

“Just understand this is being done to keep her out of his way, not because he has any fondness for the Church.”

“I know the Lord Duke’s feeling regarding the Holy Mother quite well, thank you. She will be raised as a nun.”

Kai stood timidly in the corner of the abbess’s office. She was barely four years old, timid, solitary. But she soon proved to have a great aptitude for the scholarly work she was given, and by twenty she had become the leading female authority on orthodox theology. She dared not argue with the monks, the priests who studied as she did. They would not debate with her, simply rebuked her for even presuming to pose them questions...

Then the nightmares began. Rebuking, always rebuking – a prelate in his blood-red robes, denouncing her, proclaiming her a heretic—

But she wasn’t! She was practically screaming denial when she woke. She wasn’t. They wouldn’t give her a chance to explain. Why—

“There is a desperate need for medical aid among the soldiers of the King, fighting the pagans not far from here,” the abbess was saying to her. “Perhaps a reprieve from solitude will ease your mind.”

Kai sat among the two dozen nuns who were also acting as nurses. She herself had not yet been taken fully into the order; for some reason they kept delaying her. The wagon was unsteady; Kai sat with her head down. She was a scholar. Her practical knowledge was limited...

The war had been going on for several months; the wounded had piled up, died, piled up again... The fighting didn’t move more than five miles from their post for over two months, and there was no end to the casualties. The nuns were busy day and night, most working eighteen or twenty hours straight, and there was far more work than they alone could handle.

Kai had never been exposed to such continuous physical labor before. The wounded occupied a rickety barn; the nuns were set up in a large tent. She had seen very few men the past fifteen or sixteen years, and these just ordered her about or asked for help.

“Girl! Come with me!”

Kai startled. She was one of the three women on night watch.

“Now, girl. I can’t wait.”

She followed him into the army’s tent camp, somewhere she had been implicitly told not to go. He flung open the flap of a private tent, where a newly wounded man had just arrived, accompanied by a pair of soldiers.

“Stay with him till he’s well.”

“But, sir, there are many other men—”

“I need him alive, girl. Keep him that way.”

The men had already stripped off his armor, but he was fighting them.

“Let me go!”

His accent was foreign, Kai noted, but he was not a pagan. A gash along his throat, a wound upon one shoulder.

“Kindly sit him down before he bleeds to death,” she said. His eyes fixed on her as he became aware of her presence.

“We’ve been trying for twenty minutes,” one of the other soldiers muttered. The wounded man’s eyes were still fixed on her as he sat.

“Leave,” Kai said to the other men. They were reluctant; she was stubborn.

“Who are you?” he asked when the other men had gone.

“One of the sisters attending wounds,” Kai replied, finding that bandages and water had already been brought. She moved the basin and wrappings over to the cot he was seated on. The man loosed his shirt at the throat, letting it fall off his wounded shoulder.

“Do you have a name to give me?” he asked, lifting his chin as she began cleaning his wounds.

“Kai Hohefeld.”

“Hohefeld?”

“Illegitimate to the house,” she clarified, noting that there was pain behind his eyes, if nowhere else.

“Alyosha Perin,” he said, offering his uninjured hand. She ignored it; the wounds were still bleeding. “I don’t bite, sister.”

“Perhaps not, but you *are* bleeding.”

He let her alone for several minutes while she worked. She had a light touch, but she was not squeamish about the work. After she was satisfied with the cleanliness, she pulled out a needle and thread.

“I thought sisters didn’t give stitches,” he said.

“They don’t.” She proceeded, however, to stitch up the gash below his throat. “But I figure a man’s life is more important than avoiding purgatory, hm?” she said, her face neutral, looking up to meet his eyes briefly. She cut the thread with a small scissors that had been tucked in her hair like a hat pin, then turned her attention to his shoulder.

“Where are you from?” he asked after a moment.

“Gads. You talk more than all the others combined. St. Clothild’s,” she answered.

“How long have you been there?”

“Since I was four.”

“Ah.” After that he was quieter, and when his shoulder had been stitched and covered, she turned his attention to the scratches on his face. “You aren’t going to ask what happened?” he asked finally.

“I don’t approve of fighting,” she said.

“Odd. Your holy brethren seem to.”

“Killing them does not bring them into the Lord’s flock,” she said. “And the lust for power is not an admirable one.”

“There are those who say the cloisters take the best and warp them from reality,” he said.

“You’re not a normal knight, are you?” she said, pausing, her eyes narrowing as she met his again.

“No more than you’re a normal nun.”

She frowned, turning back to her work. “I was cloistered for my blood, not my devotion.”

“And I was knighted for my skills, not my chivalry.”

There was a shout outside, and he started to stand. She sat him back down. She was stronger than he’d anticipated, or he was weaker than he’d realized. He reached his uninjured arm over and closed his hand around the hilts of his sword, and Kai backed off. He blew out the lantern.

The shout became a scuffle, and then a shadowed figure slipped into the tent, not

realizing it was occupied. Kai sank noiselessly to her knees and closed her eyes, a prayer she had known since she learned to speak running through her mind. The scrape of steel on steel, the *thwock* of a blow, a gurgle as the blood entered the lungs. The body was shoved off the blade, out of the tent, and Alyosha relit the lamp. Kai's eyes were on the ground in front of her.

"You were trained for God, Sister," he said. "I was trained for war."

"I haven't actually become a nun yet," she said as she stood.

"Ah. Just a novice, then."

A few moments later, the general who had brought her there was back.

"Your sisters have decided they will stay no longer. You are to go with them."

Alyosha was wiping his blade.

"You," the general growled at him, "are not to be fighting until those wounds are healed."

"Am I to presume you have people who can remove the stitches?" Kai interrupted.

"How hard could it be?" the general barked at her. She pursed her lips briefly.

"Very well." She left. The general noted that Alyosha's eyes followed her.

"You easterners are the worst kind of dogs. She's a nun, for heaven's sake."

"Not yet," Alyosha replied. "You sent them off?"

"The barbarians were heading for their tents."

"Ah."

Kai found the cloister, after so long – almost two months – outside it, to be stifling. She retreated to the library, and her nightmares became worse. The abbess found this disturbing, more so because the young woman would wake up screaming directly above her than out of concern for her well-being.

"You say they left you when you were out in the world, child?"

"Yes, ma'am." Kai had her eyes settled on her hands. She had become even more timid and withdrawn since her return, the abbess noted.

"You are familiar with the principle of salvation through works?" the abbess said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Write me a treatise on it. Perhaps your calling is not within our walls."

Thus Kai found herself back in the theological library. She had studied the texts before, worked with them, but she had never tried her mind on them as she had philosophy or literature. She felt better in the library, where few people bothered her. The texts, however, awoke new troubles for her.

"What does it mean, Mother Abbess, that the Savior died for the forgiveness of our sins?"

The abbess turned. Kai was thoroughly studied in Church theology. If she was asking questions—

"That through penance and working towards grace, you can be saved, dear child." It never hurt to revert to rote orthodoxy. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing, Mother Abbess. There are just many conflicts within the texts, and it weighs heavily on my mind."

"Trust the judgment of the Holy Fathers, child, and much will be clearer."

Kai nodded, returning to the library. She was no less troubled. The texts had shaken

most of the major tenets she had thought she understood. How much was her own imagination? How much was the Church's?

Kai eventually had two copies of her treatise prepared. The first, for the abbess, left most of her conclusions out and left the orthodox positions alone. The second was her own, a distillation of her beliefs. Had it been spontaneous? she asked herself as she placed the bundle of papers in her hidden cubbyhole where she kept her contraband.

No, she answered herself. She and the Church had been on separate trains of thought for a long time. She had just never realized it.

Kai stood silently through the abbess's rebuke. The one point she had openly disputed – real presence – she had called immaterial. The entire act was symbolic, she reasoned; what did it matter whether the elements were transformed or not?

“Do you have anything to say?” the abbess asked finally.

“No, ma'am.”

Kai stayed in her cell for well over a week. She had eaten little more than water and a few bits of bread, and she was pale when she reemerged.

There were people waiting for her – several examiners from the highest level of the Church.

“Do you have anything you wish to assert, child?”

“No, sir.”

“What is *this*?” He dropped a bundle of papers in front of her; her brow furrowed. So her room had been searched... when? Before her confinement, no doubt. Her personal treatise lay before her, several times perused.

“Peace of mind,” she said after a moment, picking up the papers and flipping through them. They were all there.

“Is that all, child?”

“That is all it was meant to be,” she said, looking up, her face becoming bitter. A prelate in his blood-red robes...

“It's heresy,” he barked.

The images played through her mind. She had seen this all before, an option she had chosen to maintain her sanity. “And?”

“Have you nothing to say in your defense?”

“There is no point in it. You will not listen to explanations.”

“And do you confess to heresy?”

“There is nothing to confess,” Kai said, standing, her papers rolled up and tucked in one sleeve. She turned and left.

“Who is she, Mother Shannon?” the prelate asked. “Why is she here?”

“Kai Hohefeld. Her father wanted her out of the way.”

“Then we'll oblige him.” He motioned for the soldiers to retrieve her.

Kai was already climbing out the narrow window in her room, a small bundle of her personal effects tied up in a pillowcase. She had not been outside in almost a year; the sky was dark, heavy with rain. She was soon running across the open fields, and shortly a half dozen horsed Church soldiers were pursuing her.

She had soon passed beyond the Church lands, into an open wood belonging to whatever petit noble was in that area. The soldiers were gaining on her. In the middle of a ring of ancient trees, she tripped. There was a patch of bare stone almost six feet across in the center of the circle, and landing on it briefly knocked her out. She came around after a few moments to find that the soldiers were circling the trees, seemingly unable to enter the ring. She looked up at the trees once – oaks, all of them. The parasitic mistletoe was thick amidst the branches, but the trees were hundreds of years old and not suffering from its presences. A pagan tree circle.

The Church soldiers had finally clustered on one side of the circle, debating how to go about retrieving her. The clink of plate armor caught their attention, and Kai rolled her eyes.

“Please, Lord,” she breathed, “anything but the stereotypical knight in shining armor.”

She found her feet after a moment and stood as the knight approached. His armor was overlaid in copper, the finish matte. Definitely not *shining* armor, at least, she remarked to herself. He pulled off his helmet, and she recognized him.

“Trouble, Sister?” he asked her quietly.

“She’s a heretic, knight,” one of the soldiers called before she could reply. “She is to be burned at dawn. Stand down that we might take her into custody.”

“Stand down?” the knight retorted. “I haven’t even opposed you yet.”

“Prithee stay out of my trouble, Sir Perin,” Kai said quietly.

“Alyosha, hm?” he said. “I owe you my life, lass. Leaving you for the Church to burn isn’t in my options.” He offered her his hand, but she turned her eyes away. He put his helm back on.

“My life is not worth yours,” she said.

“I hold my lands from the King, not the Church. Their law has no power here,” he replied. “Mine does, and I have twoscore men on the other side of the hill if they want to argue about it.”

“I do not approve of fighting,” she said, her eyes frowning.

“Too bloody bad,” he said, turning his horse and pulling her up before him. “I do.”

The Church’s soldiers pursued them as far as the crest of the hill, when the knight’s soldiers came into view. Alyosha pulled up, chuckling as he cast his visor back. Kai was still frowning.

“Cheer up, eh?” he said. “There is life outside a convent.”

“It was determined that I should not leave,” Kai said. “For political reasons.”

“Well, then, they’ll have to live with the consequences, hm?”

His troops were rowdy, boisterous. She held her little bundle securely against her chest, uncertain what exactly the knight wanted with her. He had one arm around her to keep her on the horse. She had never truly known life outside the Church. What would she *do*?

The knight had a small stronghold set in a saddle of land on the side of a steep hill. Alyosha set her down on the steps of the hall before sliding off the horse and pulling off his helm again.

“You’re pale,” he said. “Haven’t they been feeding you?”

“I was fasting,” Kai replied. His brow furrowed.

“No wonder you’re such a twig. Well, come on, then. We’ll see if we can fix that.”

He led her through the hall, down to the kitchens. A younger, larger version of him was already there, with a rack of ribs half gone in front of him.

“I thought we ruled out raiding convents, Alyosha,” the younger man greeted him.

“My brother, Dmitrii,” the knight introduced him. “And I’m not raiding convents,” he addressed his brother.

“Well, she certainly looks like a nun,” Dmitrii said.

“Just find her something to eat, hm? And behave,” he said, taking his brother playfully under the chin. “I’ll have enough trouble over her.”

Alyosha left her there, and Dmitrii wiped one hand mostly clean and offered it to her.

“Dima.”

“Kai,” she said after a moment, briefly gripping his hand.

“So why *are* you here?” he said as he stood. “Assuming that he hasn’t been raiding convents.”

“I believe he fancies he rescued me.”

“Ah. You’re not a nun?”

“I... was in the novitiate. I would assume that has been revoked.”

“So you don’t hate men?”

“I have little use for them.”

“Damn.” He shortly had assembled half a dozen chicken sandwiches.<sup>i</sup>

“Pardon, but I don’t have the appetite of a mastiff,” Kai objected.

“That’s all right. I can finish what you don’t eat.”

She sighed slightly. Her patience had been waning in the previous months, and these... *men* were going to try it sorely.

Alyosha was back shortly. “Well, they’ve got a delegation here. Do you want to talk to them?” he asked Kai. She had eaten little, he noticed. She sat quietly with her bundle in her lap.

“There would be little point in it. They won’t listen. They’ve been ignoring me for five or six years; there’s no reason for them to change now that they want me dead.”

Dmitrii glanced up at his brother. He stuck his neck out too often—

“Well, I suppose you should at least show yourself so I don’t have to chase their soldiers off my farmers. Come on.”

Kai stood, and Dmitrii followed them, wiping his mouth and picking up his sword on the way out of the kitchen. They came out into a smaller hall, where the prelate and his soldiers were waiting.

“You’re harboring a heretic, Sir Perin,” the churchman growled.

“Oh, come now, Monseigneur,” the knight said. “Do you truly think I’m going to let you take a girl and kill her when she’s harmed no one? She’s on my lands, and she’s welcome to stay here as long as she will.”

The prelate’s eyes shifted to her. “Her clothes are not her own.”

“And you would just love to see her stripped, hm?” the knight said hotly. “Your Church preaches charity. Perhaps you’ve forgotten that?”

“And what would it take for her to be turned over, knight?” the churchman said. There was anger seething behind the pious façade, Kai noted.

“A good reason,” the knight replied. “Nothing comes to mind at the moment.”

“Land? Money? Women?”

“If you’re going to offer women, just leave this one, eh?” Alyosha said. “I have what I

need, hm? You have nothing to offer me.”

“The salvation of your eternal soul?”

“No man can offer me that,” the knight said. “Begone. I have work to do, and I’ll not harbor snakes on my lands.”

“We can take the girl, knight. With or without your consent.” He motioned to the soldiers, and both Alyosha and his brother drew their swords. Kai found herself backed into a corner with the knight’s younger brother standing guard before her.

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten that your war on the pagans was carried out with aid beyond your own troops,” Alyosha said. “Or perhaps you’ve just forgotten whom you’re dealing with. Go,” he said, “or I can just as easily pack you out in coffins.”

Kai sank back against the wall as the prelate and his soldiers left. Dmitrii sheathed his blade and helped her up.

“I told you not to mess with the Church,” he said to his brother.

“And what was I supposed to do? Leave her to die?” Alyosha snapped at him.

“Perhaps. It’s not as though it’s uncommon for them to kill heretics.”

“Later, hm?” The knight was pacing, the clank of his armor grating on Kai’s nerves.

“They may be back soon. With more. I’ve taken this stance; I can’t back down from it easily.”

“Well, you better have a damned good reason if you’re going to get us killed,” Dmitrii said.

“She saved my life,” Alyosha shrugged.

“Ah. So it’s at least debatable.” He shifted Kai on his arm. “So what are you going to do with her?”

Alyosha shrugged. “Just go find her a room, hm? I’ve got a lot to do yet today.”

Dmitrii led Kai to the upper level of the keep. She was quiet as they walked, keeping her eyes on the floor in front of her.

“Did you really save his life?” Dmitrii asked as they reached the top of the stairs.

“That’s a matter of opinion, I think.”

“What did you do, then?”

“Gave him stitches.”

She stopped in the doorway of the room he had opened as he crossed to open the shutters. It was almost four times the size of the cloistered cell she had occupied before.

“Let us know if you need anything, hm? Just leave laundry by the door, and someone will take it. If you don’t want to eat at normal times, someone is usually in the kitchens...” He turned. “That’s really all you did?”

“Yes.”

“Odd. He’s never done something like this before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s ignored the Church here for a long time. But he’s never done, well, anything like this.”

“Like what?” she asked. “What am I as to be so inexplicable?”

“Female.”

She blinked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Dmitrii shrugged. “Maybe nothing. We’ll see, I guess.”

He left her alone, and Kai sat down on the bed. What had she fallen into?

For almost four days, Kai stayed alone in the room. It took a while for the knight to get around to seeing if she was still alive; he found her sitting by the window.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Should I have?”

“I don’t need you starving to death or something. Not with the Church pissed.”

“Do you understand the concept of a fast?”

“I don’t see a purpose for it.”

“Undistracted contemplation?”

“Contemplation of what?”

“The nature of God.”

“Starving yourself doesn’t lead to hallucinations of steak or cake or that strawberry wine... Damn. Now I’m hungry.” He paused. “Why try to grasp something beyond the human mind, eh? There is a reason there is a distinction between God and man.”

“And between man and woman? Hm...” Her mind drifted again. She was pale; he crossed the room to her. She was feverish, as well.

“You need to eat something, lass.”

“There’s no point in it,” she said finally, her face bittering, coming back into herself. “There is nothing left for me to do here.”

He lifted her chin, though her eyes remained on the window. “You have to be doing something?”

“I can’t just sit here. I’ll go crazy.”

“So find something.”

“Like what?”

“There must be something.”

“All my life has been with the Church.”

“Then why turn heretical?”

She finally turned her eyes from the window to him. “One does not simply *turn* heretical. It is the evolution of many years. Some of them are very old. But there are some things I cannot find it in myself to believe.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“It is not so much a question of right or wrong... In the end, we are all wrong about something. It is our imperfection that is our humanity. I do not think God will hold against us the fallibility inherent in our very beings.”

“Then what are you complaining about?”

“What am I going to *do*?”

“That’s pretty much up to you, no? You can do pretty much whatever you set your mind to.”

“Since when has a woman ever had that option? I didn’t *choose* the cloister.”

“And would you have taken any other road at this point?”

“There have never been any other roads open to me,” she said, looking away again. “My blood would not allow it.”

The door rattled under Dmitrii’s knock.

“What’s up, Dima?” Alyosha asked without shifting his eyes off Kai.

“Zhariv is coming to dinner.”

The knight looked up. “Tonight?”

“In about an hour.”

Alyosha swore. “Over her?”

“Undoubtedly. But I don’t know if he realizes why you brought her here.”

“Why the Hell would that matter?”

“Because—”

“Never mind. Get her a bath drawn and see if you can hunt up a change of clothes for her, hm? I need to brief the men at the gate.”

Kai watched disinterestedly as her bath was prepared. Dmitrii was digging through the closets in the room, looking for something remotely her size. Finally he came up with half a dozen dresses that seemed closest, and he hung them from the curtain rod.

“Any of these might do, I hope,” he said. “Please do try to cheer up for him, huh?”

“For whom?”

“Alyosha. He’s just trying to help.”

“If you say so.”

She was left alone. She bathed quickly and brushed out her hair, then stopped in front of the dresses. They were far more flashy, far more revealing than anything she would have chosen on her own – than anything she had ever worn before. She couldn’t bring herself to wear white; she settled on a deep purplish-blue with a more modest cut. Her hair being wet, she left it down.

There was a knock on the door after she had been ready for a while, and when she opened it, she found Dmitrii outside.

“Who is this *Zhariv*?” she asked as he led her through the hallways.

“Nikolai Aleksandrovich Zhariv,” he said. “A prelate from our homeland. He is on the council in the Holy City, and he’s probably been sent to talk Alyosha into turning you over.”

“Will he?”

“Not likely. He seriously thinks he owes you his life, and as such, he will not turn you out.” He ran one hand back through his hair. “If the Church wants to get ugly about it, they know quite well that the sons of Ivan Yevgenievich Perin will make them bleed for it.”

Kai gathered her skirt to go down the stairs they had come to. “Are there more of you?”

“Just two,” Dmitrii said. “Ivan, the eldest. And Vladimir, the youngest. Ivan is already married, and will inherit our father’s lands. Vladimir is only ten.”

“Do you have any sisters?”

“Six.”

“All alive? My! And you all have the same mother?”

“No. The elder four of us – Ivan, Alyosha, me, and Nadia – all have the same mother. The younger six are from our father’s second wife.” He paused. “Do you have siblings?”

“Presumably, but I wouldn’t know them if I saw them. I don’t remember my mother, and I’ve never met my father.”

“Who is your father?”

“Gerhard Hohefeld, Duke of Wachsberg.”

Dmitrii stopped short. “Ah – what?”

Kai stopped and turned to face him. “What?”

“Nothing.” He offered her his arm again, and they continued to the smaller dining hall.

Alyosha and the prelate were both already there; Kai sat quietly at the place Dmitrii put her, between him and his brother, opposite the prelate.

“Good evening, Dmitrii Ivanovich,” the prelate greeted him coolly. His eyes shifted to Kai. “Miss...”

“Kai Hohefeld,” she replied calmly.

“And what brings you to Sadelberg?”

“I was under the impression that you were aware of my situation,” she said, accepting the basket of rolls from Dmitrii, unflustered.

“And you fled?”

“One can only endure so much hypocrisy.”

“The Faith is not hypocrisy,” he said, his vehemence measured. Kai’s eyes shifted to him without lifting her head. A lawyer. Interesting.

“No, but the Church’s treatment of its women is,” she said.

“How dare you—”

“How dare I what?” she interrupted, looking up from her roll. “You haven’t spent the past seventeen years in a convent, hm?”

“If you all are just going to talk Church all night, I’m going to eat in the kitchens,” Dmitrii said as he stood.

“Sit, Dima,” Alyosha said. “If you want to make me more irritable, Nikolai Aleksandrovich, debate theology. You’ve known for years where I stand in it.”

“Does she?”

“Why should she?” Alyosha said.

“Why is she here, then?”

“Because Church soldiers can’t enter a sanctified circle, hm?” the knight replied. “My lands are mine. Let the Church do what it wills on its own.”

“Are you inviting a critique of your managing?” the prelate said.

“I’m confident enough in my decisions that it is the Church which needs critique as a landlord.”

Kai glanced at the knight, but she kept her opinion that the Church should not *be* a landlord to herself.

“There’s hardly a man in the kingdom who does not know of your reputation for leniency and excessive generosity,” the churchman said.

“It’s not my fault the church is short-sighted, Nikolai Aleksandrovich, now is it?” Alyosha replied. “It’s better than having them starve, eh? My stores are full. So are theirs. Everyone has clothes and a decent home. You blame me for not living like the Bishop of Galren?” He tossed the bone from the roast to a large dog in the corner of the room.

“You could do more for the King.”

“What, encourage his push east? Back towards my father’s lands?”

“Your allegiance is to the King, no?”

“Yes. And sending him to the East would destroy Größerfeld. I know my father and his neighbors. You’d think you would as well.”

“Ivan Yevgenievich is losing power.”

“To his son. What, do you think it’s an accident?”

“Enough, Alyosha, hm?” Dmitrii said. “There’s a reason snakes are deaf.”

Alyosha's eyes became amused as they shifted to his brother. "Dad always called you a gag for a reason, too, I suppose."

"Only in some areas. I've got a girl waiting for me. I'm not keeping you silent there."

"There are far too few decent women out here who haven't been cloistered," Alyosha shrugged.

"There's always the clans," Dmitrii offered.

"The pagans cannot marry into the Church," the prelate said. Alyosha refilled his glass.

"That's not really a problem for me, hm? The marriage of the Church serves nothing more than a societal function. A common law marriage is no less a marriage than that of the Church. When God has bound two souls, neither man nor any of man's institutions should separate them simply because they didn't spend an hour in a church telling God what He already knows."

"The helmet really does bake the brain, doesn't it?" Dmitrii said. Alyosha grinned briefly at him.

"You deal far more with baking than I do."

"Don't hate me because I can feed myself, hm?"

Kai was trying very hard to tune the brothers out. Her head hurt, and she had to be careful not to overeat at this point. The night became a blur of debate about land-use theory and rights and sovereignty and the uses of war. Dmitrii eventually took her back to her room.

"You're welcome to poke around, you know," he said.

"I'm not accustomed to roaming," she replied, her eyes on the window.

"Then learn. Do something besides sit up here and starve. I want to know why Alyosha brought you here, and I can't if you're always apart."

"I've never had reason to want male company," she replied. "And tonight wasn't exactly encouraging it."

"You've never wanted men?"

"Not really, no."

His brow furrowed. "What do you *do* in a convent?"

"Study. Pray. Repeat."

"It doesn't get dull?"

"Painfully, but there is nothing else to do."

"Stay here. I'll be right back."

Kai's brows rose slightly as he left. "Where would I go?" she murmured to herself. Then the prelate was in her doorway, and she let her face melt back to neutrality.

"What are you doing here, child?"

"At the moment, nothing," she shrugged. "There is no more for me to do here than anywhere else."

"Why don't you give yourself over?"

"To die?"

"You have already forsaken God."

Her brows rose. "On the contrary, I am far more reconciled with God than I have been in years."

"How can you claim to follow God when you have forsaken His Church?"

"Have you considered, perhaps, whether it is His Church which has forsaken Him?" Kai

replied. "I've been through every known scrap of Scripture in as close as one can get to the original, Monseigneur. I cannot deny what I have found. And there is much in Scripture that has no bearing on life, and much in life that is not to be found in Scripture."

Dmitrii stopped short in the doorway when he found the prelate in the room.

"Alyosha told you to stay away from her," he said.

"What is he concerned about?" the prelate returned without taking his eyes off Kai.

"She's far more a heretic than he is."

"It's only heresy for him on this side of the Bolshen, Nikolai Aleksandrovich. Stay away from her. And quit trying to slander my brother."

"Your brother is a dangerous man, Dmitrii Ivanovich."

"So am I. So is our father. Go."

"And leave you alone with her?"

"I am not the one here with children, now am I?" Dmitrii replied. "Go."

Once the churchman had been badgered out, Dmitrii gave Kai the half dozen books he'd brought back with him.

"What are these?" she asked.

"A corrupting influence," Dmitrii shrugged. Her brows rose again. "Stuff you should know if you're going to be out in the world. A great exaggeration of most of it, but still..."

Her brows furrowed. "And what would I need to know?"

"Of relationships between men and women?"

"I know where babies come from, Dima, and how."

"But do you know why?"

She frowned.

"Read the books, huh?"

Kai was not in her room when Alyosha went to find her the next day. There was a stack of books on the night stand – his brows rose.

"Dima, I told you to behave."

Dmitrii looked up from the potatoes he was roasting. "What do you mean?"

"Turelan romances—"

"Oh. Heh. I just didn't want her to be caught up in the world without knowing what she's getting into."

"She's not the marrying type, Dima."

"Neither are you."

"Don't even start. That's not why I brought her here."

"It's not?"

"No, it's not."

"Then don't let her see that you're in a panic to find her. And Zhariv is coming back in two weeks to talk to her."

"Damn."

"What?"

"He'll try to take her with him, then."

"And you'll try to stop him?"

"If he takes her to the Holy City to stand before the current council, they'll kill her."

“For someone who wasn’t knighted for his chivalry, you’re taking this damsel-in-distress thing rather seriously.”

“She saved my life, Dima.”

“Yeah, well, just don’t get killed over her.”

Alyosha resumed his search. He stopped on the edge of the upper garden, then stepped back out of sight. She had lain a folded blanket on the grass and was balanced upon it on her hands. As he watched, she shifted her weight so that she was balanced just upon one, then, in a move he would have missed if he had blinked, she shoved off the ground and landed on the other hand. It occurred to him that she was quite possibly focused enough that she wouldn’t have seen him if he walked past. The baggy pants she wore were very worn, as was the loose shirt. She must have been doing these exercises for a long time before coming there.

She eventually settled cross-legged on the blanket, and Alyosha headed for his study. He knew quite well that no convent of the official Church would have – could have – taught her that.

Kai sat for some time alone in the garden after she came back into herself. Dmitrii’s idea of educating her about the world was rather amusing. Half a dozen court romances. Really. She did not intend to subject herself to a man. She was out of the convent, relatively free. Not that there was anything for her to do, anywhere for her to go.

The big, fierce-looking dog that had been at dinner the night before bounded out into the garden, then stopped short when it spotted her. He had a ball in his mouth. Kai held out one hand, and he trotted over to sniff her.

“Do you have a name?” she murmured as she gently freed the ball from the dog’s maw. His tail was wagging madly. She threw the ball; he brought it back. Kai pursed her lips.

“This would be an endless cycle of dullness, hm?” she said. “Somehow that fits too well.”

The dog sat down practically in her lap, so she rubbed his ears.

“What am I supposed to do here, hm? I’ve run out of things to learn, it seems... I have no interest in becoming a toy for a man. And I can’t do *nothing*.”

The tail continued to wag. Kai tossed the ball again, then went inside with her blanket after the dog got up to chase it. The sun was setting; her stomach was growling. The brothers would be nagging if she didn’t eat...

She got lost rather quickly. The castle wasn’t really that big, but... She stumbled across a large room with a very smooth floor and a piano.<sup>ii</sup> A ... ballroom? If she remembered correctly from Dmitrii’s “lessons.” Kai sat down at the piano.

“I *told* you the place is haunted,” Kai heard Dmitrii asserting to his brother as the door on the opposite side of the room opened a while later. She stood as they came in. Alyosha turned his eyes to his brother.

“What?” Dmitrii said.

“You haven’t been right yet today,” Alyosha said.

“So sue me.”

“For what? You won’t have a penny until you get Zhenna’s dowry.”

“Yes. Which is why it’s your fault I’m broke.”

“Were you going to come eat?” Alyosha asked Kai after she’d crossed the room to them.

“If I could find my way there.”

Kai lay awake in her bed that night. She was still unused to such a large mattress. The room was bright with moonlight, and she was having trouble sleeping. After a while she walked down to the garden she had found earlier and sat down by the fishpond.

What was she going to do? Sitting around doing nothing was not an option. And Dmitrii was obviously desperate to marry off his brother so he could get married himself.

Her face darkened as she traced the scars on her wrist. She had almost died. And they said he had been absolved, that God had forgiven him, that she should as well. Forgive? That was irrelevant, after what he had done. There was only one incidence she could find of it in Scripture, and the girl's brothers had killed the man. But he was already dead, and she had no brothers. She had wanted to die for a long time after that, to be able to forget.

The man, his father, all the men of the city, plundered the city—

No, purging the Church of all its men was impossible, and too extreme. But perhaps its wealth? Its ill-gotten wealth?

Alyosha combed the castle in the morning, even more thoroughly than he had the day before. But even her things were gone from her room.

Dmitrii found him in his study late that night with a half-empty bottle of wine.

"You're going to have a headache," he chided him.

"It's preferable," the knight replied.

"Where do you think she's gone?"

"I don't know. If they catch her, they'll kill her. And she won't fight them."

"You're just going to keep denying that she's what you've been pining over for the past year?"

"What do you mean, pining over?"

"You've been morose since you came back from the last bit of fighting."

"It wasn't pleasant." *My life is not worth yours.* Had she going to find something to do, or because she felt she was bringing him trouble? Willing to sacrifice herself to a "greater good?" And what would that be?

Dmitrii was worried about his brother's bitterness, but he knew too well that there wasn't much he could do about it beyond giving him time.

Time, however, just brought strange news. The peasants were defying Church ownership of land. It had been two weeks, and Zhariv had returned.

"That's crazy," Alyosha said to the churchman's news. Despite his mistress and his obedience to his superiors over his conscience, Zhariv was one of the least hypocritical prelates Alyosha knew. He had not wanted to join the Church, and he didn't hide it.

"There are many strange occurrences in this world, Aleksei Ivanovich."

"And you think she's behind it, huh?"

"Do you?"

Alyosha shrugged. "She does not approve of fighting."

"Fighting is irrelevant until the Church has to send soldiers to collect the rent."

"Killing peasants is counterproductive."

"You know I do not decide policy, Aleksei Ivanovich."

“And your soldiers can’t find her?”

“It’s a needle in a haystack. But the most recent uprising was in Eberheim.”

“What, do you expect me to do something?” Alyosha said.

“No, no... You’ve proven stubborn enough about handing her over already.”

“Just make sure the Church’s soldiers don’t wander into Sattelberg again, hm? I don’t give a damn who they’re chasing.”

Dmitrii found Alyosha saddling his horse the next morning after the churchman had gone.

“Where are you going?”

“Eberheim. Why?”

“Are you only lying to me, or to yourself, as well?”

“About what?”

“She left of her own accord, Alyosha.”

“I’m not going to sit idly by and let her get herself killed.”

“And what reason are you going to give her for hunting her up?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve got four hours to think of something, hm? And stop with the salt pork for supper for a while, huh?”

Dmitrii frowned as Alyosha rode out through the gate. He’d bothered with full armor. He was expecting trouble.

Kai swore under her breath as the soldiers entered the barn, then flattened herself against the floor of the loft. When had she picked up that habit? she asked herself. The soldiers were taking the animals out of the barn, and she swore silently again. They were going to burn it.

There were only two doors out the barn, and they were both on the same wall. She moved along the eaves as they dropped the torch, looking for the elm tree she knew to be beside the back wall. There was almost a two-foot gap between the top of the wall and the lip of the roof; sure enough, her preliminary check revealed that there was no one watching the back of the barn. She eased herself down, crouching against the wall as she hung by her fingertips. Then with a line from an old prayer, she jumped towards the tree.

Landing was unpleasant. The bandage on her arm showed again where the wound was still seeping; as she dropped lightly to the ground beside the tree, a few drops of blood dripped in front of her. So the sting on her cheek was more than just a bruise. She shifted the bundle on her back and ran.

“There she is!”

She swore again, but didn’t bother looking back at the score of soldiers running after her. The peasants had been perfectly willing to join the cause. *Why did the Church have soldiers?*

She gained the road, and her pace quickened. There were hoof beats behind her. When the soldiers reached the road, the horse quickened, and Kai let herself look back. The copper armor was unmistakable.

“Oh, Lord, not again.” She slowed, turned, waited for the inevitable with resignation openly on her face as the knight passed the soldiers. When he reached down, she cooperated.

“You seem displeased to see me,” Alyosha said as he slowed the horse to turn it.

“I’m tired of being cloistered.”

“The only reprieve you’ll get from that is among the pagan clans.”

“They’d kill me. Or force me to do it myself.”

He glanced down at her wounded arm, the one that wasn’t around him for balance that he might have his sword arm free. The bandage stopped well above her wrist, above the faded, angry scars that ran across it.

Alyosha put his heels to the horse, and they rode back through the soldiers. He put his visor up once they were clear.

“You’re bleeding still?” he said.

“I’ve been running.”

He produced a handkerchief from somewhere and held it to the cut on her cheek.

“You played your hand too soon, lass,” he said quietly.

“It beats being bored to the point of madness.”

“I thought you didn’t like fighting.”

“I was running, not fighting. Why are you here?”

“Just making sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

“But why?”

“You saved my life.”

“You’re chasing me all over the countryside because I gave you stitches once?” she said incredulously.

“What?”

“Put me down. Being hunted for heresy makes far more sense than that.”

“You’d rather die than live a quiet life?”

“It’s not like I’m trying to convert anyone. If I’m right, God won’t hold it against anyone else. And if I’m wrong, I don’t want to take anyone down with me.”

He turned her face towards him as he lifted the handkerchief from her cheek to see the wound.

“How badly hurt are you?” he asked, wadding the cloth and tucking it back into the saddlebag behind him.

“I’ll live.” She turned her eyes back to the road before them.

“Why did you stay in the convent if you didn’t like it?”

“Where else was I to go? St. Clothild’s is sandwiched between pagan lands and Wachsberg.”

“You’re afraid of your father?”

“I don’t know that he would be pleased for my existence to be advertised across Größerfeld.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t raise you to be a marriage alliance.”

“I don’t know who my mother is.”

“And why does the Church call you a heretic?”

“I have issues with them.”

“Oh?”

She shrugged. “There’s a lot.”

“Like what?”

“Transubstantiation. The whole faith-works-predestination-free will argument. The nature of the Savior. The nature of God. The existence of Hell.”

“You don’t believe in Hell?”

“I don’t believe in eternal damnation. Unfortunately I can’t deny the existence of demons. If I could, I would, but...” She sighed. “Then there’s the whole thing about the hypocrisy of the institution of ordained priests, of discrimination about who can perform sacraments, of what the sacraments even are...”

“You don’t believe in Hell, but you believe in demons?”

“Demons don’t dwell in Hell. They dwell on Earth. And certain parts of the Church hierarchy are involved with them.”

“Have you been hit on the head recently?”

“Gah! Why does everyone I mention it to think I’m making it up?” she said, shifting slightly. “You think that they would have a rite to exorcize a demon without having one to implant one as well? I’ve seen it done, damn it.”

“Such language.”

“If you’re just going to mock me, I’ll go get myself burned at the stake, thank you,” she said. He caught her before she could get off the horse.

“I’m sorry. I’m just having a difficult time taking you seriously.”

“Don’t worry. I’m quite used to it.”

He was quiet for a while.

“Demons?” he said finally.

“Four years ago, I made a pilgrimage to see the shrines. I wandered into something I shouldn’t have.”

“That didn’t explain much.”

“The Church has a handful of assassins in their employ. When the assassin is first acquired, they implant a demon in him. That way he’s controllable, and I would suppose more effective.”

“Implant a demon how?”

“First you summon the demon. Then you tie down the host. Most try to run when they realize what’s happening. Then you open shallow wounds on the forearm in the pattern of a pentagram. Demons seem to like those. Then the demon will be drawn to the blood and the mark and inhabit the body. Then to lock it in, they cut a cross through the pentagram.”

“And do they know that you’ve seen this?”

“Of course not. Otherwise they wouldn’t bother trying to burn me at the stake.” She shifted again. “This is like being held by a tea service,” she muttered.

“You’ve become more caustic, lass.”

“I suppose so.”

“Not getting much sleep?”

“Haven’t had time.”

“It’s about four hours to get back.”

She did not mean to sleep, but before long she was drifting through a fog. Smoke mingled with the mist, the noxious hint of blood overbearing. There was an awareness that she normally only attained in her meditation. Her dreams of heresy had stopped after she had realized their reality, six months ago. And now it was this that came back – the feeling of danger, the site of battle, the fog, the smell of death—

There was a sword in her hand. The blade was sticky with blood – she wiped it off,

sheathed it. The actions were natural, practised – her mind briefly rebelled. She didn't want to go this way. She didn't want to fight. She didn't want to hurt anyone—

She was dressed in leather, hard and soft. There was a ring on her finger. There was a dead man at her feet. She stood in an archway. There were several – many dead at her feet. Church soldiers, to a man.

A benevolence was beside her, but somehow always out of her line of sight. But the malevolence – those eyes—

Kai awoke with a start. She was soaked with sweat – the sheet, the pillow were damp, as well. She was in bed?

“You've been asleep close to eighteen hours.”

She turned her eyes towards the voice; the knight stood at the foot of the bed.

“And have they come for me yet?” she asked.

“No.”

“They will.”

“Perhaps.”

“If not here, if not now, somewhere. Eventually.”

“You sound so certain.”

“I knew for a long time that the Church would cast me out. Long before I even knew I was a heretic to them. They'll come for me until I have proven to them that not even their demons can kill me. And I don't know if I can.”

“Running proves nothing but the inability to fight.”

“Running is my only option.”

“And where will you run to now?”

“It doesn't really matter. They *will* find me.”

“And if an agreement can be worked out?”

“What kind of agreement?” she asked, sitting up.

“That you would not be loose upon the world?”

“I will not bow to a law that does not govern me.” Her anger was genuine, and he was a little surprised to be seeing it. But it was sincere—

“How long have you cloistered your soul, hm?”

“Too long.” She stood and walked to the window, concentrating on a scraggly little pine, easing herself out of the anger.

“You are his daughter in more ways than you might realize, lass.” He turned to leave.

“You'll winter here, at least, hm?”

“Alyosha.”

“Hm?” He stopped in the doorway, turning his head to look at her.

“Why does Monseigneur Zhariv call you and Dima *Ivanovich* and you call him *Aleksandrovich*?”

“Because we're on formal terms with him. It's from our father's name.”

“And I am not?”

“We don't usually use our full names with westerners.”

“Ah.” Her back was to him, but he could almost feel the bitterness he knew must be in her eyes as she said, “To live well is to live free.” And in his native tongue, at that. She *was*

well read, it would seem.

“Why do you cling to traditions you do not believe?” he asked.

“And if I let go, then what?” Her hand went to the bandage on her arm. “Where does one turn without guides?”

“It’s never a free fall when you’ve got your own morals and ethics to steer by.” He left her, and Kai turned. Why was this knight so like a philosopher?

“Because he’s not really a knight,” she said to herself after a moment. “Nor am I a nun. He wears the title because he can,” she mused. “But I am no nun. What, then, am I?” She looked down at her wounded arm, at the scars, at her hands. They were a woman’s hands, worn with work, still stained with ink, though she had not written in three days.

She moved to stand in front of the mirror. She was disheveled, her face drawn. There was but one thing of herself she could not deny. She was a woman. But who?

She did her meditation in the garden, the autumn just beginning and not yet cool. As she sat within her mind, she was unconscious of the eyes which watched from the bay window one floor up, of the concern they held, of their reluctance to approach. She was within herself, and searching.

Alyosha was standing outside her room when she came out to go down to supper.

“Do you think you should do all that before that’s healed?” he asked.

“It’s not bleeding anymore. It will be all right.”

“Will you stay the winter here?”

“Where else could I go?”

“Your father?”

“I’ve never even seen the man, and I was under the impression he didn’t want to see me.”

“Well, then.”

Kai accepted the arm he offered, and they went down to the dining room together. Dmitrii had an odd look of hope in his eyes, but he suppressed it when he found it premature. Kai ruminated on his expression for several moments before comprehending his reason. He wanted his brother married, and he was willing to consider any single woman a potential candidate.

No. That wasn’t a route she wanted to consider.

*A ring on her finger...*

**No!** her mind shouted. No man would ever subject her again. No man had that right.

And so she sat through dinner in silence, the brothers letting her be, her fever apparently past, sat in silence and tried to argue the dream away as just a dream. The sword, the ring, the malevolence...

Dmitrii walked her back to her room.

“You’ve been quiet,” he said.

“What else should I be?”

“Cheerful?”

“I have no reason to be.”

“And what reason do you have for being glum?”

“You don’t want to know, hm, Dima?” She closed the door behind herself and settled in the chair in front of the window. The idea of a man touching her disgusted her. It was degrading. And messy.

Alyosha ran across Kai and his brother at the piano about a week later. Her knowledge of music was apparently expansive, but Dmitrii was teaching her some of the songs they'd known growing up back east. Her knowledge of the language was broader than the younger man had expected, and Alyosha smiled faintly as she raised a brow at the next line in the drinking ballad he was teaching her.

"What?" Dmitrii asked.

"Pardon, but I am unaccustomed to singing about orgies," she said.

"How much of this *do* you understand?"

"You underestimate our lady," Alyosha said from the doorway.

"What have you got lined up for the harvest festival?" Dmitrii asked.

"Just the usual. Why?"

"What about her?"

Alyosha's brow furrowed. "What's an extra plate or two?"

"That wasn't what I meant."

"Are you implying you have plans for me, Dima?" Kai asked, both brows rising slightly.

"What?" the younger brother asked, his eyes widening.

"You assume too much," she said as she stood, patting him on the head. She left the brothers alone.

"She's right, you know," Alyosha said once she'd gone. "You do."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Stop assuming that every woman within fifty miles is a potential in-law."

"I've been waiting four years, Alyosha."

"Another couple years won't kill you."

Kai was beginning to enjoy the wide selection of dresses available to her from the years of collection at the little castle. They had been amassed for storage in the closets and wardrobes of the room which was now hers, and she found a great many of them to be far more comfortable than she'd expected.

Her days found her often as not sitting in the garden by herself, watching the seasons changing. And more often than she knew, eyes watched from the bay window above.

Time passed, and life was normal. Normal save that *she* was there, meditating in the garden, seeking meaning in her life. And then there was the harvest festival.

"C'mon. Wake up already, or you'll miss everything."

Kai found Dmitrii shaking her awake before dawn. "I usually get up *with* the sun," she said.

"Today's busy, though. And the festival's a half hour away."

"And how do you expect me to get there?"

"You think I spent three days teaching you to ride for nothing?"

"Why are you so determined to get me out in the world, Dima?"

"Because good women are hard to come by around here, and I'm damned tired of waiting for my brother so I can go home and get married."

"Your brother doesn't believe in marriage."

"Not church marriages. Dad knows that."

Kai sat up. “Well, what am I looking at? What should I wear?”

“Uh, well, most of it is outside. So something that can handle it.”

“Hm. All right.”

Kai found her bath already drawn when Dmitrii finally left her alone. Then she delved into the closets.

The brothers were finishing packing the mule when she came out into the courtyard. Alyosha stopped, looked at her for a moment, then turned to his brother.

“What all the Hell is *in* those closets?”

“Heh. A lot,” Dmitrii said. He tied off the straps on the packsaddle as Alyosha ran back inside. Kai had managed a blue dress, short brown boots, and suede gloves that matched the boots. She had a thick cloak and a lighter cape, for whichever she needed. Her hair was braided for about six inches, and the last eighteen or so hung loose. Alyosha came back out a few moments later, and Dmitrii headed for the kitchens to get their breakfast.

“Here,” the knight said to Kai as she was securing her heavier cloak behind her horse’s saddle. She turned, and he held out a short gold necklace. A tear-drop shaped blue stone hung at the center.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“The dress reminded me of it,” he shrugged.

“I am unaccustomed to wearing ornaments.”

“I really don’t want to debate the stupidity of the Church’s indoctrination against beauty right now, hm?”

She turned her back to him and lifted her braid. Alyosha was fastening the catch when Dmitrii returned; he backed up ten paces and came back when the other two had separated again. Dmitrii gave Kai a leg up, and they were off.

“Nobody is going to be there who will gripe about her, will they?” Dmitrii asked.

“I’m not too terribly concerned about it,” Alyosha replied.

“But—”

“You’re practically guaranteed second or third in the archery, I’ve won the swords the past two years, and the joust is a toss up. I’m not concerned about it,” Alyosha interrupted his brother.

“What exactly is this festival?” Kai broke in.

“Well, there’s competitions,” Dmitrii said. “Besides fighting. Livestock. Pie eating.”

“And much food, dancing, and music,” Alyosha said. “About a dozen of the lesser knights like me converge on it.”

“They say that Schusterlich has that stud horse up as the prize for the horse race,” Dmitrii said.

“The blue dun?” Alyosha said, turning in his saddle to look at his brother. “I offered him two hundred *florins* for it, and he wouldn’t take it.”

“Apparently he’s unmanageable.”

“Well, then. I’m glad you put her on Sasha. That’s our best shot at it right there.”

“And who’s going to ride?”

“We’ll see what it shapes up like.”

Kai helped Dmitrii strap Alyosha into his armor for the joust. Her eyes were disapproving when Dmitrii went to get the horse ready.

“It’s not real fighting, lass,” the knight said.

“It’s still fighting.”

“It’s in your blood, hm?” he said, lifting her chin with the leather on the inside of his glove. “Stop denying that and accept that it is there, and maybe you’ll stop waking up screaming, and I can get a decent night’s sleep.”

Her eyes shifted to his.

“You should’ve been raised his daughter, not a nun.”

“As if that would have changed anything?”

“Maybe not.” He tapped her once lightly under the chin and left.

Kai found a place along the fence to watch the joust, and then the archery, and then the sword fighting. And then it was lunchtime. She waited somewhat impatiently through the awards ceremony. The brothers’ predictions had been accurate – first in the swords, second in the joust and archery. She helped Alyosha back out of his armor while Dmitrii trotted off in search of food.

“What do you know of horse racing?” Alyosha asked her as she began sponging his bruises after he got tired of protesting it.

“Next to nothing.”

“Would you do it?”

“How’s that?”

He took the sponge away from her and took her hands.

“I *want* this horse, Kai. You’re a good sixty pounds lighter than I am, and Sasha’s a fast horse. The race is almost three miles, all on flat ground. The idea is to not wear the horse out, but to not be so far back that you can’t catch the leaders.”

“Why is this horse so important to you?”

“Have you *seen* him?”

“No...”

“I’ve been trying to buy him for two years.”

“And will they even let a woman in the race?”

“You wouldn’t be the only one in it.”

“All right, then. But don’t get your hopes up.” She picked the sponge back up and resumed her work on his bruises. Dmitrii came back with the food as she was helping Alyosha into his clean shirt.

“Go take her to see Mouse, hm?” Alyosha said to his brother.

“I’m eating first,” Dmitrii said, his eyes narrowing.

“Mouse?” Kai asked.

“The blue dun,” Dmitrii answered. “Alyosha’s only had him named for two years.”

“I need a good horse.”

“Petya isn’t good enough for you?”

“He’s fine in a joust, yeah, but he panics in real battle.”

“I didn’t think they had you in cavalry.”

“Not most of the time, but an ambush doesn’t leave you to pick your methods.”

“You need a hair cut,” Kai said to him when she’d finished rinsing out his other shirt.

His brow briefly furrowed. He hadn't expected her to do that... Her years in the convent had instilled some odd habits in her.

"Well, it'll have to wait." He turned his eyes back to his brother. "What's to eat, Dima?"

Kai left them alone when she'd finished eating, and soon she found herself at the edge of the makeshift fence around a large, lone horse. An equally makeshift sign reading "Killer" was tacked to one of the fence stakes; she turned her eyes back to the horse. This must be Mouse. He was walking tight circles around his ring, looking for a way out. And then he stopped, opposite the ring from her. A presence beside her—

"Don't stress yourself over it, but I appreciate your trying," Alyosha said. His eyes were all for the horse.

"Your interests vary greatly, hm?" she said.

"I suppose." The horse had come to the limit of his rope in their direction. "Mysh<sup>iii</sup> is a pretty horse, eh?"

"Yes," Kai agreed quietly. She left him alone with the horse, heading back to the jury-rigged lean-to tent they had been using. Dmitrii was packing the mule.

"You don't dance, do you?" he asked.

"I suppose I can if I have to. Why?"

"You've never— Damn it, he's right. They waste the good women on the convents out here. Maybe I should just take him back with me this Christmas and see if that works."

"Rushing him into something he doesn't want isn't good for him, Dima."

"It's getting to the point I'm wondering *if* he'll ever decide to get married."

"Some people never do."

"Like you."

"I couldn't if I wanted to," she shrugged.

"Why not?"

"There was a reason I was in a convent, hm?"

Dmitrii finished packing the mule, tightened the pack straps, then pulled the entire packsaddle back off.

"You ... packed ... and unpacked it," Kai said.

"So we just have to throw the whole thing on when we want to go."

"Ah."

"He asked you to ride in the race?"

She nodded.

"Be careful, huh? It can get ugly."

She raised a brow. "Secular competitions are just as corrupt as ecclesiastical ones?"

Dmitrii chuckled. "Something like that." He started looking over Sasha's hooves.

"Keep your weight forward on him. I used to be the jockey for the family, but I kinda grew."

"A bit."

"Would you if you could?"

"Would I what?"

"Get married."

"If I were interested in it, perhaps. I don't really see the appeal."

He frowned. "He says pretty much the same thing."

“A mutual disinterest does not make a match.”

“If you say so.” He threw the saddled over Sasha’s back. “You want the stirrups shorter?”

“What does that do?”

“Helps concentrate your weight where you’re less of a burden.”

“Ah. Sure.”

“You’re sure you’ll be able to stay on him?”

“Balance isn’t really a problem for me.”

“All right.” He tightened the girth strap. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, Dima.” Her patience was wearing thinner again, he noted. “I do wish I’d worn pants, though.”

“Heh.” One last look at the horse’s hooves, and he left him tied amongst their other animals under the large elm. “You’re going to have to fend off a lot of dance requests tonight, I think.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because you’re a pretty unclaimed lass at a country fair, and there are a lot of young men who don’t have the luck to already be engaged to a stunning beauty like my Zhenna.”

“I’m still debating her luck in the deal,” Kai said as they headed across to the field where the bulls were being judged, the last event before the race. “How are you going to support her, if the eldest gets your father’s lands?”

“Since Alyosha took land here, I’m getting that which our mother left. Vlad will get his mother’s lands.”

“Ah. So Alyosha’s being here is to your favor.”

“Yep. His skill in fighting has made my life much easier.”

“Aggression is a major problem in this world.”

“Perhaps. But it never hurts to be able to fend it off.”

“I take it philosophizing on it is more your brother’s scope?”

“Pretty much, yeah. He does a lot more solitary jobs. Gives him too much time to think. Besides. I’m a far better archer than anything else. Warring is impersonal to me.”

Kai turned her head slightly, feeling a presence approach from within the crowd. Alyosha stopped energetically beside her.

“How’s Sasha?” he asked his brother.

“Good.”

“And how are you?” he asked, shifting his eyes to Kai.

“Decent.”

“Nervous?”

“About what?”

“No performance anxiety?”

“I’m never nervous about my physical capabilities. Defending my theology in the Holy City – that would make me nervous. Compared to six weeks ago, this will be a piece of cake, as they say.” She paused. “Winning, on the other hand, is not wholly within my control.”

“Just don’t let him wear himself out, and he’ll do most of the rest,” Alyosha nodded.

“What was six weeks ago?” Dmitrii asked.

“It involved a burning barn and an elm tree,” she said, turning and heading back for their

horses as the prize bull was announced.

“What?” Dmitrii said, turning confused eyes to his brother.

“Is *that* how she cut her face then?” Alyosha said. “Hm.” He nodded after her, and they followed her back to the horses. Dmitrii gave her a leg up, and with a creak and a snap, the girth strap gave. Dmitrii found the saddle in his hands and Kai perched on the horse’s back, calming him.

“What the Hell – it was sound less than fifteen minutes ago,” he said.

“Cut,” Alyosha said after giving the broken ends of the strap a look. “And probably not meant to break yet.”

“Fifteen or twenty pounds less weight, hm?” Kai said, pulling the reins free and turning Sasha in a circle.

“But can you stay on?” Dmitrii asked.

“She didn’t come off with the saddle,” Alyosha said.

“Fine,” his brother said. “But if you feel like it’s too rough, don’t get yourself killed over a horse, huh?” Dmitrii said to her. He paused. “Better over a horse than religion, though, I suppose.”

She rolled her eyes. “The course is marked, right?”

“Yep. It’s between the fence and a rope. Three times around the field,” Dmitrii said. “The last one will be the roughest.”

“So just keep him from wearing out too early,” she said. “But Sasha is of desert blood, hm?” she said to the horse in Arabic, leaning close to his ears. “He does not tire out.”

Dmitrii looked at Alyosha as the horse’s ears flicked back to her at the foreign tongue. Alyosha was amused.

“I think someone likes Sasha better than my Mysh,” he said.

“He’s of southern blood, no?” she said to them. “I have read of southern horses.”

“And the infidels who ride them?”

Both brothers turned to see the man beyond them who had spoken. Kai’s face darkened.

Those eyes—

“Have the same God as the Holy Church,” she replied. “To each his own.”

“The Church wants your blood, girl.”

“And you come alone to do their bidding?” Kai said. “They will pour out more than they should over me. But it is too early for this, hm?” She turned the horse in a circle again. “Come find me when the grape hyacinth is in bloom.”

He met her gaze for almost a full minute before he turned and stalked off.

“What the Hell was that all about?” Dmitrii asked.

“That,” Kai said, “was a Church assassin.”

Alyosha’s eyes shifted back to her. “Is that what makes you wake up screaming?”

“Sometimes. I’ve seen him before,” she acknowledged.

“How’s that?” the younger brother asked.

“The race, Dima,” she said. “You have all winter to pick apart my nightmares, hm?”

The brothers led the horse to the starting line in one corner of the field. There were almost two dozen entrants, male and female, most of the riders adolescents.

“I’ve never felt old before,” she murmured to the men.

“Heh. Be careful,” Dmitrii said. “They’re young, but several of them will pull stunts.

Just don't wear him out early."

They retired to the other side of the fence as Kai took her place in the line.

"Never underestimate a woman who knows to speak to a horse in its native tongue," Alyosha said to his brother as they sat down on the top rail just past the finish line.

"Is that what that was?"

"Yep."

The rope dropped, and the horses were off. Kai held Sasha back, not at the very end of the pack, but close to it.

"He likes to run towards the front," Dmitrii said to Alyosha without taking his eyes off the horses.

"And hopefully he'll get to."

"Why did you ask her to do this?"

"Because I think she can."

"Why?"

"She wasn't meant to spend her life in a convent. Something is pushing her to other things."

"Such as?"

"Partly herself, partly God, I think."

"I thought God didn't mess with human lives like that."

"I don't think He does. But I think He needs her to do something for Him, and He'll urge her to it as indirectly as He can as much He can."

"Don't people usually just get predilections for stuff like that? Like the urge to become a doctor or a nun or something?"

"She didn't have much choice, though, so the Church indoctrinated other things into her."

The horses thundered past for the first lap, and Kai began letting Sasha move up a little, holding him in check with half a dozen horses still in front of them. She had read avidly of horses and horse racing in the tracts on the North African lands in her younger years. She was aware that some of the horses behind her would move late. She knew next to nothing, but she hoped it would be enough.

"You really think she can do this?" Dmitrii said.

"She's kept her seat," Alyosha said.

"And what do you think lies ahead of her?"

"Everything she despises."

"Including marriage?"

"Perhaps."

"You're not going to admit an interest in her."

"I don't think God intended me to marry, Dima."

"You've been saying that for three years, damn it."

"When I first moved out here, Dima, I found the right girl. She's been dead almost four years now."

Dmitrii was quiet for the rest of the second lap.

"You could have mentioned that before," he said after the horses had passed again.

"It's been on a need-to-know basis."

"Dad?"

“He hasn’t needed to know yet.”

“I want to settle down, Alyosha.”

“I’m getting to the point I can get along without you, hm? I won’t hold you back much longer, Dima. I’d say I’ll know by April at the latest.”

Dima didn’t respond for a few moments, standing astraddle the fence as the horses hit the stretch on the far side of the field.

“All right,” he said finally. “They’re starting to hassle her now.”

“She’ll be all right.”

The last two turns were messy, and the horses leveled out for the last stretch. Kai and Sasha had been pushed wide on one of the turns, but she didn’t try to bring him back into the pack, leveling him out and giving him his head. Alyosha smiled slightly as they drifted back towards the inside, the little stallion’s stride lengthening and his head going down. Kai was talking to him in Arabic again. Her hair whipped out behind her, and she was perched up higher than he’d expected her to be able to manage without stirrups. The leaders had tired. The drive from behind had begun. The little desert stallion had been raced in his homeland – that was how Alyosha had won him, almost three years before. He knew this game, and he loved it. He pulled ahead by more than a length, and it took Kai a good quarter of a mile to get him to slow down. She had started back towards them by the time Dmitrii and Alyosha reached her.

“Aleksi Perin. I should have known.”

The man had spoken as soon as Alyosha had caught Sasha’s bridle. Kai was wiping the wind tears from her eyes, but she recognized the speaker as one of the other knights.

“Known what?” Alyosha said.

“That you’d have a horse in this race.”

“Actually, Scherker, the horse is hers,” Alyosha said. Dmitrii’s eyes shifted to his brother as he took the bridle from him. Sasha was one of the knight’s favorites—

“And who is she?”

“Kai,” she replied for herself.

“Kai who?”

“Just Kai,” she shrugged.

“Ah. Peasant scum. What is it with you and peasant scum, Perin?”

Kai leaned down and caught Alyosha’s arm as he reached for his sword.

“I’m well aware of how men treat religious women,” she murmured to him. “Let his ignorance bring him pain, hm, and him alone. Sasha needs to be moving.”

Alyosha conceded to her, knowing she was right about the horse. They made their way to the semicircle where Schusterlich was waiting with his horse.

“Well, now,” he said. “It’s not often such a pretty young lass actually wins the race.”

“Some of us don’t have to worry about scaring off young men,” she replied.

“Ah, that’s too bad. There are good many young lads here would claim you, I think.”

“But which of them could catch me?” Kai said. After a few more lines of banter, he presented his horse, and Kai and the two brothers headed back to their other horses.

Alyosha caught Kai down off Sasha when they got there, and Dmitrii took the horse to cool him off.

“Now, was that not more fun than the convent?” the knight asked her as she tied Mysh off with the other horses.

“Most things are.”  
 “Are you going to keep him?”  
 “He’s your horse, Alyosha, hm? I don’t think he would be happy otherwise.” She paused. “Were you serious?”  
 “About what?”  
 “Sasha.”  
 “Yeah,” he shrugged. “He likes you.”  
 “Thank you.”  
 “You seem irked.”  
 “All this damned ‘pretty girl’ nonsense and the condescension is starting to get to me.”  
 “They don’t know you.”  
 “And if they did, would it change anything? A man who wants nothing more from a woman than pleasure and drudgery will see nothing more than that in her.”  
 “Like someone who just wants a horse will see the potential for that gain?” Alyosha said.  
 “You and your horses.”  
 “I don’t see you complaining about Sasha.”  
 “Sasha is different,” she said archly.  
 “Oh, is he now?”  
 “But of course.” She paused. “What else is there to do here?”  
 “Just eating and dancing.”  
 “Ah.”  
 “You don’t intend to dance, do you?”  
 She shrugged. “I never really have before.”

Kai found herself sitting on one of the benches around the dance floor later that evening. The brothers were off somewhere together; she was content just to watch. Dmitrii stopped with Alyosha on the far side of the circle from her.  
 “Why don’t you go dance with her?” the younger brother asked.  
 “I already explained this to you, Dima.”  
 “A dance is just a dance.”  
 “Yes, and fathers with unwed daughters abound.”  
 “And you look uncommitted and in need of a wife.”  
 “If we didn’t share a mother, there are days I would kill you, Dima,” Alyosha muttered.  
 “Just go, hm? The Church may not wait for her nightmares to come true.”  
 So Alyosha slunk reluctantly around the dancing to her.  
 “Dance?” he asked quietly.  
 “Is he still pushing you towards this?”  
 “I told him my reasons today.”  
 She stood. “Maybe it would be easier for him to understand if you didn’t feel obliged to keep me alive.”  
 “I know your reasons, lass,” he murmured to her as they joined the dance. “No one should push you towards something you don’t want. I understand that quite well.”  
 “Why do you see it, and not he?”  
 “Why else would a talented girl try to kill herself?” He was quiet for a few moments.

“I really appreciate your riding today.”

“It was fun,” she replied with a slight shrug.

“You were not born to be a nun.”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

“Just not sure where you’re going yet?”

“Something like that.”

He spotted a familiar face through the crowd and slowed to a stop on the edge of the dancing.

“Shit.”

“What?” Kai asked. He turned her head to see.

“That,” he said, “is your father.”

“Shit,” she concurred, then turned and started walking back towards their horses.

Alyosha followed after a moment. The Duke was looking for someone. Dmitrii joined them after a few more moments.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Unexpected guests,” Alyosha said, motioning with a nod to the ducal soldiers that were starting to converge on them.

“You’re really going to go up against him?” Dmitrii asked.

“Hey, it was her idea,” Alyosha said.

“I’m twenty-two,” Kai said without turning her head. “He has no right to me anymore.”

“How are we going to do this?” Dmitrii asked. “We’ve only got two saddles.”

Alyosha shrugged. “You take the horses, I’ll take her.”

“All right.” He glanced behind them. “Go, then. They’ll follow you.”

“Be right back.” The knight sprinted, pulling his horse free and pulling himself up as the horse began moving. Dmitrii had saddled Mouse for him, Kai noted. Then she realized what he intended to do.

“Oh, good Lord, not again,” she muttered. “Take care of my horse, hm?” she said to Dmitrii. Alyosha was racing the soldiers now. He held out one hand, and she caught it, using his foot as a step to pull herself up in front of him. Dmitrii continued on to the other horses unhindered, and Alyosha pulled Mysh around to head for home. The soldiers were raising a ruckus; he didn’t look forward to the delegation that would undoubtedly show up after they got back.

“Not a tea service tonight, hm?” he murmured as he put his heels to the horse.

“I appreciate your help.”

“Hey, I owe you for Mysh, hm?”

Kai shrugged slightly. “How far is it to get back?”

“Half hour at the most.”

“All right.” She settled against him, looking back over his shoulder. “Two dozen on horse coming after us.”

“Damn.” He shifted her slightly, shifted his weight, and turned the horse off the road.

“We’ll let Dima get back first, then.”

She was quiet, holding on to him as they rode through the dark woods, watching the silhouettes of the pursuit in the moonlight.

“I’d expected him to be older,” she said finally. Alyosha glanced down at her.

“He’s about fifty.”

“Does he have other children?”

“Just a son.”

“Oh.”

He stroked her hair gently once. “Don’t worry about it, hm?”

“If he’s this determined, he’ll not let me go easily, though, no?”

“Why are you so worried about him finding you?”

“It’s not that. It’s if he wants to marry me to someone.”

“Man cannot create a bond where God does not.”

“Tell that to someone who sees you solely in political terms.”

“No one’s foolish enough to try that with me.”

“Fighting is not an option for me.”

“Not personally, perhaps, but there are those of us who would fight for you.”

“Why?”

“That you might be free to choose the course of your life.”

“Free? You didn’t seem to approve of my attempt at land reform.”

“The course of your life, not your death.”

“April decides if I live or die.”

“How so?”

“That’s when he’ll come to find me again.”

“Your father?”

“No, the assassin.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t want to do it.”

“What, face him?”

“No... Everything that will lead up to it.”

“How do you know what will lead up to it?”

“From what I saw.”

They’d crossed the ridge onto his lands, and he relaxed a little, knowing better where they were. “What did it involve?” he asked.

She shrugged slightly.

“Fighting?”

“Partly.”

“And do you want to learn?”

“No.”

“The sooner you start, the better your chance of surviving, no?”

“I suppose.”

“Then why do you fight the inevitable?” he asked.

“Why do you?”

“What do you mean?”

She just shrugged again. The little castle came into sight about a mile up the ridge.

“Dima’s home,” Alyosha said, recognizing the signal fires above the gate. Kai turned to look behind them.

“Still a dozen following us.”

“Well, then, we’ll see what Mysh can do, hm?”

The mouse-gray stallion was far more sure-footed than Kai had expected a horse his size to be, and they made their way across to the fortress faster than the hacks of the soldiers could keep up. Dmitrii helped Kai off the horse, and Alyosha dropped down beside them.

“He’ll send someone tomorrow or the next day,” Dmitrii said.

“I know,” Alyosha replied, pulling the saddle off Mouse.

“And what are you going to tell them?”

“That mostly depends on what they want.”

Kai pulled her cape more closely about herself, her face neutral.

“And does she want to stay?” Dmitrii asked.

“It’s getting too cold to do anything outside,” she said with a genuine frown.

“That would work,” Alyosha said.

“What?” she asked.

“Feminine stubbornness. Though it would work better if you dealt directly with your father and not through either of us.”

“I don’t give a damn how you work things out,” she said. “I’m *cold*.”

They retired to the knight’s study, and Alyosha stirred up the fire. Kai settled on the chair he motioned her to, and Dmitrii broke out the wine.

“Well,” Alyosha said once everyone had settled, “if you’re going to stay here this winter, we have to give your father a reason why, and beyond harboring you from the Church.”

“Because?”

“Because if he intends to do the same, and you intend to stay, then I’m really harboring you from him,” Alyosha said. “The odds are he’ll make the same assumptions as Dima, and then we’ll have a real mess on our hands.”

“What is his court like?” Kai asked.

“In what respect?” Dmitrii countered.

“Morally.”

“Not as bad as the Bishop of Galren’s,” Alyosha said. “There’s minor intrigue, a couple of illicit relationships, a moderate amount of flirting, but that’s about it.”

“But enough to shock a nun?” Kai said.

“You’re not a nun,” Dmitrii objected.

“No, but he doesn’t know that, except that I haven’t taken vows.”

“How would you explain a horse race to him?” Dmitrii said. “And that little... uh... excursion six weeks ago?”

She pursed her lips briefly. “Six weeks ago was Old Testament vengeance, so to speak. The horse race is mostly inexplicable, anyway.”

“Vengeance for what?” Dmitrii asked.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she shrugged slightly. Dmitrii’s eyes flicked to his brother, but he let it pass.

“You intend to lead the life of a nun still?” Alyosha asked.

“To an extent. The odds are it’ll fall apart by April, but I can try, hm?”

“It’ll at least give you an excuse, though,” he said.

“How?” Dmitrii said. “If harboring her *from* the Church won’t work—”

“Yes, but she was cloistered before her heretical bent was known. Doctrine has nothing

to do with piety. If we can get a priest to write up a bit about her having been kicked out on those grounds—”

“Who are you going to get to do that?”

“Zhariv?”

“Do you really want to put yourself in that kind of debt to him?” Dmitrii asked.

“It’s in his favor,” Alyosha shrugged. “If her father just intends to keep her cloistered on his estates, the Church can’t fight Wachsberg without fighting all of Größerfeld. Sadelberg is small enough to be more a nuisance than a threat.”

“And you’re *asking* to keep her here?”

“Well, what *are* we looking at in April?” Alyosha asked Kai.

“Probably a hundred Church soldiers and an assassin,” she said.

“See?” Dmitrii protested.

“The Church soldiers aren’t a threat,” she said tiredly, leaning back. “And the assassin will come only for me.”

“Not a threat?” Dmitrii said. Her eyes were tightly closed, tears at the corners. Stubborn tears. Angry tears. Alyosha waved his brother off. Dmitrii stood, not satisfied with the answer.

“Go on to bed, huh?” Alyosha said to him. “You’ve had a long day. We’ll figure something out.”

Dmitrii nodded slightly, then left them alone. Alyosha dropped to his knees in front of her.

“I can teach you, if you’ll learn.”

“I don’t approve of fighting,” she said, angrily wiping the tears away and turning her eyes away from him.

“And did the Church make you passive, or did you do that on your own?”

“Probably both,” she snapped. “I don’t know. I’m very tired of people telling me what to do because of how it affects *their* interests.”

“And can you live with the nightmares?”

She was quiet for a while. “I suppose if I do, I’ll die in April.”

“And do you want it to end that way?”

Her mind slipped back seven years for a brief moment, to a drunk monk on a stormy night.

“I would kill myself first,” she said, opening her eyes to look at the fire.

“And is your own life not worth purgatory?”

Her eyes shifted to him. “I’m not sure it would even warrant it at this point.”

“Then let me teach you.”

“If we can work out my staying here.”

“Zhariv can be here by tomorrow afternoon.”

“And do you think he’ll really help? He is very concerned about keeping himself out of trouble, no?”

“He owes me.”

“Enough to put his name to something that could kill him?”

“The odds are the paper would legally declare you a heretic, as well.”

“Ah.” She watched his eyes a moment. “So why does he owe you?”

“I give his kids and their mother a place to live.”

“Ah.” She was quiet for several moments, watching the man on his knees before her who somehow needed her to stay, but was unwilling to ask it outright for himself.

“He didn’t want to become a priest,” Alyosha said, feeling somewhat a need to justify Zhariv’s qualifications.

“You seem to trust him.”

“I’ve known him for a long time. He’s a better lawyer than priest, and he knows Church law in and out.”

“I’m not unfamiliar with it.”

He stood. “Is there anything you haven’t studied?”

“Just war.”

“Well, then, between the two of us, there is little we don’t know.”

“And have you studied nothing but war?” she asked. He allowed the leading question without comment, aware she assumed he knew more.

“I... dabble,” he shrugged. “Travel has necessitated some.”

“Where have you been?”

“In or out of Europe?”

“Anywhere,” she shrugged.

“Well, I got caught up in some private dispute as the muscle for one party that landed me in Carath for two months a couple years ago. Hence Sasha. I’ve fought in most of the empire, most of the Trusan states.” He sat down in the chair opposite hers. “You’ve been to the Holy City?”

“Parts of it. There is no advancement for a woman in the Church.”

“Or outside it, I guess,” Alyosha said. “Not the opportunities a man has.”

“And they wonder why I get so angry with them.”

He smiled faintly, a slightly bitter tinge to it. “You cannot be both Dinah and her brothers, you know.”

“Yes, but he’s already dead.”

“Oh?”

“He was reassigned in an area the plague hit.”

“They never really did anything?”

“They assigned me penance for not letting it go after he had confessed and done penance.”

“The logic eludes me,” Alyosha said after a pause.

“You’re not alone,” she said.

No delegation showed up before Zhariv the next day, so Alyosha met the prelate in his study. He had forgone the normal robes of his office for a simple black cassock, and he seemed a little surprised to have been asked there so urgently.

“You cannot tell me you called me here over a matter of a spiritual nature, Aleksei Ivanovich.”

“Of course not. All my problems are more concrete.”

“The girl, then?”

“In a way... but probably not quite how you’re thinking. Her father is looking for her.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“She doesn’t trust him, and she doesn’t want to leave here in his custody.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Then she shouldn’t have to.”

“And what reason does she give him for her remaining here without saying flat out what she thinks of him?”

“Marriage?”

“That would start a war. I’m trying to avoid that. She doesn’t want to marry, anyway.”

“So you’re looking for a cloistering out a church or convent, hm?”

“Something like that.”

“She’s a heretic.”

“We’ve taken that into account.”

“You know the Church wants to kill her.”

“That has also been taken into account.”

“Do you know why, Aleksei Ivanovich?” Zhariv asked.

“There’s something beyond heresy?”

“She has seen rites that no mortal should have ever known the existence of,” the prelate said quietly.

“Oh, so they *do* know she knows?” Alyosha said. “Well, that’s been taken into account as well, then.”

“And you’re willing to face the consequences?”

“So long as she remains here, I do not foresee them being a problem.”

“You wanted to avoid a war, I thought?”

“With her father, yes. Wachsberg is too big for me to fight.”

“And her mother?”

“She doesn’t know who she is, much less if she’s alive.”

“Ah.”

“You do?”

“I’m not at liberty to disclose that information,” the prelate said. Alyosha nodded slightly.

“All right. Will you work out the details of the document with her?”

“Dmitrii said you didn’t want me near her.”

“As an inquisitor, I don’t, no.”

“You’re just going to ignore that you want her to stay here?”

“As long as is humanly possible.”

“Have you told your brother about Alana yet?”

“The generalities.”

“All right. Where is she, then?”

“Probably in the library doing her exercises, since the garden has become too cold for her.”

“Exercises?” the prelate asked as he followed the knight around to the library.

“Ah – yeah. I don’t know what else to call it,” he replied, shrugging slightly as he opened the library doors. “Kai?”

She tilted her head to see the door; Zhariv's brows rose. She was balanced on her hands on the back and seat of a chair that was balanced on one leg. She eased it down and stood.

"Hm?"

"They wanted you to be a nun?" Zhariv said.

"It was decided when I was four," she said. Alyosha left them alone.

"And you want to do other things?"

"It's not so much a matter of want," she said, sitting down at one of the large tables. "It's a matter of sanity."

"How so?"

"I used to have nightmares – for years – of the little meeting that forced me out of St. Clothild's. Long before I even began questioning doctrine. And as soon as I did what was necessary to make it happen, they stopped."

"And now?"

She looked away for a moment, then back. "I suppose it's a matter of adapting. But I need to be here. At least through April. After April, I don't know what it will be. But I'd rather not find out what happens if I am not here in April."

"You believe in free will, no?"

She nodded.

"How does this affect it?"

"I also believe in infinite possibilities, Monseigneur. Foreseeing something that will or might happen does not make it happen. But I think if I cooperate with the path that is being offered, things will work out for the best in the long run."

"You know things that they would prefer you did not."

"And God knows things they would be better off not doing," Kai replied. "It is not wrong to follow the right course of action, no matter the earthly consequences."

"And that peasant revolt?"

"I was still grasping at straws then. The urge to do something without knowing what."

"You want to hurt the Church?"

"Sometimes. But more the inflated bureaucracy it has become. The Church was never meant to be an institution. It is a fellowship of believers. Nothing more. Society has turned it into a cancer."

"You should've been a man, hm?"

"If God wanted to work with a man, He could have arranged it easily enough."

"And where are you headed now? What is April?"

"Life or death," she shrugged. "Depending mainly on whether I am willing to give up some things."

"Such as?"

"Personal pacifism. Alyosha seems to want me to just embrace change with open arms, but it's not easy to just drop everything I've ever known."

"And your father's looking for you?"

"Apparently. He doesn't want me to marry, or at least he didn't. And if he changes his mind, I'll oppose it in any way I can."

"The Church won't marry you at this point, anyway."

"That's to my advantage," Kai shrugged slightly.

“You were not meant to be a nun, were you?”

“Alyosha’s been telling me that for quite some time now.”

“There are many roads you could have taken, I think, had you the opportunity.” He paused. “Including warring, no doubt.”

“I have no wish to hurt anyone.”

“So why stay here?”

“What, beyond the odds of getting brought back on horse by someone who thinks I’ll get killed wandering around in the world? I’d rather not move around too much. I’m used to being in one place.”

“Do you really think he wants you to stay?”

“I think he doesn’t want to get hurt again. I don’t blame him. If my being here helps him feel better, I’m not unwilling to just stay.”

“You know why he’s not married, then?”

“For the most part.”

“He told you?”

“No. He didn’t really have to.”

“Why not?”

Kai shrugged. “Alyosha is not particularly difficult for me to understand. Nor am I for him, I suppose. I can... sense his presence, in a way, feel him approach through a crowd.”

“Can you do this with anyone else?”

“Only the man who will be sent to kill me in April.”

“And you deny an inclination towards men or marriage.”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone, Monseigneur, nor do I wish to get hurt myself, hm? I cannot say nothing will ever happen, but I’m not going to try to make anything happen. I was cloistered so I wouldn’t marry. I’d rather not bring anyone the probable wrath that pursuing me would cause.”

Alyosha found Kai and Zhariv debating purgatory and Hell when he returned to the library at suppertime. The prelate stood when the knight entered.

“She is very convincing, Aleksei Ivanovich.”

“It stems from stubbornness, I think,” Alyosha said, his eyes shifting to her.

“And a very thorough knowledge of the subject,” the prelate said.

“I’ve always considered it the product of boredom,” Kai said, “for there was so little else to do.”

“Well, Dima actually broke out something besides the salt pork, so you might want to get there before he finishes it,” Alyosha said.

Kai slipped out the door past him, and the prelate joined the knight to walk to dinner.

“What are you going to do when your brother goes home?”

“Hire someone,” Alyosha shrugged. “I have to at Christmas every year anyway.”

“I think the two of you could get along quite well.”

“Don’t even start. Dima’s been at it long enough. She’s been hurt by men before, and at the moment there is nowhere else she can go without running into the Church or her father. I

won't take that from her."

"Ah." He folded his hands within his robe. "Just don't maintain it so long you hurt her through denial, hm?"

"Do you really think it would?"

"Perhaps in time, if not now."

Kai had settled in by that time; Zhariv could see that clearly enough. He was far quieter at supper than Alyosha had expected. The prelate normally hid his indecision in silence. He had known the Perins for years, and Aleksei had done him many favors since he had earned Sadelberg by his blade and wits. This woman who had fallen into his lap, so to speak... She could be very good for him if they were left together long enough to get beyond the reluctance of their pasts.

Kai retired early. The brothers were talkative, but the prelate was not. She settled down at the window after loosing her hair. If she stayed... At the very least it was something to do.

Alyosha knocked at her door late, but she was still awake. She let him in after finding a robe.

"He's offered to go talk to your father if he gives you trouble over staying here."

"Offered?"

"I think he knows who your mother is. She probably doesn't know where you are, and he may be able to arrange something that way."

"A mother can be just as much trouble as a father," Kai said.

"More along the lines of that your father may be trying to hide you from her."

"Ah."

His eyes were on hers. Her hair hung to her waist, the ends showing the natural wave that at times overcame gravity and spiraled into a loose curl for three or four twists. His eyes were on hers...

"I should go," he said finally, turning for the door. Kai held her tongue, letting him leave. Acknowledging the realization that she could sense his very being had made her wonder *why* him. And she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

The "delegation" from the Duke of Wachsberg arrived around noon. Kai had decided to just switch to pants for the duration of the winter – at the least – so she had layered a knee-length tunic over her shirt. She arrived at the meeting room just after lunch; Alyosha, Dmitrii, and Zhariv arrived about fifteen minutes later with the delegation. Kai stood from the bay window bench, recognizing the Duke among the other men. She folded her arms within the sleeves of her tunic. Alyosha's eyes settled on her; she took the seat between the brothers, Zhariv sitting to Alyosha's right. The Duke sat; his men stood behind him.

"You're getting bolder, Perin," he said.

"Oh, am I now?" Alyosha said. "I don't take my soldiers off my lands unless I'm already at war."

"You have something of mine."

"That's debatable," Alyosha said. "I have no claim on her."

"Then why is she here?"

“Because neither do you,” Kai said. The Duke’s eyes shifted to her.

“Oh, I don’t?”

Kai shifted slightly. “And do you want me to bother debating it, or are you as deaf as the Church?”

“I paid a good deal of money to put you in that convent,” the Duke said.

“Then you wasted it,” Kai said. “Unless the Church is not the only one who wants me dead?”

He raised his brows slightly. “With how much money I’ve put into you? I’m not that rash.”

“The Church put almost eighteen years into me, and they dropped me rather fast. And you’ve demonstrated very little of your nature to me beyond the desire to be rid of me,” Kai said.

“You could stand to learn some respect,” the Duke growled.

“Respect for what? A man who throws his offspring into the prison that is a cloister rather than raising them? Even wolves take care of their cubs.”

“For not having you killed when you were born?” he said. “You’re not a hindrance, you’re a dilemma. Your mother is childless by her husband, and she’ll try to claim you for him if she finds you.”

“That would be difficult, given this,” Kai said, pulling up her sleeve to reveal a birthmark on the back of her left arm. The Duke’s brows rose slightly.

“They never told me you had my birthmark. How did *you* know what it was?”

“Nurse used to babble about it.”

He sat back. “Well, then, I take it you’re going to be stubborn about leaving, hm? Or else you wouldn’t have bothered with Zhariv.”

“You seemed so eager to be rid of me. Why change your mind now?” Kai said.

“You’re loose upon the world.”

“Not particularly. Not if I don’t want to be running from Church soldiers all the time. Wachsberg is a large state, with several powerful bishoprics,” Kai said. “The Church is very eager to see me dead.”

“Then why is Zhariv here?”

“Because it never hurts to have a priest,” Alyosha said.<sup>iv</sup> The Duke’s eyes flicked back to him.

“And are you going to interfere with her leaving?”

“That depends if she goes willingly or not,” Alyosha said.

“She was not meant to marry,” the Duke said, a hint of warning in his voice.

“I don’t intend to,” Kai said. “I’ve taken enough abuse at the hands of men. I don’t intend to compromise my life or sanity for one now.”

She stood and left. The Duke waited for her to leave before he spoke again.

“Where’s she going?”

“Probably to the library,” Alyosha said.

“Why?”

“Because she was in a convent for seventeen years, so she gets mad at herself when she gets angry at other people,” the knight said. “So she leaves for a while.”

The library was opposite Alyosha’s study across the garden. The Duke had refused the

chair Alyosha offered, remaining at the window and watching his daughter across the way.

“Where did she learn all that?” he asked finally. The knight shrugged.

“She was well acquainted with it before she came here.”

“It is an eastern art,” Zhariv said after a moment. “She seems well advanced.”

“Art of what?”

“Meditation. Self-awareness.” The prelate shrugged. “It’s not really one specific thing.”

“She has fighting potential.”

“And she will avoid it as long as possible,” Alyosha said. “She does not approve of fighting.”

“How do you know her?” the Duke asked.

“She was acting as a field nurse during the last incursion into pagan lands,” Alyosha said.

“That’s been over a year. How did she get here?”

“Church soldiers pursued her from the convent. She wandered into Sattelberg. The soldiers followed. That pisses me off a good deal, so when they said the Church wanted her dead, I brought her back here.”

“And the peasant revolts six weeks ago?”

Alyosha shrugged. “She called it petty vengeance.”

“Just how much *does* she know?”

Zhariv shrugged slightly. “Theologically, there’s little she doesn’t. Beyond that? Well, she’s been very broad in her research.”

“She speaks Arabic without an accent,” Alyosha said. “I am curious how she managed that up here.”

“She has a good ear,” Zhariv nodded.

“Her nurse was from Coram. Arabic was probably her first language,” the Duke said.

“I take it she’s difficult to make stay where she doesn’t want to.”

“She climbed out a third story window at St. Clothild’s to leave, I’ve been told,” Zhariv said.

“Jumped out of a burning barn into an elm tree,” Dmitrii added.

“And she’s well acquainted with the geography of the region,” Alyosha said, “so yeah. I don’t know how she got out of here to start that little thing six weeks ago.”

“Little?” the Duke said. “It spread to almost a quarter of Wachsberg.”

“That was probably unintentional,” Zhariv said. “I don’t think she has anything against the feudal system. She does, though, think it’s wrong for the Church to hold property.”

“Does Albert know you’ve got her here?” the Duke asked Alyosha.

“No... Why should he?”

“I thought he had an interest in your marriage.”

“I don’t intend to marry at this point,” Alyosha said after a moment. The Duke turned his eyes from the window to the knight for several moments.

“Then who will your lands go to?”

“Probably my brothers,” Alyosha shrugged.

“Why didn’t her mother raise her?” Dmitrii broke in. The Duke turned, his eyes amused.

“You’ve been dying to ask that question, haven’t you?”

“I find it rather odd,” Dmitrii said.

“Her mother sent her to me when she was three days old. Said something about not wanting to be bothered with my rat.” He paused. “I’ll come back in a couple months and see if she’s tired of staying here yet.”

“A rough time frame would be good,” Alyosha said. “Dima has been very determined to get through the salt pork recently.”

“Mid-March, probably, when the pass has cleared.” He headed for the door. “What are the odds you could talk her into some fighting lessons?”

Alyosha shrugged slightly. “I cannot *make* her do anything.”

“Look in to it, hm?”

Kai was in her room when Alyosha looked for her the next afternoon. She was sitting tiredly in a chair by her window.

“When do you want to start?”

She shrugged slightly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, crossing the room to her.

“I’m unused to having a mental image of him.”

“He’s coming back for you in March.”

Kai nodded slightly.

“Why haven’t you eaten today?”

She laughed softly. “Sometimes I wonder if you two are ever concerned about anything *besides* food.”

“Did he have anything to tell you last night?”

“My mother. Not much else.”

“Eat earlier tomorrow, hm?” he said, lifting her chin slightly to see her eyes. “Then we can get started.” He tapped her under the chin once lightly and left.

She was waiting for him the next day in the large room usually used for weapons training. Alyosha took a pair of wooden swords off one of the racks.

“I don’t expect this will take too long,” he said. “Your sense of balance is already, well, phenomenal, and the weight of a blade probably won’t pose too many problems.”

“We’ll see. Physical aggression is foreign to me,” Kai replied. She accepted one of the dummy swords from him.

“You speak how many languages without an accent, lass?” he asked.

“Eight, nine, ten... somewhere around there.”

“Nothing is really foreign to you, hm?”

October and November passed quickly, and Alyosha’s assessment of Kai’s aptitude proved fairly accurate; she learned quickly. Then December came, and Dmitrii left for Christmas, to be gone until sometime in January.

Christmas Eve found Kai alone in her room. Alyosha had left her to herself; she hadn’t seen him all day. That was unusual; since Dmitrii had left, they had spent most of every day together.

She knocked at his study door, which was half open. He was sitting on the divan in front

of the fire, a bottle of wine on the table beside him.

“I want to be alone, Kai,” he said without turning his eyes from the fire.

“I don’t.”

He edged over, so she walked across the room and sat down by him. She was wearing white, a moderate cut with no sleeves, and a wine-colored shawl about her shoulders. Alyosha turned his eyes back to the fire.

“Is it Dima being gone that has you so down, or her?”

“Neither, really,” he said, looking at the wine in his glass. Anywhere but her eyes.

“Alana stopped haunting me about two years ago, and Dima is always gone this time of year.”

She was quiet, so he set his glass down and took one of her hands.

“What did you usually do for Christmas?” he asked.

“Nothing, really. There was mass, and goose, and that was about it.”

“Nothing when you were little?”

“Nurse didn’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Ah.” He stood and stirred the fire. “Your father sent you something.”

“Why?”

“For Christmas, I would guess.”

“Oh.”

He brought a paper-wrapped package to her from a shelf in one of the cabinets. Kai was fairly certain she knew what it was before she opened it; Alyosha watched with muted curiosity. Kai let the paper drop, lifting out a sword in a silver-inlaid scabbard. Alyosha’s brows rose slightly.

“Woah.”

“Hm?” Kai glanced up.

“You don’t seem surprised,” he said.

“I’ve only been seeing it for six months or so,” she said, drawing the sword. It had a distinctive ring. She resheathed it after a moment. Alyosha threw the paper wrappings on the fire and sat back down next to her.

“I don’t have anything for you,” he said when the paper had mostly burned down.

“You’ve done enough already.”

Kai dozed off as the fire burned down; Alyosha sat conflicted beside her. Normally he would sit up till he dropped off, but he couldn’t leave her to the discomfort of the couch. He stood and picked her up, heading for her room up the hall. He stopped short when he turned the corner. A pale specter stood before her door, a ghostly blade in its hand. It turned two coal-like eyes upon the knight, then hissed.

Alyosha blinked. It wasn’t moving, but to pass it would be impossible. He headed back to his room. They were alone in that part of the castle... He laid her on his bed and sat down in the chair by his dressing table. They’d just have to wait it out.

Alyosha woke when Kai’s nightmare set her screaming. And then sobbing. He lit a candle.

“Damn it, woman, why must my sleep be dependent on yours? What is so difficult about all this that you have so much trouble with it?”

Kai blinked in the sudden light, momentarily startled out of her sobs. “Where are we?”

“There was a hostile ghost outside your room, so I brought you to mine,” Alyosha said.

“What did it look like?” she asked, her brow furrowing.

“Um... robe-like, glowing eyes, a long knife...”

“Oh, wonderful. A Christmas present from the Church. I guess I’ll have to set it to rest tomorrow night.”

“From the Church?”

“Arnulf. A bad memory.”

“What was your nightmare about?” he asked.

“Arnulf.”

“Ah.”

“Do you want to know how uncomfortable this dress is to sleep in?”

“If it’s uncomfortable, why wear it?”

“It’s only uncomfortable lying down.”

“You are *not* stripping while I’m in the room.”

She frowned at him briefly, then rolled over. Alyosha sighed slightly.

“As if my life isn’t complicated enough...” he muttered. He stood, pulling a handkerchief from one sleeve, and crossed the room to her. “If you’re crying over me, please stop.”

“I’ve tried. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Maybe you should fix the ghost tonight,” he said quietly. That set her laughing softly through her tears.

“Fix? Fix. Heh. Arnulf was never broken. Vulgar. Vile. But never broken.” She sniffed. “Not that I wouldn’t have emasculated him, had I the opportunity.”

“Please.”

Kai wiped her eyes with the handkerchief he’d handed her. Dmitrii wouldn’t be back for several weeks yet, and he would probably be leaving in May. Alyosha didn’t know if she would still be there... and he was afraid to get attached to someone right when Dmitrii was leaving, that he would be hit with the loss now that he had finally reconciled himself to life alone.

Kai sat up, stretched, stood. Alone. She knew that pain. That gnawing, maddening pain. Alone. That was what she left him with if she failed. That was what she left him with if she gave in to her father’s will. Alyosha saw her face darken as she gathered the wine-colored wrap.

“I doubt he’s still there,” she said, starting for the door. Alyosha followed her after a moment, balking but briefly when Kai opened the door to find the specter on the other side. She didn’t completely dodge the blow, but the ghostly blade initially left no physical mark. Kai recovered her balance quickly, the curse in Arabic, the evocation in Latin. The ghost’s scowling features took on fear as it realized what she’d done, then it disappeared completely. Alyosha caught her as she sank to her knees.

“Are you all right?”

Her hand was clasped tightly over the place the ghost’s blade had hit her. “It’ll be bleeding soon,” she said, through gritted teeth. “Damn him. I liked this dress.”

A hazy blue mist was seeping between her clenched fingers, and a throbbing white line appeared on her arm where the blade had touched.

“Kai...”

“He won’t be back. He can’t finish the job.”

A thin, shallow wound took the place of the white throb, a drop of blood rolling down to her elbow before dripping onto her dress.

“Damn.” She lifted her eyes to meet Alyosha’s, the mix of pain and anger in them compelling him to act. The blue haze was somewhat unsettling to him. Kai closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She would probably have to go into trance to hold her soul in long enough for the bleeding to stop, and she hadn’t been in trance in years...

When Alyosha came back with the bandages a moment later, he found the blue haze gone and Kai in a state somewhere beyond sleep. The wine had left him a headache, and he knelt before her motionless figure for several long minutes after bandaging the wound. Why *had* he asked her to stay? Why had he brought her here in the first place? It was going to be too hard on both of them when she had to leave – and he had little doubt that her father would manage to force that in March.

He picked her up and carried her to her room, laying her down on her bed and pulling one of the blankets over her. Then he sat down in the chair by her window to wait.

Kai’s mind drifted. The dreams came and went, came and went, came and went, her soul writhing against the violence. And then it was different.

The hall was full of fog, but she recognized it as an effect of the dream, of the trance... of the trance? Had all these dreams been while in trance?

Her focus was drawn back to the dream. There was a large table, rich fare. Her father was there. She was at the far end of the table, ignored. There were several nobles and noble clerics debating theology. She was ignored. It was a pedestrian debate, a topic more complex than their understanding, really. There were men sparring in the hall, men no better than she, but she could not wear a blade here. In her father’s hall. And there he sat, at the other end of the table. Sat alone and angry. She couldn’t go to him; that had been forbidden.

As long as she sat there, passive. Ignored. Caged. Isolated. The anger built inside her; she fought it, but it only hurt more. Her arm was burning—

Kai woke with an oath, rolling out of bed, hand at her arm.

“Well, it’s better than the screaming, I guess.”

Her eyes shifted to the window, to the man in the chair. “You can go to bed,” she said. “It’ll be all right now.”

Alyosha stood and walked over to her, lifting her chin to see her eyes. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

He left, closing the door behind him. Kai changed into her nightgown and lay back down on the bed.

She got the point. Too well. The only way the men would pay any attention to her as anything but a heretic and a bastard was if she stopped letting them determine her life. And there was only one way to do that without getting Alyosha killed.

And yet, did she even want their attention? No, not really. But that wasn’t really the point. She knew about the demons. She had to defy them. Too much was wrong, too much left in the hands of those who thought they had no serious opposition.

She rolled onto her back, struggling with the nausea. She would have to fight. Have to fight. It hurt, in the pit of her stomach, all through the core of her chest. The idea that the only way these men would listen – the only way they would realize they could not run rampant on the backs of the rest of the world – the only way they would believe that they were doing wrong – was if they were presented with blood, with a challenge they could not just silence and bury and forget.

Alyosha found Kai in the library the next morning, looking down at the snow-covered garden. She was bitter again, as she hadn't been in weeks.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if April is the end, or just the beginning,” she said.

“Whether they’ll keep trying to kill you?”

“Whether the demons, the rites are to be purged completely, or whether they’ll get the message if I survive the first one they send.”

“You think you’ll have to leave?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like it, sometimes, but I can’t really know until the first step is taken.”

“And when your father comes back?”

“I don’t want to think about it right now. They tried to bleed my soul out last night; I’m still rather annoyed about it.”

“The soul is a bluish mist?” he said, raising one brow.

“Perhaps to the optical senses. But that dress will be stained now. I *like* that dress.”

“We can have another made,” Alyosha shrugged.

“Oh, yes, your brother will interpret that *so* well. Me having a white dress made.”

“Dima’s just getting desperate.”

“I know,” she sighed. She was still looking out the window at the garden, but Alyosha doubted she was actually seeing it. Other than the dresses that were in her closets, she had been resorting to cast-off men’s clothing, and the too-big woolen tunic over the faded linen shirt seemed much more natural on her to him. Her hair was loose, darker in the dim light of the library, and shorter than he recalled seeing it in a while. She was so different from any other woman he’d ever known—

Kai turned her head slightly when the library door closed behind him, then sat down in the bay window and leaned her head against the glass. She didn’t really know how to explain it, why he was different, why she wanted to stay. The stone of the windowsill pooled her slow tears. He felt obliged to keep his distance, tried to juggle that with hurting neither her nor himself... How much of the dreams was her own desire?

When Alyosha brought her supper that evening – cold ham, hot bread, spiced cider – she hadn’t moved from the window, though her tears had long since dried.

“You’re the first person I’ve met who can defy the demands of both hunger and the water closet,” he said as she stretched her way into standing and walking over to the table he’d set the food on.

“One leads to the other.”

Was it inevitable? She could have gone with her father and been stubborn against him on her own. Would her staying longer only hurt them both more?

She ate tiredly, mechanically. She could start nothing yet. Her waiting game was with time, and time alone. His eyes were unconsciously on her. He had been watching her since she had first spoken in that tent out in the scarred lands where the pagan hordes were. Pagan hordes. Bah. They seemed to enjoy life far more than many other peoples she had ever caught a glimpse of.

“I shouldn’t have stayed,” she said finally.

Alyosha didn’t answer, but his eyes eventually shifted to the table.

“You’ve been unfair to him.”

“To whom?” he asked.

“Dima.”

“I’ve never given him the impression that I intended to marry. He knows that quite well.”

“That’s not quite what I meant.” She sat back, closing her eyes. “You’ve kept him here how long simply because you didn’t want to be alone?”

“Just because it was selfish doesn’t make it unfair.”

There was a twinge of hurt in his voice, defensiveness. She hadn’t meant to bring that out.

“You couldn’t have found anyone else to do that?” she asked. “Have you no one but family to draw on?”

“This from someone who can’t even do that,” he said. Her eyes flicked open.

“I did not choose to come here, Alyosha, and I’ve had little choice but to stay.”

Something about how she said his name, how she fit the Russian inflections in the middle of German, put the beginnings of a knot in his stomach. He had dropped them into very familiar speaking terms from the beginning, stepping over a lot of well-established custom and etiquette in doing so; and yet she had never taken any kind of offense, going so far as to consistently use the familiar “you” with him, and by filial extension, with Dmitrii, as well. It had been an unconscious move on his part; he had been so acutely aware of her presence that he could not have done otherwise. The knot in his stomach tightened when she continued.

“Whether you consciously intend to replace him with me or not, I don’t know, and I don’t wholly care. I don’t mind staying here. But if you’re just going to constantly deny to both yourself and to him that there is some reason you want me here beyond two dozen stitches, you’re being unfair to him.”

She stood and left him sitting at the table alone.

The feasting New Year’s Day started around noon and continued pretty much until people felt like going home. Alyosha knew everyone, and most of the people who showed up were the ones who worked his lands. Zhariv came as well, with his children and their mother. It was not difficult for his time-wisened eyes to see that sharper words had been exchanged between the knight and the young woman, but both were silent about it to him. Kai danced – and fairly well, the prelate noted – with most of the farmers’ sons, and his own, as well. Danced to be dancing, without a hint of flirting. *How* she could manage that...

“Are you two avoiding each other?” Zhariv asked Alyosha when he finally had the opportunity to sit down with him.

“More or less. Why?”

“I was just about to ask you that.”

“He’ll take her with him when he comes back.”

“Why do you think that?”

“She knows. She won’t talk about it, but she knows.”

“And you’ll just let her go?”

“I can’t fight Wachsberg.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d be stripped of my lands and title if he didn’t have me killed outright, and I have too many people depending on me to drop them into that uncertainty.”

“And so you’ll just leave her to her fate.”

“It’s a path she’s chosen on her own from the choices she could see. If she wants to come back here, she will. But she’ll have to do so on her own.”

“Does she even know how involved you were with her?”

“She hasn’t asked.”

“Are you sure you’re over her?”

“We’ve been through this before, Nikolai Aleksandrovich.”

“You’ve never answered the question.”

“It hasn’t been about her for a long time.”

“Kolya! You promised me you would dance at least once tonight.”

Zhariv’s eyes shifted to the mother of his three children, and he stood. “Yes, I did.” He turned briefly back to Alyosha. “I am sorry I’ve pressed you tonight, Aleksei Ivanovich. But you, of all people, should know that evasion is only a temporary solution.”

Alyosha sighed slightly as he watched Zhariv walk out to the dance floor with the woman he would have married, had they met before he had taken his vows. Old lessons. No, evasion was never a permanent answer – had he not been telling Kai the same thing concerning the Church?

And yet she somehow knew... In the same way that he knew her reasons for keeping a distance between them. That she both wanted and regretted that distance. That if he tried to close it between now and March, the Duke would undoubtedly try to have him killed.

The dancing was picking up, and Kai had made her way back to the table, a few seats down from him, to get something to drink. He moved down next to her.

“How’s your arm?”

“Tolerable.”

“Quieter dreams?”

“No, just angrier.”

“There’s not much to do here in the winter,” he said.

“You seem strapped for something to say.”

“That won’t get me killed, yeah.”

She sat down on the back of her chair, cradling the mug of cider in her hands. “Why do you think I’ve been dancing all night?”

“You’re always welcome here, lass.”

“It’s at least two months off yet. I don’t want to think about it right now.”

“All right.”

“You haven’t been dancing tonight,” she said.

“I don’t need to encourage them any.”

“What, Dima’s stories of you being run down by a mob of crazed milkmaids are true?”

“Probably not the way he told them. The problem with people who like you in any capacity is that they try to fix you up with their daughters.”

“Oh, really?” She set her mug down. “Odd. Seems like they keep sending their sons at me.”

“They’ve been remarkably civil with you.”

“I’ve been talking about free will and predestination all night.”

He smiled slightly. “Nothing is inevitable, hm?”

“Well, death. But at the moment I’m dealing with the preferable options.”

“I know.” He paused. “I suppose I should dance at least once tonight, hm?” he said, finally shifting his eyes to her.

“Why is there a ballroom if you have your parties in the hall?” she asked. He blinked.

“I don’t know. I’ve only had this place for about six years.”

“Ah.”

“Was that a no?”

“That depends what the question was.”

“I was under the impression you were trying not to get me killed,” he said. She sighed slightly as she stood.

“Yes. Which is why it was a no.” She left in the direction of her room. Alyosha sat down in the chair she had vacated. Her stubborn, independent take on handling her problems was going to make living with her painful.

Dmitrii arrived back about two weeks later, finding his brother and Kai in the training room. Alyosha’s years of practice almost guaranteed the outcome of each round of sparring, but it was clear to the younger man that Kai was easily above average with a blade.

“You two have done something besides fight while I was gone, right?” he said finally, confirming from their startled looks that neither would have noticed him had he remained silent.

“Together?” Alyosha said. “Not really, no.” He sheathed his sword en route to hugging his brother; Kai stood where she’d stopped, eyes closed, head tilted back, catching her breath.

“And so how good is she?” Dmitrii asked.

“Not good enough,” Kai said. “Not nearly.”

“How was your trip?” Alyosha asked his brother.

“Busy.” He paused. “This June, Alyosha. Dad’s already agreed. I know you don’t want to go back out there, but both of us would appreciate it.”

“All right.”

Kai put the blade away as the brothers left the room together. They would need some time to catch up.

January became a story of dull repetition, involving mostly sword practice and a lot of silent meals during which Dmitrii, after a while, stopped bothering to try starting a conversation. Even the big dog that had been so long ignored seemed more bored than usual.

Kai awoke to smoke. She fell out of bed, tangled in the sheets, then found a shirt and

her pants, and followed the smell around the hall to the windows that overlooked the courtyard.

The sudden glare of the moonlight briefly blinded her, but the dark curls of smoke were unmistakable. The stable was on fire. She ran briefly back up the hall to Alyosha's room, pounded on the door, then ran down the stairs.

At one point in her life she had been scolded as obsessed with horses, and eventually, for a while, she had believed that she had spent too much time reading about them. She didn't regret it now.

The fire was new, but it would spread too quickly. She started with the stalls closest to the flames, using an old saddle blanket to cover their eyes as she led the horses out. She opened the kennel doors on her next trip in. There were only a half dozen horses there; the two score for the soldiers were down the ridge where the barracks was. The first of the ceiling beams cracked and fell as she led out the last horse. The rest of the castle was just starting to stir.

Kai sank to her hands and knees on the slushy stone of the courtyard, coughing hard, the smoke finally overcoming the adrenalin. A heavy cloak was thrown over her, and then she was carried into the hall, where the hunting dogs and the half dozen very spooked horses had already been herded. Dmitrii set her down on the pile of furs by the main hearth and got her a mug of cider before going back out to help with the fire. The coughing had mostly subsided by the time the people fighting the fire came back in, and she had fallen asleep with a dozen hounds curled up around her.

Dmitrii put a hand on his brother's shoulder when he noticed his eyes on her, and Alyosha let them drop to the mug in his hands.

"It wouldn't hurt you."

"No, Dima, it would get me killed." He rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "Now is not a good time to go into it."

"This wasn't what I meant when I hoped February would be more exciting than January," Dmitrii said, setting his chin in one hand.

"Now is not great weather to be rebuilding."

"At least the horses are all right."

"Yeah."

"You've been saying for a while that you'd rather have the barracks closer."

"It's too cold to be doing right now."

"Dad wants to meet her."

"You didn't need to mention her to him."

"What, just make up a reason you haven't been writing to him?"

"He knows why I haven't been writing."

"Nadia's happy, Alyosha."

"Yes. That's the point. She had the sense enough to marry a man she loved, and he wouldn't even spare her a single cow for a dowry." He leaned back against the wall behind them. "The fire's out. I suppose we should all get back to bed."

"All right."

Alyosha sat for several moments, somewhere between amused and annoyed, after Dmitrii got up and left him to carry Kai up to her room. She was awake, however, when he made his way through the dogs to her.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to go into a burning building?" he said quietly to her.

“I haven’t had the opportunity to see that many burning buildings.” She pulled herself to sitting up. “I’ve never had a horse before, either.”

He was restraining himself; she couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You seem scared,” he said finally.

“I’m not sure which way to go anymore.”

“How about back to bed for tonight?”

“I think I could handle that, yeah.”

“Are you all right?” he asked as he helped her up.

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure?”

“As long as Dima is eavesdropping,” she murmured, “yes.”

His brows rose slightly as he lifted his chin to see her eyes. “I see. I think you and I will be riding out tomorrow to talk to the man who can best decide when and how to go about rebuilding, hm?”

“All right.” She turned and headed for the back stairs to go up to her room. Alyosha stood a moment, watching her go, then went back to bed. Not that sleep was an actual possibility...

Kai had never ridden in snow before, but despite Sasha’s heritage, he seemed to love it. Mysh was about two hands taller than the other horse, and when they hit a deep drift or Sasha became especially playful, Alyosha would stop until she could catch up.

“Do you want to talk about it, or should I just keep my mouth shut?” he asked finally.

“What is there to say? That the sheer idea of it disgusted me for seven years, and now it won’t leave me alone?”

Alyosha blinked. “Are we even talking about the same thing?”

“Perhaps not. What were you referring to?”

“April. That you don’t have to worry about going through it alone.”

She was quiet for several moments. “Oh.”

“I won’t take things further than you want them to go, Kai. If they go nowhere, that’s fine. If they go anywhere, you’re welcome to dictate the pace.”

“I just don’t know if I can handle it.”

“Why?”

“Because leaving is going to be unpleasant enough as it is.”

“And how much worse could it get?” Alyosha asked.

“That depends on if I *can* come back.”

“You don’t seem to have that much trouble with windows.”

“I can’t make too many assumptions at this point.”

They stopped briefly atop a hill overlooking a small, snow-clad village.

“So you’re saying I’m on my own this time, huh?” she said as they started moving again.

“If I could help, I would.”

“I know. It will try my patience far more than you and Dima have. I guess I’ll see how long it takes me to snap.”

Alyosha helped her down in front of the village inn, and they went into the dim, smoky warmth. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust from the snow’s glaring gleam, and then

Alyosha led her over to one corner of the front room and sat down opposite an older man with a silver-streaked mustache and a bent back.

“How are things, Bernhardt?” Alyosha asked.

“Been better. Been worse, too.”

“Any work right now?”

“Nothing particular. Did you need something done?”

“Well, I need you to evaluate some fire damage and see if you can give me an idea of how long it would take to repair.”

“Fire damage? No one was hurt, I hope.”

“No, everyone’s all right,” Alyosha said. “If you want to come up to the keep today or tomorrow, I would appreciate it.”

“I can be up there this afternoon. The missus will have a fit if I take off again without telling her.”

“That’s fine.” Alyosha stood again. Normally the older man was more talkative; the knight got the impression that Kai was his reason for holding his tongue. They rode back more slowly, even though they had broken a path through the snow already. Kai was quiet, either within herself or still uncertain what to do with the tenuous distance between them.

“I want you to stay,” Alyosha said finally. “And if you do have to go, I want you to come back.”

Kai straightened Sasha’s mane, trying to find words to answer that wouldn’t come out as gibberish. Alyosha glanced at her, then pulled Mysh closer to Sasha and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Even if nothing ever happens, hm? I want you here.”

She put her hand over the one on her shoulder, leaning closer to him. Alyosha smiled slightly, letting the horses walk at their own pace through the pine woods that lay below the castle. Kai let her head rest on his arm, watching the birds flitting through the trees ahead of them.

“The idea of watching horses die was somehow harder to handle than that of watching men die,” she said after a while. “Which is rather odd, now that I think about it. The men had little more choice in it than the horses, and they have souls.”

“Maybe because the men had some idea of what they were getting into.”

“Perhaps.” She squeezed his hand once. “When they burned me out of that barn outside Eberheim, they bothered to take the animals out first, but they never tried anything like, ‘Come out or we’ll burn the barn down.’ They just went ahead with it.”

“Yeah, but they *want* to burn you. It would’ve saved them the trouble.”

“True.”

The edge of the woods was in sight through the stark birch that rimmed the pines. Alyosha squinted at the form heading towards them from the distance, finally determining it to be the dog that he’d been keeping in the castle.

“Dima is out and about, if Okhy is loose,” he said.

“Okhy?”

“The dog.”

“Oh, so he has a name?”

Dmitrii pulled up alongside Alyosha. “There’s wolves about.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“Hungry ones. They took down one of the Schmitzes’ oxen last night.”

Kai could feel the knight’s agitation through the gloved hand on her shoulder.

“Bernhardt’s coming up this afternoon about the stables. Do you want to deal with that or the wolves?” Alyosha asked him. The dog reached them, bounding back and forth through the snow in front of the horses.

“I’ve been out there,” Dmitrii said. “It looks like there’s about half a dozen. I can take a couple men this afternoon to look if you want to stay in.”

“Take Okhy and the hounds, then,” Alyosha said. “Take them down from a distance if they seem at all rabid.”

Dmitrii nodded. “All right.”

He headed for the barracks as they left the wood, calling the dog after him. Alyosha sighed heavily.

“What’s wrong?” Kai asked.

“Could just as easily be Eisenhart with his dogs as wolves,” Alyosha said. “He can be a problem sometimes.”

“Eisenhart?”

“Neighbor to the south. One of your father’s knights.”

“Ah.” She put the hand that was over his around his waist. “Hopefully it’s just wolves, then.”

Despite the cold, the older man Alyosha had called Bernhardt was all over the remains of the stable that afternoon. Towards dusk he sat down across from Alyosha in the hall, accepting the mug of ale the knight offered.

“Well, the stonework is sound,” he started, still somewhat wary of the woman sitting beside Alyosha. “But all the beams will have to be replaced. I can set my boys to cutting ’em tomorrow, if you want, and then we’ll bake the damp out of ’em. The shingles won’t take too much longer.”

“If it’s too cold—”

“Nah. It’s not too bad this year.”

“All right. Let me know if you need more hands for the work.”

“Will do.” He stood to go.

“Bernhardt.”

“Hm?”

“Theo and Egbert will ride back with you. There’s wolves about.”

“All right.”

Dmitrii wasn’t back until the next morning, with five wolf skins and a handful of injured hounds. The big dog, Okhy, had a slight nip in one ear, but otherwise seemed no worse for wear. Kai was soon immersed in patching up the wounded dogs, and Dmitrii sat down tiredly beside his brother.

“Lost two dogs,” he said quietly. Alyosha nodded slightly.

“I’ll go see Schmitz this afternoon about replacing the ox.”

“Alone?”

“Why?”

Dmitrii nodded at Kai, who had her back to them.

“What?”

“You’re just going to deny yesterday?” Dmitrii asked.

“Don’t read too much into things, Dima.”

“Fine, fine.”

Dmitrii found Kai in the library that afternoon, balanced on her hands in front of the bay window.

“Why *do* you do all that?” he asked.

“It helps me focus,” she said, shifting her weight slightly, then righting herself. “More effectively than fasting, and it seems not to bother you guys as much. Did you need something?”

“Why have you two been so out of sorts?”

She folded her arms in the sleeves of her tunic. “Has he already refused you an answer?”

“I haven’t bothered asking him yet.”

“I’m leaving in about a month, and I don’t want him getting himself killed. That’s pretty much it.”

“Leaving?”

“What?”

“Our father wanted to meet you.”

“And?”

“He’s coming out in the middle of March to do so.”

“Wachsberg’s court is what, three days’ riding from here?”

“Yeah.” Dmitrii’s face had fallen. “Leaving why?”

“I don’t really have a choice in it.”

“You can’t just tell him you want to stay?”

“It’s not that simple. I don’t know how it’s going to work yet, but I’ve a feeling the options are going to be pretty stark.” She paused a moment. “Don’t worry about it, hm? Things will work out.”

“But—”

“Dima, there will be a Church assassin looking for me in April. My father is the least of my concerns right now. You’ve got enough of your own to be thinking about, hm? Setting up a household and so forth?”

“Most of it’s all set. I’ve been working on it for a while.”

“Is she going to get to do any of the cooking?”

“Of course. She’s better at it than I am.”

Kai sat down in the bay window. “What’s the East like?”

“Alyosha could tell you just as well as I.”

“Alyosha won’t talk about it.”

“Still? Huh. It’s not too terribly different from here. Rich land. Good hunting.” He shrugged. “The clans that are just east of here right now tore through about twenty years ago on their way here.”

“Descendants of the Golden Horde?”

Dmitrii just shrugged again. “I’ve heard some say that. They killed our mother, though, which is pretty much the only reason Alyosha came out here to fight. Most of the nomadic groups never seemed to bother him. I think he’s just about finished venting against them, though.”

“Just killed?”

Yet another shrug. “I was too little to really remember it. I just know that he didn’t take it well.”

“That’s understandable.” She turned, looking across the garden as a light in the room opposite them was lit. “He’s back.”

“Yep. I guess I should go start supper.”

Kai crossed her legs and closed her eyes after he had gone, letting herself relax. Simple questions, complex answers. February to survive without making it too painful...

Kai swore silently as the main gate opened and the Duke and his entourage rode in. He had a half dozen soldiers with him, and a seventh man whom she could tell easily enough to be some kind of relative – though by his dress, not the Duke’s heir. She continued her work nailing down shingles when Alyosha came out into the courtyard to meet the Duke.

“Where is she, Perin?” he growled impatiently. Alyosha nodded to the almost-finished stables. The Duke’s brows rose.

“You’re early,” Alyosha said, picking her out on the roof.

“I have other things to do.” He slid off his horse, that he had ridden there, not brought a carriage, reminding Alyosha yet again that the Duke was a military man. “It’s March, isn’t it? Call her down.”

Alyosha glanced at him, knowing what her answer would be. He headed for the tower stairs, coming out on the wall just above her.

“He wants to talk to you, lass,” he said quietly to her, dropping to one knee.

“If I stop now, they’ll have to work through supper to finish. If I stay, it’ll be done by supper.”

“He’s not going to take that as an answer.”

“Talk is not going to make me leave here. Who’s the extra man with him?”

“I think his name is Henri. Why?”

“Say everything you have to say tonight, hm?” She shifted slightly, starting the next row up. “I’m not in a good mood right now, and I probably won’t be here in the morning.”

“What happened to all the self-control the nuns drilled into you?”

“Hey, I didn’t chuck the hammer at him when he rode in.”

“All right.” He stood. “Be careful, hm?”

She just nodded slightly, so he went back down to the courtyard.

“She won’t come down till they finish tonight,” he told the Duke.

“Perin—”

“Nothing anyone says is going to make a difference,” the knight said. “You may as well come in where it’s warm until supper.”

“Alyosha—” Dmitrii stopped in the doorway of the hall. “Beef or pork?”

“I thought you said you were roasting an ox,” Alyosha said.

“Well, yeah, for lunch...”

“Do you have another ox?”

“No...”

Alyosha sighed slightly. “Take Okhy out and see if you can flush a boar or two, then.”

“All right.”

“You don’t have to throw a feast for me, Perin,” the Duke said.

“I’m not. It’s for the stables.”

Kai cleaned up before supper, and during the party for the completion of the work on the stables, she spent most of her time sitting silently between the knight and his brother. The Duke was agitated; he wanted everything over and done with, out of the way.

“So where did the extra man go?” she said quietly to Alyosha as the party was winding down. He muttered an oath. “Don’t,” she said, putting a hand on his arm as he started to stand. He sat back down.

“In some ways you’re still too damned passive,” he said.

“There’s no reason for you to get yourself killed over me right now,” she said.

“Then let’s go see what he wants to talk about.” He stood, ruffling his brother’s hair as he passed him. “Wrap up the party soon, huh, Dima?”

Kai walked with Alyosha up to the meeting room where the Duke had already gone. He was pacing impatiently.

“Well? Is she ready to go?”

“No,” Kai said. “Nor will I likely be willing to. There is little promise of an agreeable life for me anywhere within the vicinity of you.”

“And who says I don’t intend to marry you off?”

“I would kill myself first – or write my mother, even if it meant opening up a whole new Hell for me.” She folded her arms within her sleeves. “Besides. The Church won’t touch me with anything but fire or a noose at this point.”

“You’re a damned pain, girl,” he growled.

“Only because you’ve chosen to see me as such.”

“And do you have nothing to say, knight?”

“Whether she goes or stays is wholly up to her at this point,” Alyosha shrugged. “Albert sounded like he didn’t want to be bothered by the matter.”

“You told the King about her?”

“I asked him about the hypothetical possibility of any fighting that might occur, and he seemed to think it was stupid.”

“Albert doesn’t have daughters to know what he’d be dealing with,” the Duke snapped. “It’s too late to be working this out right now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He stormed out to the room he would be occupying. Kai reached over and took Alyosha’s hand.

“The odds of me actually being here...”

“I hadn’t expected him to show up this early,” Alyosha said.

“It won’t change how long I’m gone.”

“I don’t want you to *be* gone,” he said, kissing the hand in his softly.

“Don’t do anything rash tomorrow. Please.” He didn’t answer. “And keep Dima in

check, hm? He doesn't really understand what all is going on."

Alyosha pulled her close, holding her tightly, something he hadn't allowed himself before, even though they had been more openly fond of each other over the previous month. The dizzying rush of the embrace, the overwhelming sense of being safe, mixed with the nagging reminder that she would be gone in the morning, the thought that she couldn't just stay—

He stroked her hair softly when he felt the silent tears seep through his shirt to reach his shoulder. She didn't care anymore about the irrationality of her mind making exceptions for one man when in the past it had denied wanting anything from them at all; she just wanted to stay here, in his arms, and be safe.

Alyosha picked her up and carried her around to her room when it seemed that neither of them would have anything more to say that night – or at least anything more that either could coherently voice. He set her back on her feet outside her door, drying her eyes with the cuff of one sleeve, lifting her chin to see her face. Alyosha knew too well that if he spoke again, he would be crying with her, and that wouldn't help her any. He took her hands again and kissed her softly, then turned and left before she could see his tears. Kai waited until he'd turned the corner to look at the object he'd left in one hand the last time he'd taken them – a ring.

She leaned back against the door as her eyes welled up again. Then there were footsteps on the stairs – most likely Dmitrii. She slipped into her unlit room, closing the door behind her, sliding the ring onto the only finger it would comfortably fit. A slight noise—

But the arm had pinned hers and the knife was at her throat before she could turn.

"Come quietly, or I can just leave you here bleeding for them to find in the morning," the man whispered harshly.

"And how do you propose to get out of here?" she breathed, wary of the blade that kept her from daring speak louder.

"The same way I got in." He nudged her in the direction of the window. "There's a half dozen at the bottom. Stick close to me when you get down there. They're hard to control."

"And why should I trust you any more than them?"

"Because the Duke of Wachsberg prefers to keep a tight leash on his bastards. Go. Quickly. And they will shoot you if you run."

Kai made her way easily down the wall below her window, wiping the remnants of her tears out of her eyes as she waited for the man she had confirmed as Henri to make his way down. He pulled her up in front of him on his horse.

"It seems he's been controlling your life more directly than mine," Kai said quietly when they were on the other side of the ridge and he'd put his knife away.

"My mother was a peasant in Turelan. He was less concerned about her being a problem. Keep quiet. We aren't supposed to be here. No need to get in a fight with a third party."

Kai slept under her half-brother's guard in the loft of an abandoned barn somewhere west of Sadelberg that night. The Duke and his men arrived around noon the next day, and the unruly lot that Henri had with him left after they were paid off.

"Why do you always involve that scum?" the Duke said as a horse was being saddled for Kai. Henri tossed her a cloak once she was on the horse.

“If I have to go back to banditry, I want my contacts to stay recent,” he said.

“Did she behave?”

“Well enough.”

“Make sure she doesn’t run off.”

Kai pulled the hooded cloak closely around herself. Spring was three weeks off yet, and she was not dressed to be outside. Henri rode beside her the three days it took to reach the Duke’s castle. Kai lifted her head, throwing back her hood to look at it.

“So your method of keeping me from leaving is to put me in a building so horribly huge that it’ll take me years to get to the point I don’t get lost on the way to lunch?” she said. The Duke turned in his saddle to glare at her, frowning when he noticed that the resemblance between the pair behind him was noticeable.

“You don’t remember it at all, then,” he said.

“No.”

She looked up as they passed through the gatehouse, pulling the cloak closer as they came out into a large, meticulously kept courtyard.

“Henri, find her a room and some clean clothes, then take her to meet Friedrich,” the Duke said.

“You said this wasn’t going to fall into my lap—”

“Did you get any practice with a sword?” the Duke asked her, ignoring Henri’s protest.

“Some,” Kai said.

“And then see how far she’s gotten with that,” he said to Henri. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Henri just nodded in acquiescence after a moment.

“You,” the Duke said to Kai, “are not to leave these castle walls, or you *will* be turned over to the Church to do with as they please.”

He left, and Henri swore under his breath.

“Come on,” he said. “I don’t want to spend all day dealing with you.”

He took her down into the castle, to a small, dim room with a four-inch slit for a window.

“My tendency to leave through windows has become known, I see,” she said.

“I’d assume you’d rather not be stuck in a dress?” he said.

“Preferably not.”

“All right. Stay here.”

Kai waited quietly while he was gone, looking out the narrow window into what was apparently an enclosed paddock for the riding horses. Henri was back shortly.

“You *can’t* fit out the window,” he said.

“No. But I’ve just left a very nice horse. And I don’t see any here to match him.”

He tossed a bundled of clothes onto the bed. “Come out when you’re done. Friedrich is a stuck-up ass. It’s not going to be pleasant.”

Kai walked silently beside Henri to another wing of the castle after she’d changed, the new clothes just as over-big as the old ones.

“What do you do here?” she asked Henri finally as they started up a staircase.

“Whatever it suits his whim for me to do.”

Henri took them in the side door of the room where the Duke’s heir sat among about a dozen courtiers, watching a pantomime.<sup>v</sup>

“Oedipus,” Kai murmured, mostly to herself, when she recognized the story. Henri glanced at her.

“Stay close,” he warned. “Some of his friends are no better than mine.”

“All right.”

Friedrich stood when the actors had finished, disentangling himself from a pair of very powdered women to walk over far enough that Henri was certain he had seen them. He brought Kai over to meet him.

“You know better than to interrupt my entertainment, Henri,” he said.

“Blame your father. He wanted you to meet her.”

“And she is...”

“Kai. The one he had in the convent.”

“Ah. I see. Well, I’ve met her now. Take her away. I have more interesting things to do.”

Kai’s comment to him as they turned to leave was in ancient Greek, and she could tell by his flustered countenance that it would probably take him ten minutes to work out what she’d said.

“What did you say to him?” Henri said as they went back down the stairs.

“That I pity his vanity. He apparently is familiar enough with it to recognize the language. Whether he’ll ever make that out—”

A loud oath echoed through the hall they had just left, apparently directed at her. Kai’s face became amused.

“I would say he did,” she said.

“You don’t need any more enemies here.”

“I don’t intend to stay very long.”

“And how do you intend to get out?”

“If all else fails, probably by bleeding to death. Why?”

“You wouldn’t really—”

She pulled up her sleeve to show him the scars. “Last time I tried, they just found me to soon.”

“How much work have you had with a sword?” he asked, pulling his eyes off the scars.

“About five months.”

“Hm. All right.”

The Duke and Friedrich showed up at the training room after Kai and Henri had been there for about an hour. Kai had found him to be about as practised as Alyosha; he seemed impressed with how much she had picked up in five months.

“Well, Henri?” the Duke said as his disfavored son put away the practice swords.

“I should take her to raid gold caravans with me,” he said. “Or Turelan’s counts. Climate’s better, food is good...”

“I don’t need you getting hanged. And I don’t need her loose upon the world.”

Kai folded her arms within her sleeves. The Duke’s only legitimate son had malice in his eyes; she held her face neutral.

“Are you raising her a man or a woman?” Friedrich said to his father.

“Neither. I’m making her useful.”

Kai raised one brow. “I suppose that means you had no use for a theological scholar.

Great.”

“The only thing that has use for theology is the Church,” the Duke said. “Find her something to eat, Henri, then take her back to her room. I want her to be honed with a blade as quickly as you can manage.”

Kai sat cross-legged on her bed that evening, her mind returning again and again to the night she’d left Sattelberg. He had not wanted her to go. And she had not wanted to leave.

Most of the next week she spent either in her room or in the training room with Henri. He seemed to resent the responsibility less now that he saw how it going to be spent. And then there was a visitor whom she had not really anticipated.

“Ivan Yevgenievich Perin,” the man introduced himself after she had been left alone with him in a small sitting room with tea laid out on the table. She probably could have guessed that just from the resemblance to Alyosha and Dmitrii, but she hadn’t thought he would really come to Wachsberg to see *her*...

“Kai Hohefeld,” she said, sitting down at the table when he motioned her towards it.

“Dima mentioned you when he was home for Christmas,” he said. “I wanted to meet the woman who was enough to catch his brother’s eye. I did not expect you to be here.”

“I did not choose to be here,” she said, somewhat relieved he had been told she spoke Russian. Wachsberg was the last place she needed eavesdroppers.

“Ah. Should I speak to your father of it? Alyosha has a promising future here.”

“My father does not intend me to marry, Ivan Yevgenievich,” Kai said quietly. “But I do not intend to stay here.”

“So you and he are thinking along the same lines, then,” he said. “I spoke to my second son for the first time in six years this week, Miss Hohefeld—”

“Please, just Kai. I don’t like associating myself with that name.”

He nodded slightly. “Kai, then. We hadn’t spoken in six years because of the details of his sister’s marriage. And he’s still angry at me about it. But I will back him if he finds trouble here.”

“I’d rather it didn’t come to fighting.”

There was a knock at the door, and Henri stuck his head in. “He’s getting antsy, Kai,” he said. She nodded slightly.

“I am very glad to have met you, Ivan Yevgenievich, and hopefully I will have the opportunity to do so again, preferably under better circumstances.”

She left with Henri, agitated by such a sharp reminder that not only was she not in Sattelberg, she was virtually in a prison.

Mid-March there was some kind of large annual feast – which Kai thought odd, for it was in the middle of Lent.<sup>vi</sup> The Duke didn’t seem to care; he did have concerns over Alyosha’s attendance, however.

“You are not to have any contact with him whatsoever,” the Duke said as he paced his study. Kai stood silent in front of his desk. “No speaking, no dancing, no correspondence, nothing. Understood?”

“You may as well just lock me in my room if you’re that desperate,” she said.

“No. I need you visible so he doesn’t assume I’ve shipped you off somewhere and start

looking for you.” He stopped suddenly. “Where did you get that ring?”

Kai didn’t answer. Henri, who had found himself obligated to attend all meetings between Kai and the Duke, tensed. He had seen her put it on the night they’d left Sadelberg, waited for her to finish before moving to take her captive. He had a good guess whence it came, and a bad feeling about how she was going to react.

“Give it to me.”

“You can pry it off my hand after rigor mortis sets in,” she growled. The Duke motioned to his bodyguards; Kai darted for the window. Henri had anticipated that; they were over fifty feet above the ground, and she didn’t fear death. He had been working with her with a sword long enough to know that she could worm her way out of most grapples, so he just tackled her, barely beating what would have been her jump through the window. It was a struggle to keep her pinned face down on the floor.

“She isn’t bluffing, damn it,” he said. “Let her keep the damned ring so I don’t have to watch her day and night to keep her from killing herself.”

The Duke was scowling, but he waved the guards back. “Then you get to keep an eye on her at the feast.”

“Fine.” He let her up, and the Duke waved them out. Kai kept her arms folded inside her sleeves as Henri walked her back to her room. She was angry, very angry, and he didn’t think it was safe to leave her alone yet.

“You could have mentioned sooner that you were in love with him,” he said after he’d closed the door. Kai sat down cross-legged on her bed, facing the wall. “Or aren’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why else would you be so bent on leaving here?”

“The church will be sending about five score of their soldiers and one of their assassins after me in April. I need to be at Sadelberg to have a chance of surviving it.”

Henri was quiet for several moments. “You can’t say Perin isn’t at least part of it.”

“He had asked me to stay, and I wanted to. And if I can without getting him killed, I will.”

“You should’ve mentioned this sooner.” He was pacing.

“What good would it have done?”

“I don’t know.” He stopped finally. “Why would the Church send an assassin after you?”

“Because I know the details of their involvement with demons. Yes, I know it sounds like bullshit, but it’s been no end of trouble for me. I’ve never killed anyone before, and I don’t want to, and I’m probably not going to have a choice in April.”

“It gets easier after the first one,” he said.

“He’s going to hold you responsible when I leave, isn’t he?”

“I may just ride over to the King’s hall when that happens and let him know that the Church is going to be warring on his eastern frontier. I’ve done that kind of work for him in the past, and I was under the impression that he and Perin got along well.”

“Will he do anything?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I do think he may tell our father to cool off. I could stand to get out from under his thumb.”

She turned her head slightly. “Am I to take that to mean you don’t intend to stop me?”

“From jumping out windows, or climbing out them?” He leaned back against the wall. “The guard is much tighter here than out at Sadelberg.”

“I don’t intend to leave at an obvious time.”

“Are you going to be able to handle being at the feast?”

“Probably not, but I won’t do anything that’ll get him killed.” She paused. “Or you. Don’t worry about that.”

“All right.” He turned to go.

“I appreciate your getting involved up there.”

He glanced back at her. “Thus far having a sister has been more agreeable than having a brother.”

Kai spent the first part of the next day in her room, watching the horses. She recognized Mysh when he was let loose in the paddock, and she coaxed him over to her window so she could pet him. Henri showed up at her door as the evening meal approached.

“I already told him what restrictions you were given last night, so he won’t make things awkward,” Henri said to her as they walked through the darkened hallways.

“All right.”

“He had this for you,” he said more quietly, handing her a small, folded piece of paper. Kai opened it with one hand, looking down at it without slowing, recognizing Alyosha’s heavy scrawl, which read simply «скучаю по тебе».

“I should hope he does,” she said, mostly to herself, slipping the paper into the pouch on her belt. “Though it is nice to hear him say it.”

“Say what?”

“That he misses me.”

“You can read that?”

“There is little in Europe that I can’t.”

Alyosha turned when she entered the hall, met her eyes across the room, and she could read on his face the sleepless nights, the dragging days. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and turned back to the conversation. Henri let out the breath he’d been holding as Kai let her eyes drop to the floor in front of her, willing the tears from forming. He put a hand on her shoulder and guided her to her place at the end of the table.

“Well, we’ve survived thus far,” he said.

“The night is yet young.”

The food was rich, almost too rich, and Kai ate sparingly. The after-dinner entertainment was what she was least looking forward to, and she kept her eyes on her cup as the first – dreadfully dry – pantomime of Friedrich’s choosing played out.

“Antony and Cleopatra,” Kai muttered without looking up. “God, please say I never have to see it again after tonight.”

“You weren’t even watching,” Henri said.

“How often to do see your nightmares played out, step by step?” she said, turning bitter eyes to him. “The food, the play, the sword fighting, the dancing, the debate, him there, me here, and the damned fops in between?”

“What do you mean, your nightmares?”

“I’ve been seeing this night for almost three months. Here, I’ll show you,” she said as

the first pair of swordsmen took the now cleared floor. She took a blank scrap of paper from her belt pouch and pencilled out the matches and the outcomes. “See how many I miss,” she said, handing it to Henri. And so she sat and called each bout to him, blow by blow, two steps ahead of it as it happened.

“Damn,” he said quietly as the last bout ended, the loser’s sword broken as predicted. He handed the paper back.

“This is why I know what will happen at one point in April, *why* I need to be *where*,” she said. “It’s the same with how he knew I was here – I can sense him, and he me, within certain distances.”

“But why?”

She just shrugged slightly. “I don’t know.” She rested her head on her hands as the dancing – and the debating among the noble clergy – began. “Do you want me to explain their argument, too?”

“No, thanks.”

“Oh, good. It’s very pedestrian, and I can make a fairly sound debate against it.”

The Duke was heading in their direction; Kai stood and left, and Henri followed her.

“Kai—”

“I’m just going to bed.”

He caught up with her. “There are too many guys already drunk for you to walk back alone.”

“Thanks.”

“He should’ve kept you here,” he said after they were a little further from the hall.

“Why?”

“So we could have grown up together. It would’ve been easier to deal with Friedrich.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t remember being here at all, huh?”

“I barely remember Nurse.”

“I don’t know what possessed him to have her nurse us. She never spoke a word of German, to the day she died.”

“If you grew up here, when were you a bandit?” Kai asked.

“I ran away when I was sixteen. He caught up with me four or five years later.” He was quiet for a moment. “If the King won’t take me, I’ll go back to Carath or Coram. Somewhere beyond his reach.”

“I’ll miss having a brother who isn’t a fop,” Kai said.

“If I hadn’t spent two months in the dungeons here on the verge of death, I would consider staying around to get to know you better. It’s nice having family that doesn’t use hanging as the alternative to cooperation.”

“I get your point. Can you let me know when he leaves?” she said as they reached her room.

“You won’t know?”

“Not from this distance. I probably won’t be out of my room tomorrow or the next day.”

“All right.”

“Where is she?” the Duke growled at Henri at lunch the next day.

“Fasting.”

“What? Why?”

“She said something about transcendental contemplation. The rest wasn’t in German, French, or Latin, so I didn’t understand it.”

“You seem to be getting rather attached to her.”

“A relative who doesn’t want me dead. What an amazing concept. Would you prefer I just leave again?”

“I could just find you someone to marry,” the Duke said.

“No, thank you. Your last selection was a thorough mix of hag and shrew. I’d rather castrate myself first.”

“Then make sure she doesn’t try to follow him.”

Henri found Kai impatiently pacing the third day after the party. It was well into the third week of March, and it would easily take her four days to get back to Sadelberg.

“Tonight,” she said shortly, agitated.

“Hm?”

“Or I’ll have Church soldiers breathing down my neck in addition to his men.”

“Oh.” He was quiet for a moment. “Anything I can do?”

“Aniseed in the kennels before you go to bed? Don’t get yourself killed on my account? Otherwise, no.”

“He wants to see you today.”

“All right.” She brushed her long bangs out of her face. “I could stand a little food first, or I won’t make it up the stairs.”

“Ah, so you’re still here,” the Duke said as she entered his study with Henri.

“Where else would I be?” she said.

“Following him?”

“I spent seventeen very long years in a convent. I have very little trouble with patience.”

“And they didn’t teach you the values of chastity?”

“No, my bastardy and getting raped by a monk did that. The nuns were too embarrassed to talk about it.”

“Getting – what? When did this happen?”

“It’s been a long time. He’s dead now, and his soul has been bound to his grave, so there’s really not much more to do to him in the way of vengeance.”

“They were supposed to keep you a virgin.”

“Then the abbey wasn’t the best choice. I thought moral outrage against the Church was wider than just amongst the devout in its cloisters.”

“Is that what drove you to heresy?”

“No, to attempting suicide the first time. My heresy is based on textual research.”

Henri folded his arms across his chest.

“What do *you* look so smug about?” the Duke snapped at him.

“I told you she wasn’t bluffing.”

“Don’t you two have work to be doing?” the Duke said, narrowing his eyes. Henri led Kai back out of the study.

“What was that all about?” she asked him as they headed for the training room.

“It never occurred to him what you may have gone through before. He didn’t know how to react.”

The rest of that day was spent practicing with wooden swords, and Henri walked her back to her room, wary of their brother’s friends, who had been watching her at the feast.

“Be careful tonight,” she said as he left her alone.

“You too.”

Kai woke around three in the morning. There was one water closet high in the wall on that side of the castle with a window large enough for her to squeeze through. The sliver of moon had already set, and clouds had crept across the sky. The equinox was approaching, and with it the spring. The first thunderstorm of the season broke as she started down the wall.

Kai could hear the guards on the wall running for cover as the rain and wind picked up, their lanterns and torches blown or drowned out. The wall was slick, now, in addition to being smooth; she lost her grip twice, each time barely recovering in time to prevent a fall that would have killed her.

And then she was on the ground, drenched, unarmed, in the middle of a storm, without stars to guide her. She started off through the dark and damp in what was, so far as she could tell, an easterly direction.

Three nights of walking brought her close to Sadelberg’s northern border, guided by Regulus and Arcturus when they rose. Normally she would stop and sleep the days, but she had seen soldiers searching, and she didn’t want to risk getting caught outside the knight’s lands.

It was chilly, but the sun was out, and the forest path she was following was quickly warmed to a more tolerable walking temperature. A break in the forest marked the border there, and she crossed it around noon. The game trail she was following ended at the edge of a small clearing bordered by a brook. It was swollen with molten snow, almost too cold to drink, but she dropped to one knee on a large, flat rock on the bank to wash her face and take the edge off her thirst. Her hair was loose, cut yet shorter than it had been before, but still falling well below her shoulders, the loose curls empowered by the decrease of their burden. The light diffused through the budding trees glinted highlights of gold within it as she bent over the stream.

It was at that point that Alyosha stopped on the opposite side of the clearing, looking for Okhy, who was somewhere in the wood chasing a deer. He blinked once, uncertain if he was finally starting to hallucinate or not. Then the hound bayed, the deer tore through the clearing, and Kai was up the nearest tree before he even had a chance to blink again. But his question was answered. He called the dog off as he crossed the clearing, stopping Mysh below her tree.

“Need a ride?” he asked.

“It would be nice,” she said.

He held her tightly when she dropped out of the tree in front of him, the hound whining after the deer.

“They’re following you?” he said when he’d found his voice again.

“I think so.”

“Let’s get back to where there’s walls, then.”

Dmitrii enveloped her in a bear hug after he’d helped her off the horse.

“Can’t breathe, Dima,” she gasped. He let her loose.

“Sorry.”

“What, did you think I wasn’t coming back?” Kai asked.

“You didn’t say anything about it. I thought you said you weren’t going after her,”

Dmitrii said to his brother.

“I didn’t,” Alyosha said.

“They’ll come here looking for me,” Kai said.

“Probably. Can you rustle up some food, Dima?” Alyosha said.

“The place seems empty,” Kai said as Dmitrii left them.

“Got a message by carrier pigeon two nights ago. Albert called up a lot of soldiers.

And specifically told me to stay put.”

“I guess that means Henri got out, as well.”

“Is that who he had acting as your leash?”

“He’s my half-brother,” Kai said. “He wasn’t there by choice, either.”

“Ah.” He walked her up to his study. “Can you sit up long enough to eat a little before getting some sleep?”

“Yeah.”

The were sitting in the bay window talking when Dmitrii finally found them.

“Damn it, stop wandering off when you tell me to go get something,” he said, setting down the ham he’d found and a loaf of bread to go with it. “At least this place isn’t as big as Dad’s, or you’d starve by the time I found you.”

“Just let me know if anyone shows up,” Alyosha said. “And don’t open the gate for anyone.”

Kai ate slowly, Alyosha suddenly tongue-tied again after Dmitrii had left. Finally she set aside the plate and slid around so that she was sitting beside him instead of across from him. Alyosha settled one arm around her shoulders.

“I missed you,” he said quietly.

“I didn’t enjoy leaving.”

He reached down and kissed her softly once, then longer. She took a deep breath when he let her back, exhaling slowly, settling against his shoulder.

“I could get used to this.”

“Do you want to get some sleep today?” he asked.

“I’m comfortable here.”

The rest of March passed bright, sunny, and warm. Kai had a nervous eye on the grape hyacinth just outside the gate as April began, but the little buds were closed tightly. There had been no sign of her father; perhaps Henri’s flight had bothered him more.

The days were passed in the training room, in the garden, in Alyosha’s study, playing cards, helping Dmitrii pack. It took the younger brother almost a week to realize that Kai had moved out of her room, and after that, he had a hard time pinning down just when the transition had taken place.

Alyosha woke sharply one morning to find Kai already up, standing at the window. He could see the tears glistening on her cheeks in the grey dawn as he stood and crossed the room to her.

“Kai?”

She leaned back against him as he put his arms around her. “Today,” she said quietly. “I have something for you.”

He led her to one of the trunks against the far wall, lighting a candle so she could see. He opened the lid, took out several sheets, then laid out a leather suit of armor on them.

“It was my mother’s,” he said. “In case you thought you were the only woman a Perin has ever taught to use a blade.”

She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe. “Will I be able to move in it?”

“I recall her saying it fit like a second skin. You’re a very similar size.”

Dmitrii found them sitting in full armor in the hall when he got up.

“Did I miss something?” he asked.

“You have the gatehouse stocked with arrows?” Alyosha asked.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll need you today.”

“As though you wouldn’t starve on a daily basis without me.”

“You know what I mean, Dima.”

“Yeah. Well, do Zhenna a favor and keep me alive till June.”

The fog was thick. Kai hadn’t expected it, but apparently the Church soldiers were lost in it. She and Alyosha stood in the archway of the gate, the portcullis down behind them, the soldiers calling to each other through the fog. Thunder rolled above them; then a loud, too close crack and flash of lightning elicited a scream from an apparently large group, and almost a score of men broke the fog in front of the gate. Kai took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“You all right?” Alyosha asked her quietly as Dmitrii’s first arrows shot out above them.

“For now.”

The next ten minutes were a blur – the part of the dream she’d never seen, or never remembered when she woke up. Then she was wiping off her blade. She moved to sheathe it, but stopped. An acrid smoke hung on the fog; the dead littered the ground in front of the gate. The grape hyacinth were blooming, their too-sweet perfume mingling with the reek of blood. There was a sword in her hand, a ring on her finger—

She felt him before she saw him, had the entire rite of exorcism out in one breath. She saw him twitch once as he stepped out of the fog, his chain mail sweating with the fog, and then he was laughing.

“Hold, Dima,” she said as she heard his bow bend.

“You can’t drive this demon out, girl. They bound him to my soul. He lives and dies with me, and he knows it.”

“Kai—”

“Only if I need it, love,” she said, putting Alyosha’s offer of help on hold as he took a step in her direction. She stepped out of the archway, clear of the dead. A sharp wind gusted through the valley below the ridge, clearing out most of the fog, revealing a small army of Church soldiers in the vale. Kai swore under her breath.

“You said a hundred!” Dmitrii called down to them.

“That’s all I ever saw!” Kai replied, rolling her shoulders as the assassin drew his sword.

“They won’t move unless I fall. That’s your choice. Come with me now, or they will take this pitiful little castle and raze it to the ground.”

“I just spent six damned *months* working up to this,” Kai said. “All because some men thought they were above every logically moral idea concerning demons. My life has just gotten around to being nice. They are *not* going to take that away after the Hell they’ve put me through.”

“So be it.”

Alyosha watched with tighter nerves than before. A man infused with a demon and trained to kill, and she had but six months – and how many years of her own training? he asked himself as she flipped on her free hand out of the assassin’s reach. Like a second skin. The thunder had drawn closer again, and Alyosha stepped back under the arch as the pair fighting drew closer again. She was meeting his blade well, and it didn’t hurt that she could dodge faster. She was tired, though. He should have let her rest that morning. Not that she would have slept. The assassin pressed her back within the gate as the sky opened and sheets of rain began pouring down.

They locked swords, and he kicked her back against the portcullis. Alyosha parried the sudden stroke made at him, holding the assassin’s gaze as Kai lunged.

“Bad move,” the knight said to him as the assassin realized that she had remained conscious when she hit the metal portcullis. Alyosha pulled the blade free of the chain mail for her as the Church soldiers charged. “Shit.”

Horns drowned out his next oath, and the Church soldiers’ attention shifted north of the keep. Alyosha stepped clear of the gate, recognizing the King’s banners among the charging line that had drawn off the Church’s army.

“Hey, Dima,” Alyosha called up as the horns died down. “Go see if we have anything besides salt pork. We’re going to have company tonight.” He paused. “And could you let us back in?”

Kai wiped off her blade and sheathed it, and Alyosha picked her up and carried her inside the gate. There was a mix of relief and remorse in her eyes; he pulled her close. Dmitrii was muttering as he walked past the kissing couple a few moments later.

“And if all we have is ham?” he called back through the rain halfway across the courtyard.

“I don’t think he’ll care.” He pulled Kai close again.

“Tea service,” she said.

“What are grape hyacinth?” he asked.

“Those little purple flowers that are all over out by the gate.”

“That’s what those are?”

She kissed him. “Let’s get you out of this armor before you rust into it.”

The thunder had died down, but the rain had gotten stronger, so they ran across the courtyard into the hall.

“Still better than a convent?” he asked as they stood, dripping wet in full armor, just inside the door.

“Alyosha, as long as you’re involved, pretty much anything is.” She paused. “Not that the people at the convent ever tried to kill each other.”

“Let’s get upstairs and out of this armor and dried off and warmed up,” he said. “Since

that leather will shrink on you.”

She pursed her lips briefly. “All right. I can live with that.”

Notes

Full Name	Cyrillic	Diminutive	Cyrillic
Aleksei Ivanovich Perin	Алексей Иванович Перин	Alyosha	Алёша
Dmitrii Ivanovich Perin	Дмитрий Иванович Перин	Dima	Дима
Ivan Yevgenievich Perin	Иван Евгеньевич Перин		
Nikolai Aleksandrovich Zhariv	Николай Александрович Жарив	Kolya	Коля

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- i. Sandwiches: Technically, sandwiches didn't occur (at least, not under that name) until the late 1700s.
- ii. Piano: True pianos first appeared in the early 1700s.
- iii. "МЫШЬ": Transliterated here as "Mysh," Russian for "mouse."
- iv. At this point in the original, I have written in the margin, "Restoring faith in humanity, one distressed damsel at a time."
- v. Pantomime: This form of party/courtly entertainment may have actually become popular in the post-Napoleonic, Regency, and early Victorian era.
- vi. The Gregorian calendar wouldn't have actually existed yet, but I'm using it for this so that the seasons, holidays, and so forth make sense.