to back down now. I couldn't allow that to happen.

"They've built everything around me here in the empire; an environment in which I can make the most of my mind."

"Yes, and your inventions have been as much a boon to me as anybody else. You're breaking new ground, and it's only natural they'd treat you with the respect you deserve. That's not what I take issue with."

I felt like she was leaving me behind. It was like she was departing for some distant planet I could never reach myself. But if that was her dream, then I wanted to support her. I wanted to help her get there.

It just felt so much more complicated than that.

"It just... It makes me so anxious," I said.

"Anxious? What does?"

"It's like the farther you stride ahead, the more enemies you make. Do you have anyone around you, anyone besides me, who can understand your intelligence?"

I felt compelled to ask now that I'd seen how she treated other people. Her mother's words had also lingered with me. In this world, the story didn't just end with praise for one girl's wisdom leading to groundbreaking invention after groundbreaking invention. This was a world of tangled human relationships, but I felt that Ern was on her own, running into the future without ever turning back.

I thought that maybe things would be different if there was someone there for her, but I received no answer to my question.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I want to understand you, but I'm not talented like you. I'm just..."

...ordinary.

I felt that even though she was a prodigy, and even though her intelligence and ability was enough to overwhelm others, it left her unable to connect with so many. I know I'm repeating myself, but I didn't think it was wrong for Ern to use her skills to improve life for people. What concerned me was the reckless speed at which she did it.

"Just moments ago, you asked me, 'what next?' Now it's your turn to tell me. Why are you in such a rush?" I asked.

The birth of explosives caused me great worry. The spread of such a discovery would completely change the landscape of war as this world knew it. The number of casualties, too, would only rise. But that was a potential future; right now I had to stay focused on the girl in front of me. The speed of her progress all felt driven by desperation, and my fear was that it left her completely, utterly alone.

"Don't just always reject everyone and everything around you, take a look around instead," I continued. "If you can't trust anybody here in the House of Magic, find connections outside of your parents. And think. Really *think*. I know how much you love your parents; it can't be that hard for you."

"Oh, stop. You want me to just give away the contents of my brain? Everybody is just out for themselves, and they'll step on whoever they have to if it means they get to climb a little higher."

"That's not what I mean. Yes, there are bad people out there, and you've seen your fair share of them, but the whole world isn't out to get you, Ern. If you just decide that everybody is going to hurt you, you'll always be alone."

"I don't need a lecture. You don't know how filthy a place this world is. *I* do."

It was all wrong. I just wanted her to have someone to open up to, but Ern thought of such relationships as transactional; for her, it

meant giving up what she knew.

"You think I fear getting hurt? I'm not that frail or fragile anymore," Ern continued. "I'm going to keep climbing; I'm not going to just take my time so all these idiots around me can feel better about themselves."

"But you'll never have anybody who truly understands you."

"I don't need people to understand me. I want them to just do what I say..."

"That's fine if you can keep it up, but you're not that sort of person, Ern. You don't have that kind of strength."

"I do. If I don't, I'll find it."

It was like she'd put up a wall that blocked the point I was trying to make. Still, she was frustrated, and she threw her arms up in the air.

"I don't care," she said. "I will not stoop to their level and go nowhere. I'm not *like* them."

"Ern!"

No. Not like this.

Ern was smart. She had foresight. She was a quick thinker. But even Ern would slip and fall if she didn't occasionally look down to make sure there weren't any potholes along the road she ran. If she kept on this path, she'd have no one, ever, and I knew better than most how quickly a life could end...

It was then that Ern settled her glare right at me.

"Don't act like you know," she spat, the sorrow in her eyes piercing through me. "Because you *don't*. You weren't sold by your parents into a marriage with a man you never loved. You never had to have his child. You're not like *me*. You were treated like a human being."

The words came from the Ernesta born in the former world we both shared. I could do nothing more than stand there, stunned; it was the first time I had felt anything like hatred from her.

"You had things so safe. So comfortable. So *easy*," Ern continued. "And then you just died like any other idiot. You didn't die being beaten by your husband, strangled by him—suffering through even your very last breaths. You don't know what it feels like to be denied

the chance to just live like a normal person. You don't know the joy that comes with the chance to do things over, to be given the power to have your vengeance on such people!"

It was her past life. Hers was a death in which she did not know happiness. It was a life, a world, I could scarcely imagine, and it was why she wanted to rid herself of the past. Her words were a full-frontal blast of her emotions. But I had no desire to rise to great heights. I never would. And so I could not truly comprehend Ern's hatred.

I was left with only one way to respond.

"You're right. I don't, because I'm not you."

I could have taken her hands and said something like "But I *do* know." It would have been easy. But it would not have helped.

Ern took my words as a rejection. Ordinarily, the hurt in her eyes would have been enough for me to back down, but it wasn't over yet. If I left now, Ern would have gotten nothing from our conversation but pain. I reached out and grabbed her shirt. I was aiming for her hands, but she slipped away from me. Klutz that I was, I still thought of the catch as a success on my part.

"There's nothing more to say," Ern said. "Go home."

"So you won't even talk to me? Am I not even allowed to want to know you better?"

It was regret that had first made me want to have this talk. When I'd last avoided a serious discussion, when I'd crossed my fingers and simply hoped for the best, it had resulted in the split between Arno and me. Now it was playing out again. I had hoped beyond hope that us being fellow reincarnated souls would have given us a bond that went beyond words, but as it turned out, we were simply different people.

"I'm not you, just like you're not me," I said. "You don't know everything about me, but that's why we have mouths with which to form words and voices with which to speak them. If we don't talk, we don't learn anything about each other."

I wouldn't ask her to tell me everything. Even just a little at a time was fine; I just wanted her to slow down enough that she could take stock of the people and the world around her.

"You're kind to me, Ern. All I'm asking is that you spare a little of that same kindness for others too. This doesn't have to be a place that's only out to cause you suffering."

My own feelings were all over the place now. I'd only meant to ask Ern about Conrad, but here I was in the midst of a heated argument nearing its end. To be honest, I thought Ern was going to blast me, but to my surprise she averted her gaze from my own.

"I won't leave while we're still fighting," I stated. "I won't. I hate it."

"Let me go."

"No. Look, Ern, you don't have to do anything *now*. You can move at your own pace. I just want you to remember what I've said."

It was possible, I realized then, that Ern might not come back home, so I was determined to stand my ground.

"If you really want to understand me, then here's how you can start," she muttered, her voice low.

"I'm listening."

"No matter what I do, and no matter what happens, stop calling me things like prodigy and genius."

"Okay."

She wasn't crying, but she looked so terribly exhausted.

"I'm really done talking for today. Go home before the meeting here is over."

"Will you come home after work?"

"Probably..."

"Then I'll be waiting for you."

It was not a problem that would be solved in a day. Ern strode away, not letting me see her face as she left the room. I followed her, but Geoff wasn't waiting out in the corridor. I suspected he was perhaps at the House waiting room.

"Karen," said Ern, her voice clear as she called out to me. "Everybody... My parents, the House, the general public... They call me a prodigy, but I'm not."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the only one who knows the truth," she replied, her voice softening, devoid of her usual confidence. "All I'm doing is remaking

what we had back there. None of it is my own invention. I don’t have a single shred of real prodigious talent in me...”

I sensed the hurt in her words. It was a burden only she truly understood, and now she’d made me aware of it. But while I did my best to listen carefully to each word she spoke, the attempt felt empty.





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