

Winter on a Watch Glass

by S. Y. Affolee

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For my grandmother.

*We were dreamers, dreaming greatly, in the man-stifled town;
We yearned beyond the sky-line where the strange roads go down.
Came the Whisper, came the Vision, came the Power with the Need,
Till the Soul that is not man's soul was lent us to lead.*
--from "The Song of the Dead" by Rudyard Kipling

Chapter One

June 7, 1815

When Greta pulled off her blindfold, she realized that the mingling scents of camphor and smoked meat filling her nose emanated from a severed hand. The hand of glory, dipped in pale green wax and mounted on a squat pewter base glittered with fingertip flames at the center of room.

"This way, Miss Silber."

Someone jabbed at her from behind and she stumbled one step forward, over a thick line of salt on a worn stone floor. Where was she? All that Mr. Wechsler had told her was that his employer, the Margrave of Baden, required her presence in a ceremony if she wanted to start repaying her father's debts.

"Stay, right here." Wechsler, a thin dour man in a black coat, took the blindfold from her hands and gave her a rheumy stare as if that would intimidate her into place. Greta only glared back. Wechsler shook his head and walked over to a dark shadow hunched over on the floor, drawing the marks on the stone with grains of salt.

It was then that Greta noticed that she was not alone. An old woman in a rich, fur-lined pelisse sat in a straight-backed chair next to the table that contained the hand and other odd implements. Behind her stood a boy—perhaps fourteen or fifteen—attempting to cover a yawn with the back of his hand. The salt markings on the floor made a circle enclosing the people in the room. Beyond the circle, she could only see the inky blackness of the room punctuated by shades of dark gray which she assumed were outlines of the furnishings. Whether she was in a tower room or an underground dungeon, it was impossible to tell.

The dark figure to whom Wechsler had been speaking with finally rose from his crouched position and moved toward the table. The weak light from the hand of glory caught at his facial features, throwing them in almost demonic relief. But Greta recognized him. He had been one of her father's customers at the apothecary. Or rather one of her customers, really, since he always dropped by on her shift. She hadn't wanted to do business with him—his demeanor, although polite, made her want to run—but she hadn't the choice. They had needed the money. And with her father gone and debts piling up, she had no choice now either.

"You brought the girl?" The man's voice curled around her, velvet and cold.

Wechsler gave a sigh. "Yes, my lord. Although I have no idea what use she will be."

"Of course not. You're not the one doing this ritual, are you?" Wechsler looked affronted with his implication, but

the dark figure ignored the man's spluttering. Then he turned to her, his eyes black. "Miss Silber. I am glad you are here. I'm afraid we are in need of your services."

"It's not like I have another option, do I, Mr. Schmidt?" she said. "I was given to understand that if I did not attend this ceremony, the Margrave would not forgive my father's debts."

Wechsler's spluttering turned into a hasty cough which obscured whatever that he was about to blurt out. Despite his sleepy state, the boy smirked. The only indication that the old woman noticed was a flicker of an eyelid.

Schmidt only raised an eyebrow. "Did Wechsler never tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

The thin man nervously cleared his throat. "Actually, Miss Silber, he *is* the Margrave."

Greta fisted her hands in her skirts. "Did my father already know you were the Margrave? Why come into our shop under the pretense that you were some sort of Mr. Schmidt, a visiting pharmacist from the south? Or did he not know, *my lord?*"

"Not everyone knows of my presence in Heiligenberg and I would like to keep it that way." Briefly, he turned away from her to drop his half empty pouch of salt onto the table. "In the meantime, stay within the circle."

"Why?"

Wechsler frowned. "You don't ask the Margrave 'why'."

"The circle is for your protection," the Margrave replied as he positioned the items on the table. A knife with a golden hilt, a silver bowl, a pewter bell with a worn wooden handle, and a small opaque vial. "I will be performing a summoning. I am fairly certain that it will be a specific one, but you can't be too sure about these kinds of things. Sometimes, things you don't want will take advantage of the opportunities that you've provided."

Greta had heard rumors about the current Margrave of Baden. Not much of it was good. "You're a necromancer."

"I prefer to be called a post-life facilitator."

"That's still a necromancer," the boy spoke up.

"Hush, Franz," the old woman said, reaching up to pat his elbow. "The Margrave needs to concentrate."

Franz hunched his shoulders and huffed.

The Margrave finally turned back to look at the boy and the old woman. "There is no one else in the house?"

The old woman shook her head. "The servants were given the night off. Josef, Hanna, and Lena are out tonight visiting Hanna's sister. They should not be back until much later."

"Good." The Margrave beckoned toward Greta to come closer. "Stand by the table. I will need you soon when I activate this circle and start the summoning."

Reluctantly, she stepped towards the table. When she looked down, she could see the faint reflection of her face and the candlelight in the water still rippling in the bowl. As she was examining the scrolling on the knife's hilt, the Margrave had stepped away to consecrate the four cardinal directions of the circle. For a moment, Greta thought that the salt on the floor glowed when he made a quick motion with his hands, but it was quick, making her think that she might be seeing things.

"Miss Silber, give me your palm."

"What for?"

At her question, Wechsler at the other side of the table, hissed between his teeth in annoyance.

The Margrave seemed to ignore the noise. "The summoning requires a sacrifice."

"I can't be the...owl!" Before she had a chance to protest, he had grasped her wrist and flicked the blade of the knife across her palm, opening her skin. Blood oozed out as he cut his own palm.

"Hold your hand over the bowl like this." He put his hand over the bowl, palm downward. She did the same and watched as a drop of blood from each of their hands fell into the water almost simultaneously. He whispered something that she didn't quite catch and the water turned black and opaque. When he took his hand away from the bowl, she did likewise. But without a bandage in sight, Greta held up her palm and watched her blood pool and slowly clot.

The Margrave stepped close to the edge of the circle. In a voice that seemed to reverberate in the room, he uttered a few strange words that sounded like a mixture of Latin and Arabic. Something from beyond the circle groaned. The blackness in the corners of the room shifted.

The old woman gasped and almost stood up had the boy not held her down by her shoulders. "Albert? Albert? Is that you?" she called out.

"Shh, Grandma. Didn't you tell me that we had to be quiet so that the Margrave could work?"

The Margrave did not appear to have heard the exchange. Instead, he watched the room outside the circle intently. "Is this Albert Ritter to whom I am speaking?"

"Yes." The answer from the corner of the room sounded like a man's voice, but there was a hollow quality to it that made the hairs on the back of Greta's neck prickle.

"It's Albert," the old woman whispered.

"Albert Ritter, when and where you were born?"

"January fourth. 1737. In Munich."

"Is that correct, Mrs. Ritter?"

The old woman nodded vigorously. "Yes, of course it's correct. Besides, it sounds just like him."

"Some spirits can imitate others voices," the Margrave said without looking back at her. "We cannot depend on that to verify identity."

"Oh. All right."

"Ask him something that only he and you would know."

She sighed. "Albert, tell me, what did you say to me right after we were married?"

There was a pause in the darkness and Greta found herself flexing her fingers. What if the spirit beyond the circle answered incorrectly? Would the Margrave then banish the spirit?

"I told you that I was pleased with the transaction."

Greta frowned at the strange answer, but Mrs. Ritter seemed very relieved. "Yes, yes that's it," the spirit's widow replied. "My lord, that is indeed Albert."

"Very well, then. Albert Ritter, who was your supplier from the east?"

There was a rustle in the room as if someone was pacing along the stone floor. "I had many suppliers."

"Can you name them?"

"I didn't bother with those details."

"Do you know who will have this information?"

The rustling stopped. The air just outside the salt circle wavered, but when Greta blinked, the mirage was gone.

"My solicitor."

"Damn."

Startled by the expletive, Greta glanced back at the Margrave. He stood stiffly, unhappy with the spirits answer. His hands had curled into fists.

"I am sorry," Albert Ritter's shade finally replied. The spirit's voice sounded more hollow and thready. "I must go now."

"Albert!" The old woman had finally wrestled out of her grandson's grip and had stood up from her chair. But she made no move toward the border of the circle.

"When it's your time, Sophie. I will see you." The air rippled again and the lights on the hand of glory flickered once, indicating that the spirit had finally left.

The old woman slumped back into her chair to pull out a handkerchief to dab her eyes. Franz's fingers tightened on his grandmother's frail shoulders as he bent his head to whisper reassurance in her ears.

The Margrave strode toward the table in quick, angry steps. "This is intolerable."

"My lord," began Wechsler, "The ghost of Mrs. Ritter's husband answered you..."

"The answer is no use to us," his employer replied as he stared down at the objects on the table. "Albert Ritter's solicitor is as dead as he is."

"Since everything is already set up, can't we just summon the solicitor as well?"

The Margrave answered, but Greta was not listening at this point. Instead, her attention was riveted to the darkness outside the protective circle. She was sure that Albert Ritter's shade had gone back to the other world with his last words, but something else was out there. It was as if some sort of pressure was coming down to bear upon the shield the Margrave had cast with the circle. And it smelled faintly like the smoldering coals on a hearth.

Greta remembered a bit of folklore she had heard about the hand of glory. The left hand of a criminal, made into a candle, had the ability when lit to open doorways. *Sometimes, things you don't want will take advantage of the opportunities that you've provided.* The Margrave's previous words echoed in her head and she found herself straining to catch any movement beyond the circle.

There were footsteps and voices—from outside of the room. The presence that had taken advantage of Albert Ritter's departure seemed to pause, as if it too sensed the others.

"Grandma! Grandma! Where are you?"

"Lena! Come back here at once. You know your grandmother is probably already asleep. You need to go to bed right now."

"No, Mama. I think Grandma is over here."

At that moment, the Margrave forcibly pulled himself away from his argument with his employee and stepped towards the border of the circle. "Don't come in here!" he bellowed.

The door to the darkened room burst open, spilling in light from beyond. The presence lurking just beyond the circle hissed in delight and Greta felt sweat breaking upon her brow as if she had suddenly stepped into a blacksmith's forge.

"No, Lena, go back!" cried Franz.

"Franz, Grandma, what are you doing here?"

"Don't cross the threshold!" The Margrave shouted. But he was too late.

A small girl child in a white jacket embroidered with silver tripped into the room like a coin tossed into a dark well. "Grandma?"

“Lena!” The girls' mother stood at the doorway, transfixed at the scene and let out a scream.

With the extra light from the doorway, Greta could now make out the presence closing in—a vaguely humanoid shape as tall as the ceiling with a void-like maw that sucked in any light that reached it. The creature stretched out with a spindly limb toward the child.

Greta moved, throwing her body through the invisible barrier that the Margrave had erected and scattering the salt, leaving behind gritty white trails along the floor.

“Mama!”

Her arm loped around the child's waist just as the creature's limb reached them. The darkness touched her sleeve and she smelled burning fabric.

“Foolish woman, you'll get us all killed!”

Someone, a human someone, grabbed her free hand and yanked her back inside the broken circle. The child came with her, but as she tumbled to the floor, the girl burst out of her hold to run to her grandmother and brother. Dazed, she looked up and saw the Margrave standing at the circle border with the knife held toward the creature in his uninjured hand. Greta looked down at her own hands, thinking numbly that not all the blood smeared against her cut palm was her own.

“Go back from where you came from,” the Margrave commanded.

The creature seemed to laugh at his words and with its arms, moved toward him.

The Margrave uttered another command, in a different language, just as the creature loomed over him like a shroud. At the same moment, Greta felt something sharp tugging at the gash in her hand, digging through the wound to grab something in her chest. She noticed the Margrave's eyes widen as if he too felt the pain, before her own vision flickered to nothing.

Chapter Two

June 8, 1815

Greta was aware of the light shining through her eyelids at the same moment that she discerned that someone was humming an old, lilting lullaby nearby. She dared not move or change her breathing.

It smelled of lemon and lilac. She was lying somewhere soft; someone had pulled a blanket over her. Her hand ached as if someone had strung a thread through her palm and attached the other end of the thread to something, someone, else. Her skin prickled as if she was playing an invisible tug-of-war with this other entity. Finally, she cracked her eyes open and stared up at high vaulted ceilings, whitewashed to the shade of bleached bone. She remembered what had happened the night before and she suddenly sat up, only to gasp, winded, before falling back onto pillows.

“You're up.”

At the voice, she struggled to sit up again, this time more slowly, and found the old woman sitting on a rocking chair beside the bed. She was wearing a morning gown of dove gray, the neckline buttoned up to her chin. Around her shoulders was a thick green wrap. Greta had been lying on a canopied bed, the white drapes pulled and tied to the bedposts to keep her view of the room unobstructed. Opposite of the bed was a hearth with a small fire, keeping the room warm. Daylight shone from wide windows.

It was a rich man's house, and reflexively, she pulled the bed covers off her body, only to realize that her left hand and forearm were bandaged.

“Careful. I was told that you would still be weak yet,” Sophie Ritter said even though she made no move to get out of her chair.

“Weak from what?” she replied. “Where am I? I have to get back to my shop. I can't afford to have it stay closed.”

“Did they not tell you?”

Greta sat back and let out a frustrated breath. “No one tells me anything. I'm just a silly shop girl, after all. I was informed by Mr. Wechsler, the Margrave's employee, that if I wanted to start repaying my father's debt to the Margrave, I was to be present at a ceremony. He told me that it was better for me not to know the location of the ceremony since he believed it would compromise certain persons' confidentiality.”

“Oh dear.”

She didn't like the sound of that.

“You're at the Ritter House, on Hauptstrasse.”

“The Ritter House?” Greta suddenly appraised her surroundings with a new eye. There were a few people in Heiligenberg with the family name of Ritter, but the Ritters on Hauptstrasse were wealthy clothiers with connections to cloth suppliers from all over the world. She had no doubt that everything, from Sophie Ritter's shawl to the window drapes, were made from the highest quality—thus most expensive—material on the market. She was suddenly aware of the cheap

material of her chemise chafing against her skin.

"As you've probably have guessed, the Margrave attempted to call my husband back to answer some pressing questions. He is in Heiligenberg on a confidential investigation. Franz and I were there because the ritual required close relatives in attendance. You were there, I suppose, because the spell required a maiden's blood."

"I suppose that's obvious, considering my spinster status," she muttered, feeling her cheeks color. Louder, she asked, "Does the Margrave take me for a tattletale? I can keep my mouth shut, when the situation demands it."

"Well, what's done is done," the old woman told her. "On my part, as well as my son's and daughter-in-law's, you've paid the debt many times over. You have our deepest gratitude for saving my granddaughter's life."

She looked down at her bandaged arm. She could still remember the thing burning through her sleeve. It was a good thing that she was passable with a sewing needle. She couldn't afford a new dress. "I'm afraid it's not that easy."

"Why? I have known the current Margrave since he was born. I'm sure he would understand."

"No. The debt is enormous." Greta named a sum that made the old woman blink in surprise. "You see? It isn't easy. My father was a gambler and the habit got worse after my mother died. I didn't know how bad it got until Mr. Wechsler came knocking on my door a week ago with promissory notes signed by my father."

"Good lord. I can't imagine ruining a man like that unless there was some ulterior motive. Do you know if Baden had a grudge with your father?"

Greta shook her head. "I don't know. He ran the apothecary shop before he died. It's quite possible that he sold something to someone who was the Margrave's enemy. Other than that, I cannot think of a reason, especially of a direct connection. My father was a rather amiable man, even if he was given to certain vices. And the Margrave only came to the shop when I was in charge, in the guise of a Mr. Schmidt."

"I see." Sophie Ritter seemed suddenly interested in the silk fringe of her shawl. It was obvious that the old woman had thought of a possibility for Greta's predicament, but hesitated to share her suspicions with her.

But before Greta could open her mouth to demand answers, there was a brisk knock at the door, before it opened to admit a plump maid carrying a tray.

"Mrs. Ritter, where would you like the tray?"

"At the bedside, please," the old woman answered, indicating a small table next to the bed. "Miss Silber, I'm sure that you'd like some breakfast after the trying events from last night."

Her stomach growled in agreement. She actually hadn't had anything to eat since the previous morning. "Thank you. I appreciate this very much, Mrs. Ritter. You needn't have. I do need to get back to my shop."

"I understand," Sophie replied, "But considering the circumstances, I doubt much would change if you took an hour for breakfast. Don't worry, I may think of something to help you come to an agreement with the Margrave. Despite my appearance, I do have some pull with the boy. Do you take cream with your coffee?"

"Um, yes," Greta replied, unsure if it was correct form in the upper classes to take the beverage in that form. She had had coffee only once before, and it had been a while ago when she was younger and when her mother had been alive. It had been her birthday. Her parents had taken her to a coffee shop tucked in a basement corner of Neckarstaden owned by a Turk who served all his beverages black and bitter. Nowadays, she was reduced to consuming weak tea.

Sophie poured out the coffee and the cream and stirred the steaming liquid in the porcelain cup twice before offering it to her guest. Greta took the cup, feeling the warmth seeping into her hands before tentatively taking a sip. It was mild, almost like chocolate in texture—a completely different drink than the Turk's coffee.

"Is that all, Mrs. Ritter?" asked the maid to remained hovering at the bedroom threshold.

"Yes, Marta. You can come back in an hour and help..." Sophie paused as she cocked her head to listen to the angry footsteps approaching the room.

Greta's hand ached. Unfortunately, she knew quite well who was coming in their direction. She hastily put down her cup and pulled up the bed covers to her chin. Hopefully, she would look like she was deathly ill. But with the way her luck was going lately, she was probably fooling no one.

The maid yelped in surprise as the door was yanked wide open. "My lord!"

The Margrave flicked the fingers of his right hand to dismiss the maid. His left hand, wrapped in bandages similar to hers, was still grasping the doorknob. The man was dressed smartly in dark slacks and a navy waistcoat with a deceptively simple cravat. But with his longish dark hair mused as if he had been yanking at it for the past hour, he appeared more like a storm cloud than a gentleman. He stared at Greta even as he spoke to the older woman. His eyes felt like sparks on her skin, but Greta fought the urge to pull the covers up to her nose.

"Mrs. Ritter, I trust your newest guest is doing well?"

"As well as can be expected, my lord. Miss Silber has been telling me about some interesting things."

"Oh? That can't bode well at all."

"For goodness sake," Greta found herself saying. She took up the coffee cup and decided to drink it before it could get cold. "You're being over-dramatic, *my lord*."

"I am never over-dramatic."

Sophie made an exasperated sound at the back of her throat. "I have heard that her father had owed you a

tremendous debt. And now the debt is hers. I should say that from the debacle last night, she had repaid the debt ten-fold.”

The Margrave smiled. But it wasn't a pleasant curve of his mouth—it was almost cruel. “Even if I theoretically say that the debt is forgiven, things are a little more complicated because of what happened last night at the summoning. Don't you agree, Miss Silber?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Greta said.

He held out his bandaged hand and wiggled his fingers. “Then how do you explain this?”

Greta found herself smiling into her cup. “Everyone saw you cutting up your hand yourself.”

“You know very well what I mean. Something wrong happened last night and now we're connected. Don't deny it. You know it, too.”

“I can deny it if I want to,” Greta replied. “You go back doing whatever Margraves who dabble in necromancy do and I'll go back to my shop. No one will be the wiser.”

“It's not that simple,” he said loudly.

“My lord, calm down,” Sophie interrupted. “Now what's this about being connected? Are you in love with the girl?”

The Margrave flushed. “It's nothing like that,” he muttered. He waved his bandaged hand toward Greta. “We're connected by a blood bond. If something happens to one of us, the other will be struck down as well. I do not like this new weakness. Something wrong happened last night when I tried to banish that spirit, and it's all your fault!”

“What?” Greta spluttered into her cup. “How can it be my fault? I did nothing but to pull Mrs. Ritter's granddaughter back into the circle. And I'd do it again, no matter what you thought about it.”

They glared at each other for a long moment before the Margrave turned on his heel to step back into the hallway. “I'm going to the library to find a solution for this problem. I don't want to be disturbed. And keep Miss Silber out of my way.”

“Like I would even want to get in your way, *my lord*,” she sneered at his back.

He slammed the door when he left.

“Well,” said Sophie. “That went rather well, didn't it?”

Chapter Three

“Please, won't you stay for lunch?” said Hanna Ritter.

“Thank you for the generous invitation,” Greta told the mistress of the house as she tugged on her cloak over her slightly burned dress. She had refused Sophie Ritter's suggestion that she borrow a dress—her pride refused the handout despite the fact that her own clothes appeared to be shabby imitations next to the Ritters' rich garb. “But I'm afraid I have business that cannot wait.”

“You're welcome at Ritter House any time,” Josef Ritter offered. Josef had the look of his mother, the same pragmatic face, only younger, more masculine, and with an impeccably groomed mustache. He made a striking counterpart with his wife, Hanna, who looked like a porcelain doll with her pale complexion and blonde ringlets. His mouth quirked upwards, “no matter what the Margrave says.”

Franz snorted. “Right. The Margrave doesn't own this house.”

“Franz!” exclaimed his mother. “It's not polite to speak that way of the Margrave of Baden.”

The teenager crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “I don't know how he talked me into that summoning last night.”

“Well, no harm done,” said Sophie. “The Margrave isn't here to hear that, is he? Besides, Franz, the last that I recall, you were practically begging to be included in the ceremony. Weren't you quite eager to see ghosts?”

Greta fastened her last button. “Don't be too hard on the boy. I was quite curious about things when I was his age as well.” She nodded towards Josef. “Your offer is quite hospitable of you, Mr. Ritter. I will keep that in mind. But don't worry about it. My matters are between the Margrave and myself. I will, perhaps, call tomorrow once I have my affairs and schedule looked after.”

“You *will* call tomorrow, won't you?” said Lena as she tugged at Greta's hem. In a matching pink gown, the girl looked like a miniature version of her mother.

She faintly smiled down at the little girl. “I will try. But I cannot make any guarantees.” She reached down and plucked a wooden coin from behind her ear. A trick that her father had taught her when she was very small. Lena giggled as she placed the coin in her small palm. “Keep that close. It'll bring you good luck.”

As Greta moved toward the entrance of the foyer, the door swung open, surprising the Ritters' butler and revealing Wechsler on the door step. The Margrave's man of affairs was out of breath and red in the face as if he had run a mile. He

pointedly ignored everyone as he waved an envelope and shouted at the butler, "Where's Baden?"

"In the library, sir."

As Wechsler rushed off to the interior of the house, Sophie remarked, "What a rude little man. Perhaps the Margrave should fire him. Then perhaps his manners might improve."

Greta hid a smile behind a gloved hand as she stepped out of the Ritters' residence.

The air was biting cold as she pulled her cloak closer to her body. Unnaturally cold. Snow frosted the streets and rooftops and ice dripped from eaves like transparent teeth. The streets were also unnaturally empty. Even on a December, one could see the city's poor and homeless tromping about, trying to make their meager living. But when April had come and gone without a sign of a thaw, those that had the ability to leave left. The rest were either taken in by the churches which had made make-shift shelters for them or the poorhouse at the edge of town.

And now, it was June and there was still no let up of winter despite news from surrounding towns that were currently enjoying summer.

Greta missed the warm summer sun. She was tired of the constant overcast skies and the weak white light during the day. She wanted to move elsewhere. Almost anywhere. She drew the line at the locations that had turned into Napoleon's battlefields. But her father's debts tied her down to Heiligenberg. And until she paid all of them off, she couldn't go anywhere.

There were, of course, rumors about the unnatural winter. Some said that it was a spell that had gone wrong. Others said it was a curse, a sign of God's displeasure. Yet others posited that there must be a scientific explanation. Even the mad Count-Palatine who ruled over Heiligenberg in his ruined castle overlooking the city had offered a reward to anyone who could lift the unnatural winter. But despite the influx of sorcerers and scientists alike, no one had yet succeeded.

Greta passed the Church of the Holy Spirit, the Heiliggeistkirche, heading west from Hauptstrasse to the fish market. The square where the fishermen would normally sell their day's catch was layered with a pristine layer of fresh snow. Normally, in June, the place would be filled with people hawking the bounty of the Neckar, but with the strange weather, everything had been moved to one of the larger common houses on Steingasse. She turned a corner onto Lauerstrasse and involuntarily hunched her shoulders as she made her way past an avenue of dead trees. Beyond, she could pretend to see the glitter of the Neckar River—normally sapphire bright under a summer sun. Now, it flowed past the town under a cloud of vapor.

She entered a narrow alleyway just south of the intersection between Lauerstrasse and Bussemergasse. Here, the buildings were so close together that a visitor could almost touch the walls on either side of the alley. The snow from the previous night had missed this small street, leaving only treacherous ice. Greta gingerly made her way across the slick cobblestones to the worn shop front that was the apothecary. A raven perched on the faded wooden sign overhead that depicted a mortar and pestle. The silent bird watched Greta as she approached.

A woman, rendered squat in a voluminous green cloak, was already waiting at the door. She stopped pounding on the door when she noticed Greta nearing and turned a fleshy frown at her. "Well, now, I thought you had died or something. And look at you, all out an about."

Greta winced as she dug into the pocket of her coat for her key. "Mrs. Wismar. I had not expected you until Friday. What brings you to the apothecary today?" The question was mostly rhetorical. Mrs. Wismar was a hypochondriac and stopped by the apothecary due to any excuse. Which normally wouldn't have bothered her, except that Mrs. Wismar never bought anything.

"My gout has been acting up," the woman huffed. "It's this terrible weather, I tell you. It has always acted up when the air is cold. It's probably the imbalance of my humors."

"Hm." Greta finally took out her key and fitted it into the lock of the door. "Well, I do have just the thing for gout or aligning the humors. We have plenty of herbal supplements that would solve those problems."

"Bah. I hope you don't advocate me eating the stuff. I hate the taste of herbs. Now if you could just let me smell them, that would be just fine with me."

It was time to put her foot down on the woman's antics. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wismar, but the efficacy of the herbs has only be observed by the consumption of them. If you truly want to treat your medical problems, you will have to purchase and eat them. Of course, if you dislike the taste, you can always disguise it with some other food."

The woman frowned. "Of course I know that. I just want a look around to see what's on your inventory. Then, when I see the doctor, I can make some suggestions."

Greta ignored the tingling sensation that was beginning to pulse in her bandaged hand like a particularly bad insect sting. Instead, she twisted the knob to her shop. "Suggestions, Mrs. Wismar? I didn't know you were so learned. You could be a doctor yourself."

The sarcasm went right over the woman's head. "I'm only a doctor for myself. I don't like touching other people. Besides, whoever heard of a woman doctor anyway? I take care of the hearth and that's good enough for me."

As the pain in her hand sharpened, the raven overhead flapped its wings and cawed in warning. Greta gritted her teeth and pushed the door open. Despite the woman's attitude, her presence was but a minor annoyance to what was coming

in her direction. "You look a little chilled, Mrs. Wismar. You should be inside."

"Yes, thank you. I tell you, it shouldn't be this cold at this time of year. Completely unnatural."

Greta nodded as she stepped over the threshold into the dark, cool shop. "Absolutely. Unfortunately, no one has any idea how to change it."

"Only God can," the woman replied as she made the sign of the cross.

A shadow fell between Mrs. Wismar and the apothecary door, barring her way. "Excuse me, madam, but I must have an urgent word with the apothecary's proprietress."

"Mr. Schmidt! Imagine seeing you about today. I heard from that old busybody Margaret Dessau that you were bedridden with lumbago."

The Margrave held up his good hand to stop Greta from closing the door. He gave Mrs. Wismar a charming smile although there was a hard gleam to his eye at the news of the fake rumors. "How unfortunate. As you can see, I'm quite healthy. I'm afraid Mrs. Dessau probably got me mixed up with someone else."

"Unfortunate, indeed."

Finally deciding that if she had to deal with the Margrave at that instant, she might as well have a buffer between her and him, Greta suddenly pulled the door open as he continued applying pressure. With grim pleasure, she watched him trip over the threshold. Her small act of pettiness was worth whatever retribution his glare promised. "Please, Mrs. Wismar, you look like you're about to freeze out there. I'll start the stove."

"Bless you, dear," the woman patted her arm. "I'll just take a look around and you have your little confidential conversation with Mr. Schmidt. Perhaps he has some other affliction that he doesn't want to blurt out to the world."

"Oh, I can think of a couple afflictions. Some of them, very peculiar gentlemanly afflictions, in fact." Greta moved towards the far end of the counter on the side of the shop where the stove was located.

"Gentlemanly afflictions?" said the Margrave as he moved towards her.

She ignored his position to take a tinderbox from a nearby shelf to light the stove. When she started shoveling in some coal, she replied, "Of course, isn't that what you wanted an urgent word with me for? Although I mostly prescribe these medicines to older men, I'm sure it would work for you too. In no time at all, your wife will be quite happy that you will be able to perform your husbandly duties again."

"You can't be serious."

She briefly glanced at him and then at Mrs. Wismar who appeared to be looking intently at the rows of drawers containing various herbs on the opposite side of the shop. Greta strongly suspected that the woman wasn't looking at the herbs at all but avidly listening in on their conversation.

"Of course I'm serious," she replied as she placed the shovel back and scooted behind the counter where she felt she had some defense. If all else failed, she could always throw one of the glass jars filled with medicinal licorice at his head. "I'm given to understand that even though a gentleman's overall health is not compromised by his lack of ability to perform..."

"Perform?!"

"His emotional health will be compromised due to his worsening marital relations. There's a theory that..."

"I don't want theory." The Margrave placed his hands on the counter and leaned close, perhaps barely restraining from throttling her. His voice lowered, almost to a growl. "And I'm not here to talk about that, although I'll have you know that I have absolutely no problem in *that* department."

She suddenly felt warm, although it had nothing to do with the stove. "Then what are you here to talk about? I thought you were busy at the library."

"This." He slapped an envelope in front of her. It looked familiar. "Wechsler gave this to me right after you left Ritter House. It is an invitation to Heiligenberg Castle."

"I don't see what that has anything to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you. I must attend, but I cannot be there and here at the same time."

"If you're worried about this," she said, waving her bandaged hand, "Then just send Wechsler here periodically to check up on me. It's not like I'm about to move anywhere. Or drown myself in the Neckar."

"I need Wechsler with me up at the castle. There are things going on that you do not yet understand. I need you somewhere I can keep an eye on you, where I will know that you won't get in trouble and compromise me."

"Since you believe I won't understand, then explain it to me. I'm not an idiot."

He raked a hand through his hair, further mussing it. "If I didn't have to do this, I wouldn't. But this," his eyes flickered toward their bandaged hands, "is going to take time to undo. So meanwhile, you will have to come with me."

"There is absolutely no way I'm going with you," she replied. "You might have the freedom to hobnob with all the other nobles, but I have to work. To pay off my debts."

"Speaking of debts..."

She reflexively took a step back. "Oh no."

He gave her a cold smile. "You happen to owe me quite a bit. I'll strike a bargain with you, Miss Silber. My aunt is arriving in Heiligenberg this afternoon and is in need of a companion for the next two weeks. Take the post and I will

consider half of your debt to me repaid.”

“And last night's debacle didn't count?”

“If I was less generous, I would have added it on the considerable amount that you already owe.”

She curled her fingers against her bandaged palm. “It's not only an inconvenience on your part, you know.”

“Oh believe me, I know.” His eyes narrowed. “Think about it. If you're sensible, present yourself at the Ritter House by two this afternoon.”

As she watched his black greatcoat swirl out the door, she considered shoving him into the Neckar River's watery grip.

Chapter Four

The afternoon sun was almost warm.

She stood in the shadow of a nearby alley to watch the entrance of the Ritter House. A carriage, a fine white one gilded to look like a painted egg, stood by the entrance with its team of four white horses with matching bridles. It looked fragile, more suitable to a summer than this strange winter. And Greta had no doubt that it belonged to someone grand.

She had changed into something more fitting of her temporary job, but she was still acutely aware that at best, she probably presented a picture of shabby genteelness. In her good hand, she clutched one bag which contained some clothes and a worn copy of a horrid novel her father had wanted her to throw away. Greta had never been a lady's companion although she had heard stories that it was a dreadfully dull job—often involving reading stories aloud to some ancient lady who snored through most of it anyway.

If the Margrave's aunt was anything like she imagined, she wouldn't care if she read the Bible, the newspaper, or some trashy horrid novel. Besides, how bad could two weeks being a companion be?

Finally, Greta took a deep breath and stepped forward with resolve. It was no use dawdling outside, shivering, while there was a warm room to be had. This job would be a new experience. The Ritters seemed to be kind folk and if the Margrave's aunt was staying at the Ritters, the situation could be quite tolerable. And as for the Margrave himself, well, she hoped that she would see very little of him while he was visiting Heiligenberg Castle.

Her focus was so intent on getting to the front door of the Ritter House that she did not realize that another carriage was coming toward her until she heard a shout from the driver. Two black steeds swerved away from her as she tripped in the snow, sprawling on top of her single piece of luggage.

The black travel coach creaked to a halt in a spray of snow. Greta slowly stood up and brushed down her coat before she retrieved her sole luggage.

“Sorry, miss!” called out the driver. “I didn't see you there. Are you all right?”

“I'm fine, sir,” she replied. She took a step forward and did not feel any strain to her body besides the normal aching backside that would accompany a fall to the floor. But unlike the usual fall, her composure was now rattled. She wasn't sure that she would get up the nerve to get to the Ritters' front door at this rate.

The carriage door banged open, revealing an older gentleman in a maroon coat decorated with severe brass buttons down the front. A top hat made of a dark fur of some sort was wrapped on his head, although it failed to contain a few graying curls. His countenance was hawk-like, intense, as he gave the driver a disgusted stare.

“You've been drinking again, haven't you?” the coach's occupant demanded.

“Mr. Beethoven, what an odious accusation!” the driver retorted. “Of course not. You saw as well as I did that all I had was coffee this morning.”

The man hopped out of the coach and started shaking his fist. “What did you say? Vodka? Like those damned Russians?”

A boy, bundled up in black, poked his head out the door and surveyed his surroundings. He sent Greta an apologetic smile before getting out and poking the man with the maroon coat in the elbow and handing him a sizeable brass ear horn that was at least twice the size of his head.

The man in the maroon coat put the ear horn to the side of his head and shouted again, “You've been drinking vodka, haven't you?”

“No, sir. I said coffee. Coffee!”

“Hurmph! Who's to say you haven't a flagon of spirits secreted away in you coat anyway? Drivers these days. They're all reckless! Why back in my day, we made do with walking. Walking! Fresh air never hurt anyone.”

The boy tugged at the man's sleeve and pointed toward Greta.

“What?” The man turned and spotted Greta, who was trying to slip away before she was brought to their attention again. He made an exclamation. “Ah, miss. I must apologize for the accident. Mr. Hessel, here, is much too carefree with

the reigns.”

The driver made a choked sound at the back of his throat that sounded suspiciously like grunt of indignation. The boy, however, made some sort of motion with his hands and the driver sighed and finally got out of his seat with a, “I’ll get your bags,” mumbled under his breath.

“No, no,” said Greta, “That’s all right. Please, you needn’t stop on account of me. I’m sure you’re eager to reach your destination.”

“Ha! This is my destination. I’m here to visit the Ritters. You must be on your way to work or,” he said eyeing the bag in her hand, “you must be traveling elsewhere as well.”

“Well, er, sort of,” she replied. “I was seeing the Ritters too. Or rather, their friend the Margrave of Baden. I’m applying for a post as a companion to the Margrave’s aunt.”

The man waved his ear horn in surprise. “The Margrave, you say?”

Meanwhile, the boy had helped the driver drag their luggage to the front steps of the Ritter House and was waving towards them.

“I’m Ludwig von Beethoven,” the man said as he cocked his head to motion towards the front door. “And that is my nephew Karl. We’re actually here dropping by to see some of my friends—they’re relatives of von Gluck, you know—before heading up to Heiligenberg Castle. I’ve been invited by the Count-Palatine to whip his court musicians to shape.”

“Oh, Mr. Beethoven, I’ve heard of you. You’ve conducted symphonies in Vienna, haven’t you?” she replied. “I’m Greta Silber.”

“Well, Miss Silber, shall we?”

Greta found herself walking with Mr. Beethoven to the front door of the house. “You’ve known the Ritters for a long time?”

“Since I was a young man in Vienna, I met Christoph Ritter von Gluck working with the opera. Amiable fellow, but a terrible musician. The conductor at the opera finally let the poor fellow go and he didn’t have anywhere to go. So I took him in for a few months.”

“How kind of you, Mr. Beethoven.”

“Bah. It was mostly self-serving. Some count or other wanted to have an opera commissioned for his mistress. Opera is not my thing so I fobbed it off to von Gluck who liked to write librettos in his spare time. It was beneficial to both of us. He got his start composing and I got time to work on my symphonies rather than frittering my time away with ridiculous commissions.”

They had reached the steps of Ritter House and Mr. Beethoven’s nephew, Karl, had rung the bell for entrance. The butler soon opened the door and nodded toward Greta.

“Miss Silber, you are expected. The Margrave’s aunt, Lady Beswick, is in the front parlor. And you sir?”

“Ludwig van Beethoven. And my nephew Karl. I believe the Ritters are expecting us as well?”

“Yes, sir. This way please.”

Again, Greta walked through the foyer where a pair of footmen took their luggage back outside to the white, egg-like carriage.

“Wait, aren’t we staying here?” Greta asked the butler, confused.

The butler shook his head. “The Margrave and his aunt will be leaving for Heiligenberg Castle shortly. He has also offered to take Mr. Beethoven if he arrived today.”

“Well, that is rather generous of the Margrave,” the composer said. “I will have to thank him.”

The butler led them to a short hallway which terminated into an open sitting room that faced an interior courtyard.

The room was not decorated ostentatiously but there was an obvious showing of wealth with the silk and damask covered furnishings. And what wasn’t covered with rich fabric was gilt with mother of pearl.

Three women were already in the room. Two of them were Sophie Ritter and Hanna Ritter. The third woman was a rather austere looking lady with steel gray hair and dark eyes. She sat on one of the couches in a rigid position, dressed in a high-necked morning gown of deep apricot and a matching wrap around her shoulders. She frowned at the newcomers but did not say anything as Hanna stood up to greet them in a voice of exclamation.

“Miss Silber, I am so glad you could make it here this afternoon. You know, the Margrave told us about it in his rather blunt fashion during lunch. Please, sit down. This is Lady Beswick, his aunt. She’s come all the way from England.”

“Good afternoon, my lady,” Greta said politely, hoping that her brief courtesy was sufficient manners. Being an apothecary’s daughter didn’t lend one much time or inclination to learn etiquette for situations that one never imagined one would find herself in.

Lady Beswick merely nodded, her demeanor chilly. “Miss Silber, sit down and we shall begin the interview. My nephew may be high handed, but that doesn’t mean that he knows anything when hiring lady’s companions willy-nilly without my knowledge.”

Greta sat on the edge of the high-backed chair opposite of Lady Beswick and prepared for the grilling. She half-hoped the woman would find her lacking and the Margrave would be forced to let her go back to her shop.

Sophie Ritter leaned next to her and discretely whispered, "Don't let the old bat fool you. She's just trying to throw you off your feet."

Greta merely shrugged. She didn't particularly care if she passed the woman's inspection or not. But before the Margrave's aunt could say anything else, she was interrupted by Hanna's delighted shout.

"Oh Mr. Beethoven, you shouldn't have."

"It's nothing," the man grumped, clearly embarrassed as Hanna Ritter fawned over the porcelain figure of a piano that played a tinny melody when she twisted a silver key at the base. "I just remembered that you told me that you liked that particular sonata when you were visiting me out in Vienna. And I knew this music box maker who lives on a nearby street so it was no trouble at all."

Hanna leaned over to kiss the man on the cheek. He turned red and spluttered. "It was very thoughtful of you. Oh and you must be Mr. Beethoven's nephew Karl. You've grown so much since I've last seen you."

Karl merely nodded as Hanna pulled him into a brief hug.

"Come, you must be famished from your travels. Sit down, we have coffee and tea, since Lady Beswick is visiting us, as well as some rolls and cakes."

As Beethoven and his nephew were preoccupied by Hanna and Sophie, Greta was once more aware of Lady Beswick's regard.

"Well, girl, I have few requirements for a companion," she told her, sipping her tea. "Mostly, I need you to do what I need you to do, mostly fetching tea or a book."

"I am able to do those things, my lady."

"Of course," she sniffed. "You have working arms and legs. Only a paraplegic moron would have such a problem. Also, can you read? My nephew is known to have a penchant for air-headed beauties although you," she frowned as if she were a bug beneath her shoe, "don't seem like his type at all."

"Yes, I can read. And no, I've noticed I'm not his type. He doesn't like me very much at all."

"Humph. Which is just as well, anyway."

Lady Beswick took another sip of her tea and turned to stare out the window contemplatively. "I do not really need a companion, you know. I'm not that old and decrepit, no matter what others may say."

Sophie Ritter faked a cough to cover up a laugh.

The woman then turned back to her. There was something strange about her gaze, as if she was looking through her rather than at her. "And my nephew knows that as well. Matthias is a smart boy even though he can be stubborn and close-mouthed at times. So the only reason I can think of that he has hired a lady's companion without notifying me—and leaving the message with the poor Ritters to tell me instead—is that he requires your presence for some reason. What, at the moment, I cannot discern. Unless you care to enlighten me?"

Greta did not think that this intimidating woman would be pleased to know that her nephew had somehow bound himself to her via an accident. Hopefully, Sophie Ritter would not think to set the matter straight either. So she said instead, "Your guess is as good as mine, my lady."

"Oh really?" Her vision focused back on her again. "Well, I suppose we should be resigned to stumbling about in the dark."

Hanna poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Greta. "That's rather enigmatic of you, Lady Beswick. What do you mean, stumbling in the dark? Couldn't you ask the Margrave what the whole matter is about?"

"Asking him isn't the easiest way to get answers out of him," Lady Beswick intoned. "I'm afraid he got his dreadful habits from his father—the moodiest boy I've ever grown up with. I think this responsibility of being Margrave is making it worse."

"Perhaps so," said Sophie. "We have been seeing him quite often so perhaps we haven't noticed it as much. You probably have more perspective than we do."

"I met the Margrave of Baden once," Beethoven said as he had angled his ear horn in their direction to pick out the conversation. "He was visiting Vienna to see a friend of his. He was at one of my concerts. I did not notice his moodiness. He was quite an outgoing fellow. His sunny disposition quite matched his blond hair and blue eyes. The ladies, as I recall, were quite fond of him too."

The women turned to stare at the composer.

"That was the previous Margrave of Baden," said Lady Beswick loudly. "Another nephew of mine. He was quite reckless. I believe he enrolled on one of those Peninsular campaigns against Napoleon and got himself killed."

"I'm sorry," the composer said, momentarily subdued.

"You couldn't have known," Sophie replied, patting his hand. "But you'll meet the current Margrave soon enough."

With her words, Greta cradled her bandaged hand. While in no longer hurt as if someone was taking a knife to it, there was still a twinge that not only made her flesh but part of her soul ache. The Margrave had better find a solution to severing their connection soon because it was not getting any better.

Chapter Five

The egg-like carriage made its way slowly up the mountain with a driver and six passengers.

Greta was feeling slightly nauseous.

She had lived all of her life in Heiligenberg. The apothecary shop that had been her father's had also been her grandfather's and his father before him. So she had grown up in the small alleyway, no more than a minute's walk away from the banks of the Neckar. She had also grown up underneath the shadow of the mountain where Heiligenberg Castle overlooked the city—a fort that had been built in the medieval times with the intent to subdue and unite the Germanic tribes. Various rulers had lived in the castle, but for the most part, played little part in the lives of the townsfolk aside from collecting taxes.

The current Count-Palatine, it was said, only arrived at Heiligenberg the November of the year before from the Balkans. The gossips, such as Mrs. Wismar, said that the current Count-Palatine had been born and grew up in the Balkans where his father before him had lived. His grandfather, the previous Count-Palatine, had moved to the Balkans in search of some sort of medicinal elixir that the hill tribes had supposedly concocted, and had never come back. While he was gone, lightning had struck the north tower twice, causing fire, but since no one was at the castle to supervise restoration, the entire place had gone into disrepair.

But now, there was someone living in the castle. But the north tower was still left to rot as the main part of the castle was being used. There were more rumors about the current Count-Palatine—that he was mad.

Oh, it wasn't the sort of madness that could be easily seen, whispered the gossips. It was a more insidious kind that only once in a while, one of his servants would glimpse and report back to others. It was an odd request here or there, not particularly interesting in of itself, but when taken together, equaled something quite strange and troubling.

Greta had seen the insane before when she once passed the madhouse near the university. Some of them ranted and frothed at the mouth. Some of them mumbled and twitched. Almost all of them were unkempt. She had always pictured the Count-Palatine as this old man who shouted and scared his servants although the reality was, it was more subtle than that.

In the cold carriage, she shivered, although she knew it was not from the cold.

Greta sat by the carriage door so she was able to peek out the window. It was gray out—and darkening as the sun sank lower and lower into the horizon. The dead tree branches, weighed down by ice and snow, weaved in the wind like trembling fingers from the side of the avenue. Next to Greta sat the Lady Beswick ensconced in thick furs. Her eyes were closed as if she was asleep. The only indication that she wasn't was her gloved hand on her knee, slowly tapping in time with the clapping of the horses' hooves. On the other side of Lady Beswick was the boy Karl who played a strange game with a piece of string that he wove around his fingers.

Karl's uncle sat across from him. With his ear horn tucked under his arm, he was engrossed with scribbling notes in a leather-bound notebook. Beside him was Wechsler who truly was asleep. The thin, cadaverous man sat with his head slung back, his mouth slack. And the Margrave on his other side—across from Greta—was wide awake, watching her with an unsettling expression. Greta was quite sure that he was attempting to sever their connection with his stare alone. Unfortunately, from the twinge in her hand, he was not succeeding.

"You're not feeling well, are you?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Greta noticed that Lady Beswick's hand suddenly stopped. Beethoven continued scribbling, ignoring the conversation. His nephew did something with his fingers and the string rearranged itself in an interesting pattern. Wechsler snorted in his sleep.

"It's nothing that a bit of fresh air won't cure," she replied slowly. "But you needn't concern yourself with my health. I think we're almost there anyway."

"But you forget, I am very concerned about your health. You do look a little green."

She felt something tugging at their connection, reaching out to do something to her, to her head. Suddenly angry that he was trying to manipulate her, she mentally tugged back hard at the connection as if she was pinching him as hard as he could. In response, he flinched.

"You don't look so well yourself, *my lord*," she replied with faux sweetness. "Perhaps we should let the driver know that we need to stop so you can rest on the side of the road for a moment."

"That's ridiculous." She could see the thought going through his head by the flicker of his eyes. He was thinking about retaliating, but he knew he would get it back three-fold. "As you've said, Miss Silber, we're almost there. I can see the entrance now, I think."

Lady Beswick gave Castle Heiligenberg a baleful eye. "This place looks like something out of one of those horrid novels. I hate those."

Greta glanced around at the dank stone framed by the evening sky and clutched at her baggage at those words, revising once again her assessment of her latest employer. She was probably not going to take out the horrid novel from her bag if she could help it. Lady Beswick was turning out to be a very disapproving and dour woman. The next couple of weeks was definitely going to be dull.

"Karl, over here!" exclaimed Beethoven. "I think I see our host now!"

The carriage had stopped at a small courtyard just inside the front portcullis of the castle. At first, the courtyard seemed as empty and silent as a snow covered grave, but when the driver dismounted from his seat to help the others out with the language, four footmen in liveried navy and gold exited out of an unnoticed side door and began taking the luggage to the guests' respective rooms.

At Mr. Beethoven's remark, the rest of the party looked up to see where his gaze rested. The front door, a massive wooden structure bordered in brass, opened revealing yet another footman and an old man entirely dressed in black. His head was uncovered, revealing on a few remaining wisps of white hair. Hunched over a frail looking cane, the man discretely coughed before looking back at the party with red-rimmed eyes.

"Welcome to Castle Heiligenberg," the man said.

"Your Grace," began Wechsler, "We want to thank you for..."

The man held up a hand before motioning them inside. "I am the Count-Palatine's secretary, Eichel. He has asked me to escort you through to the main hall where you will be directed to your rooms to rest for a bit before dinner. His Grace had wished to meet all of you when you arrived, but unfortunately, he has been detained by an unexpected appointment."

"Mr. Eichel," Wechsler started again. "Thank you for meeting us on the Count-Palatine's behalf. Would you know when we will be meeting His Grace this evening?"

"I believe you will have about an hour and a half to freshen up," Eichel replied. "Someone will come by to show you the dining hall. Lord Welf will be meeting all of you at dinner."

Inside the front hall of the castle, Greta looked up at the vaulted ceilings which disappeared into shadow. From what she could see, the building was lit minimally with lanterns mounted periodically on the walls, like modern versions of prehistoric torches. Two footmen stood next to the door like statues as everyone entered, footsteps echoing. The front foyer itself was a cold, intimidating place only of bare stone. The rich velvet tapestries that she had always heard so much about in stories were absent.

More footmen arrived to flank Mr. Eichel and Greta had the uncanny feeling that all the servants were somehow the same. Sure, there were slight differences in height perhaps and maybe the one of the right had a slightly more crooked nose than the one on the left—or that one had brown eyes while the other had blue—but in their uniforms, they looked almost like identical tin soldiers in a toy shop. But the sameness didn't stop at their appearance. There was something about their demeanor that made her think of the automatons that she had once watched go round and round on a cuckoo clock that a neighbor had gotten from a relative living in the Black Forest. There was something glassy and blank in their eyes as if there was nothing in their heads—that their bodies were merely puppets for something invisible and greater.

She tried to shake her head of the thought as one of the footmen motioned for Lady Beswick and her to follow him down a corridor and up a stair toward the west wing. She assumed that there were guest bedrooms in this part of the castle. Almost unconsciously, she stepped a little closer towards Lady Beswick as the flickering shadows appeared to close in on them. She was sure that in an ordinary castle, there would be servants bustling about the place on a daily basis. Here, there seemed to be no one except for her, the older woman, and the footman.

Lady Beswick did not appear to notice the strangeness of the castle at all. Instead, she merely looked about her in disdain. Greta remembered that the older woman had lived in England—Hanna Ritter had briefly mentioned that she had married a British baron but had been widowed the last few years. No doubt, Lady Beswick had seen castles in far better repair than the one in Heiligenberg and was perhaps mentally compiling complaints to tell their host once they got to dinner.

They rounded a corner and encountered a set of elaborate doors inlaid with faintly glimmering enamel. The footman knocked on the door and it was opened by a dark haired woman of indeterminate age who introduced herself as Inga, the maid assigned to Lady Beswick. When the older woman entered her own chambers, the footman directed Greta to a set of doors opposite of Lady Beswick's. The door was of a plain dark wood hinged by tarnished brass—obviously quite plainer than her higher ranked employer—but it seemed sturdy enough as she pushed the door open to survey her room.

She was not expecting much, really. As a companion, she had also assumed that she would have been directed to the servants quarters within this huge stone edifice, but here she was in the same wing as the woman she was going to be the companion of. The room itself was simple and stark. There was a bed at the center of the room—an old one that was obvious in its age by its dull, dark shine. At the opposite end of the room was a fireplace in which someone had started up a small blaze and beside it, a small table with a mirror and water pitcher for morning absolutions. Next to the bed was a matching wardrobe and her small shabby bag that another footman had insisted on taking to her room for her.

Greta took off her cloak and hung it up in the wardrobe for a lack of anything better to do and wondered what she would do for herself for the hour and a half until dinner. Lady Beswick was probably already being attended by Inga so she

was quite useless there. And there was very little for her to unpack. She also did not want to take a tour of the castle herself—it was probably a rude thing to do as a guest and she would probably get herself lost before she found the dining hall.

Finally, she walked toward the window that was facing the door to her bedroom. She pulled aside the heavy drapes and looked out onto the brittle winter country-side. The sky was black except for a thin silver slip in the clouds as the new moon edged its way back towards full. She could make out the branches in the surrounding forest—vague twisting arm-like shadows which reached upward, grasping something invisible. The room was three stories up, far enough that the ground below looked like a black pool in the night.

Greta shivered as her finger touched the ice cold pane. She supposed she should be glad that her circumstances allowed for her to be inside. She let the drapes fall and walked back towards the fireplace to warm her hands. It was as if the touch of the pane had not only chilled her fingertips but her entire body.

But as she reached out her hands to warm her hands against the hearth flames, she became aware of something odd—as if something was staring at her forehead. Slowly, she looked up and stood back startled as a pair of glimmering feline eyes stared back at her.

Chapter Six

Greta decided, once she reached the dining room following one of the footmen who had knocked at her door to inform her of the evening meal, that Heiligenberg Castle was a labyrinth. It was either that or her sense of direction had been completely scrambled after being surprised by the black cat living in her room.

She wasn't sure what to make of the animal. Her first inclination was to ask someone. So she had opened her door to peer out at the hallway. The door to Lady Beswick's room remained closed and she loathed to disturb her to ask her maid what would probably be a rather silly question. However, none of the footmen who had initially escorted them to the west wing were around either. So she had gone back into her room to ponder the incident. She didn't know if this was really that much of an inconvenience to herself to warrant calling it a problem.

By the time she looked back into the room again, the cat had leaped down from the fireplace lintel and was padding toward her. Thinking the animal wanted out, she opened the door wide. But the animal ignored the door and instead wound itself around her legs, purring. With a sigh, she had closed the door and picked the cat up and sat on a nearby chair to contemplate the situation.

The cat was rather large—but it was muscular rather than fat. He, Greta had discretely checked and had determined that it was indeed a he, seemed content to just sit on her lap and let her pet him. Her father had never allowed pets in their house—untidy vermin, he had called them—so she had very little contact with any animals except the occasional strays that wandered in the streets. This particular cat seemed well-fed but not particularly pampered. He didn't seem to be pure-bred which what she would have assumed what an aristocrat would have. So perhaps the cat was one of the servants—or at least one that was allowed inside the castle, possible as a pest control agent in the kitchens.

When a footman—she couldn't tell if it was the same one from before or a different one since they all seemed the same to her—had knocked on her door, the cat had pricked up its ears sensing another's presence and had automatically jumped out of her lap to paw at the door. She had opened it and the animal streaked out into the hall, not looking back.

“I discovered that cat in my room,” she told the footman. “Is it one of the kitchen cats or perhaps the Count-Palatine's pet?”

The footman had given her a blank look and had only replied, aside from the dinner announcement, that the Count-Palatine did not own any cats.

The dining hall itself was a wide, square room framed by wood pillars decorated only with dark varnish. There were no windows in the room so any light—whether it was day or night—was provided by an iron chandelier hanging from a black chain from the ceiling. From where Greta had entered, there were a pair of massive closed wooden double doors leading elsewhere. At one end of the hall to her right, there were steps leading downward to a dark hallway where servants—aside from who she saw so far—streamed back and forth, carrying various implements.

Although she was not the last to arrive at the dining hall, Greta found that she was not the first either. Mr. Wechsler, Mr. Beethoven, and his nephew Karl were already there standing by the side of the room conversing. Rather, Wechsler was conversing while Beethoven held the enormous ear horn up to the side of his head and shouted responses. Karl stood a bit to the side, looking bored, as he shuffled his feet in an intricate pattern on the floor as if he was dancing a strange kind of waltz. With Greta's arrival, Karl looked up and waved at her. The older men briefly halted their conversation for a cursory greeting before going back to discussing what sounded like a commiseration about the state of music in these modern times.

“Good evening, Karl. Did you find your room satisfactory?” Greta asked the boy.

Karl nodded. “We are staying on the second floor, facing the south side. All Uncle Ludwig and I can see from our

windows are the surrounding forest, but Uncle Ludwig said that perhaps we could see the surrounding city if we ventured up to the fourth floor. I asked the footman about it and he didn't say that we were forbidden from the top floor."

"Oh? Well, perhaps I'll like to see that, too," she replied. "I've lived in Heiligenberg my entire life and I've never been here. I never thought I would be—but, well, here I am. Let me know how the view is up there. I'm not sure if I will be able to get up there any time soon. It will depend on when Lady Beswick is in need of me."

"Yes, I'll let you know," the boy said. "I was planning on exploring the castle some time when I have a free moment. You know I normally help out my uncle. If the Count-Palatine's musicians aren't in need of too much practice, I could see it soon." The boy paused for a moment and looked around the dining hall. A few servants were bringing up lagers to place at the dining table which dominated the left side of the room. On that side of the room, a large hearth dominated one side. It was lit—the burning logs emitting a pleasant odor that had almost a narcotic effect. Oak and yew, Greta guessed. "Have you noticed something a little strange with them?"

Greta knew that the "them" the boy referred to were the servants and their automaton behavior. They did not seem to have any personality. While the servants were not so strange as to be silent, their conversations were limited to their work. They did not exhibit the familiarity or the politics inherent in the relationships of people who have worked together for some time. It was as if they were all experienced strangers. She remembered the rumors about the Count-Palatine and she wondered if this was perhaps a defense mechanism against an employer who wasn't mentally stable.

"Perhaps," she said magnanimously, "they are a little cautious of us. We are guests, after all. They don't know whether or not we are the pleasant sorts or the kind of people who could be more than a little difficult."

"Some people think that Uncle Ludwig is more than a little difficult," Karl replied. "But it is just his personality. If you aren't used to it, you might think that he is rude. But it's just how he is. Besides, I think he can be kind if he wants to. And most of his seeming rudeness is reserved for people who do not understand music. Or who mangle it badly because they don't know any better."

"I see."

"What happened to your hand?" the boy asked.

Greta looked down and realized that she had been rubbing at her hand. The ache in the past moments was increasing in its intensity. "It was an accident. My hand got cut. It hurts sometimes."

"Does it hurt terribly?"

"Not really. It's more of an ache. I'm sure once it's healed, it won't be a problem."

"It's good that it's an ordinary cut then," Karl said, oblivious to Greta's circumstances to her injury. "Otherwise, it can take a very long time to heal. Uncle Ludwig once told me a story about..."

"One would think this place was a tomb!" rang out a familiar voice. Lady Beswick had arrived at the dining hall on the arm of her nephew, the Margrave. "We need more light in this place. Why, any person could trip over their shoes and go tumbling down the stairs and break his neck."

"Aunt Catherine, if the Count-Palatine could hear you, he would probably take offense to your criticism of his interior design," the Margrave replied, amused. "I know that you haven't been back to the Continent in the past twenty years, but the style here is quite different from the English. I think you will just have to get used to it. It is either that or obtain a pair of spectacles so you can see those stairs better."

"How ridiculous of you to even consider the idea," Lady Beswick said even louder. "My vision is perfectly fine. And I have no need of spectacles. They would make even a perfectly ordinary person look like an old hag. It is quite odious of you to even say that I would need spectacles."

"I am just considering all the possibilities, aunt."

"What is this about spectacles being ridiculous?" Mr. Beethoven shouted, interrupting Wechsler in their conversation. "Spectacles are nothing compared to this!" He waved his ear horn as if it were a club. Wechsler ducked before the composer could inadvertently whack him on the side of the head with it. "Do you know how long it took me to get used to this? Compared to this, spectacles would be nothing—like wearing a pair of pants that happens to be a different color."

"Actually, my uncle still hasn't gotten used to it," Karl whispered to Greta. "He just likes it more that he gets to wave it in front of everyone's face for attention."

"Humph! Of course you would say that, Mr. Beethoven," said Lady Beswick coldly. "You are a composer and you value your ears. You do not care about appearances. You have absolutely no notion propriety."

The composer just shook his head. "Your sort of propriety, you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Beethoven made some sort of noise at the back of his throat and whispered to Wechsler, although his whisper was loud enough that it could be heard by Greta and Karl, "That old bat!"

Greta fought a smile. It would not be considered genteel to laugh at one's employer, especially if one's employer was being maligned against quite loudly. Karl, however, had no such qualms at grinning at his uncle's comment. The Margrave didn't seem particularly worried about his aunt's reaction when his mouth merely twitched upward in a brief smirk. Lady Beswick acted as if she did not hear the comment at all.

While everyone's entrance into the dining hall was marked by the obvious sounds of footsteps on the stone floor, it was a surprise when a ringing voice greeted all of them and entreated them to take seats at the dining table. The Count-Palatine had finally arrived to greet his guests.

As Greta took a seat at the farther end of the table near Karl and Wechsler due to her status as a mere lady's companion, she discretely observed the Count-Palatine and wondered how her assumptions about the current seat holder of Heiligenberg Castle were so far from the reality.

Conrad the Ninth of the House of Welf was not old—which understandably was why Wechsler had first mistaken the Count-Palatine's secretary as the Count-Palatine himself. Lord Welf appeared to be in his prime—perhaps in his thirties or forties (a guess on Greta's part since she considered herself a poor judge of age)--and to be quite fashionable, dressed in tan trousers, burgundy waistcoat, and a ruffled cravat that must have taken a valet of incredible artistic talent to achieve. He did not wear a wig. Instead, gleaming gold hair was tied back in a simple queue. His face was that of an aristocrat—hard angled lines, severe, and almost domineering. His ice blue eyes had the same startling effect. But all of that was marred by a wide smile and his cheerful, gracious manners.

Is he mad? Greta wondered. Is this merely just a facade that he shows his guests? And would the madness show over time?

As the servants came out with the dinner platters—the scent of meat and curried vegetables reminding Greta that she was indeed hungry—the Count-Palatine turned his attention to his more important guests, primarily the Margrave who seemed suddenly very intent on the Count-Palatine to the exclusion of everyone else. No one else noticed the Margrave's shift in attention since everyone else was concentrating on the dinner in front of them, but Greta found herself peripherally aware of it. The quality of the ache in her palm had changed. It felt odd, as if something was clutched at her palm, anchoring itself into her skin.

Greta half concentrated on her meal, vaguely aware of the taste of the food, while she focused on the changed link. She was unsure what it meant—whether the Margrave was consciously trying to sever himself from her or that he was unconsciously manipulating the bond due to the circumstances. It didn't feel painful, but it didn't feel like the usual either.

The Margrave and the Count-Palatine were talking. The Margrave motioned towards the Count-Palatine's full plate and Greta realized that he was asking why their host was not eating anything. The Count-Palatine merely laughed and made a motion with his fingers. Although she could not quite hear the conversation because Mr. Beethoven and Mr. Wechsler nearby were arguing, Greta assumed that Welf was probably making some sort of excuse—most likely something about having eaten earlier.

After dinner, the Margrave, his employee Wechsler, and the Count-Palatine retired to the study to discuss a 'certain matter'. Mr. Beethoven and his nephew decided to retire early so that they could get up the next morning to work with the Count-Palatine's resident musicians. The Lady Beswick claimed exhaustion from her day's travel and also turned in. Feeling someone edgy, Greta decided to take a small tour on the first floor of the Count-Palatine's residence before going back to her room.

As the servants bustled back and forth, cleaning up the remains of the dinner, Greta pulled her thin shawl around her shoulders—a poor defense against the chill of the room—and skirted out to the hallway where she briefly listened to Lady Beswick claiming that she would be getting up around noon due to her exhaustion and to meet her at the castle's library the next day for her afternoon reading. When the older woman turned to head back to her room, Inga in tow, and muttered about poorly insulated walls and hot water bottles, Greta turned in the opposite direction.

Heading into the east wing of the castle, she noticed that the hallway here was much busier than she had expected. Maids bustled to and fro carrying linens and blankets up a narrow stair toward the second or third story. After questioning the maids, she determined that they were preparing several rooms on the third and second floors in the east wing for several guests who would be arriving the next morning. Exactly who these guests were, the maid she questioned was rather clueless. All she could glean was that the guests were either long-time friends of the Count-Palatine or relatives of some sort.

Not wanting to be in anyone's way, Greta made her way down the hall until it terminated into an archway and a short flight of stairs down to a large room lit only with lanterns. In the dimness, she could make out the gigantic form of the tun—an enormous oak barrel approximately ten paces in diameter used to store alcoholic spirits—and the winding wooden stairway snaking up over the tun to the other side. She could hear the sounds of voices and crockery emanating from the other side, perhaps the kitchen. She climbed up the stairs to the top of the tun where someone had built a small platform on which one could stand and look over from the top of the gigantic barrel. She did so and noticed a crest of some sort had been carved at the top of the tun, but in the dim lantern light, she could only make out the outlines of the crest, not its heraldry.

It was more difficult walking down the stairs on the other side. In the dimness, she nearly missed one step and would have tumbled head first down the stairs had she not had gripped the banister as she descended. At the bottom, she found a narrow doorway which led into a cavernous kitchen equipped with stone hearths. Servants were still busy preparing food for the next day and did not notice the figure slipping in from the tun room toward the corridor leading to the servants' quarters.

Here, she immediately sensed that something was quite different. Two maids holding bundles of laundry passed her in quick, tense steps—completely ignoring her in their intentness on their task. The corridor curved towards the left and at one of the bedroom doors, three more servants—three men in work clothes—were holding an intense conversation in whispers. One of them, the tallest, spotted her and frowned at her presence.

“Miss, you shouldn't be here.”

She knew guests normally did not venture into these parts of a castle. Even if the guest was merely a lady's companion—an occupation that really was not any better than a servant's position. “Is this area specifically restricted?” she countered instead.

“No. But I'm sure you must be lost, miss. If you're looking for the library...”

“I'm just walking around the castle on a little tour. I hope you don't mind my wandering the halls. I'm not actually going into your bedrooms.”

Now all three of the men were frowning at her. “I'm afraid that's not advisable,” said the shortest man. “While no part of the castle is exactly forbidden, it's not exactly safe. For instance, the entire north tower is not stable.”

“Yes, I've heard that after it got struck by lightening, the Count-Palatine hasn't gotten to rebuilding it yet.

Suddenly, a scream rent the air. All four of them froze at the sound. Greta could not tell if it was a man or a woman, but she was quite certain that the scream originated from behind the door that they were standing in front of.

“What was that?” she asked.

The men looked at each other, obviously mentally debating on whether or not to tell her. Finally the shortest man replied, “It is the Count-Palatine's food taster. He has been quite ill, ever since the day before when he had tried His Grace's dinner.”

Putting aside the fact that a mere Count-Palatine, rather than a Kaiser or an Emperor, was employing a food taster, Greta asked the obvious question, “Someone tried to poison Lord Welf?”

The man of middle height nodded. “We think so. The food, of course, was thrown out and the cook who prepared the dish was dismissed—as a precaution—but who knows. The poisoner could still be in this castle. At any rate, another has been taken up as the food taster at the moment.”

“Is he going to be all right?”

Then men exchanged another glance and the taller one said, “We don't know. The doctor is with him now.”

“But to be honest, it is one of the hazards of the job,” said the shorter one. “As a food taster, you must live with the fact that the next bite could be fatal.”

While they were talking, Greta could make out terrible coughing noises coming from the bedroom and the doctor's voice, imploring his patient to take it easy. Then almost as suddenly, the noise abated and with it, the conversation. The men seemed to be waiting for something at the door, now, even ignoring her as if she no longer mattered.

After a few moments, the door opened, revealing a tired old man, stout and gray haired, holding a candle and dressed in an overcoat and an apron splattered with what looked like blood. Beyond the old man was the bedroom, an inky darkness, still.

“He's sleeping now,” the old man said.

The shorter man glanced at his companions and then said, “Doctor, do you think he'll recover?”

The doctor sighed and shook his head, saying nothing.

Chapter Seven

June 9, 1815

Morning light leaked out of her bedroom window, acid on her eyelids and heavy on her chest.

Finally, she opened her eyes and found herself lying in bed with the black cat curled up on top of her. The feline was heavy and uttered no noise when she pushed him to the side to sit up. The air was cold and the fire in the bedroom's hearth had burnt down to dying embers. With reluctance, she pushed aside the covers and pulled a robe over her nightgown. She briefly hissed as her bare feet touched the cold floor. For a frantic minute, she searched for her slippers which had somehow wound up on the other side of the bed.

A small ormolu clock sitting on the side of the desk on the opposite side of the room told her that it was five past eight. She doubted that the Lady Beswick would be up at this hour. The older woman would probably be up at noon, at the earliest. For her, eight was quite late. Usually, she would be up by five due to the chiming of the grandfather clock in the apothecary shop. Then again, she had stayed up fairly late the previous night. Usually, once the sun went down, she had dinner, a bath, and then it was to bed.

Greta pushed aside the drapes and looked out onto the countryside. From her floor, she saw nothing but the tops of the trees, still glistening with early morning frost. With little to do except for a bit of remembered conversation she had with Mr. Beethoven's nephew Karl from the previous night, she quickly performed her morning absolutions and dressed for the day.

The corridor connecting her bedroom with the rest of the floor was a dim gray, quiet and abandoned. Slowly, she made her way down a narrow stair, hoping that she remembered from the day before the path towards the dining hall. In the morning, Heiligenberg Castle had a different air, an almost distant deadness to it as if something sinister lurked in its interior but was sleeping due to the sun overhead.

In a few moments, she found the hall and peeked in to find part of the main table laden with a few choice breakfast dishes. Two maids were arranging the rest of the table in readiness for the noon day meal. They ignored her as she took a seat and pulled out two freshly baked bread rolls and sliced them neatly in half. She placed slices of cheese and sausage on the rolls and slowly ate them as she drank a mug of still hot coffee.

Although she had taken her meals alone ever since her father passed away, she still felt odd eating alone—as if something in her routine had irrevocably altered, and not for the good.

After breakfast, she felt herself hesitating as she got up from the table and wandered back out in the corridor. Just outside the dining hall, the corridor branched into three different directions. To her right was the west wing—the location of several bedrooms including her own. To her left was the east wing which she had explored the previous night. She wondered about the food taster, whether his friends and the doctor was with him now, if he had died during the night while she was asleep or was still lingering in the doorway between life and death.

In the corridor, there was a suit of armor standing by the archway leading to the dining hall. Someone had polished it to a shine, so reflective that she could see her own image in it. The visor of the suit of armor was closed. Intellectually, she knew that the suit was merely an empty shell of metal, but she couldn't help feeling that something from within it was watching her as she surveyed her surroundings.

Directly opposite of the archway to the dining hall and the suit of armor, the corridor branched off to the south side of the castle. Greta remembered that Mr. Beethoven and his nephew Karl had mentioned that they were staying in a room located there. So she began walking in that particular direction, passing yet another suit of armor standing guard against a closed doorway a little further to her left and several paintings of which depicted personages dressed in old style clothes from previous centuries. She paused for a moment to look at the paintings, noticing the personages' resemblance to the current Count-Palatine. Ancestors from the House of Welf, she mused.

One particular painting at the end of the corridor, right before a small entrance to a narrow set of stairs leading up to the next floor, made her pause. The man in the portrait was wearing clothes that had been popular about a century before, but that was not what had struck her attention. Instead, it was the man himself, a blond who—with the exception of his old-fashioned hairstyle—could have passed for the current Count-Palatine's twin. Was he the current Lord Welf's grandfather, she wondered, who had left the castle to travel the Balkans in search of some mystical elixir?

But in reality, she only pondered that question for a few moments. She forged onward, climbing the stair up to the second floor where she began to pick out sounds coming from behind a door on the east side of the second story corridor. Curious, she walked toward the door and put her ear to the cold wood to listen to the strains of violin and viola and cello. She heard Mr. Beethoven's loud, sonorous voice. From his comments, he was quite pleased with the talent of the Count-Palatine's string quartet, but he was puzzled as well. Why had he been called to the castle to supervise the musicians if they were actually too good to really need minimal supervision, if any?

There was more murmuring in the background, but since Greta was outside, listening through the door, she could not make out any distinct words. She sighed and turned around to gaze out a window where the drapes had been pulled wide open, pulled back by golden cords that matched the gilding of two marble statues—of nymphs—standing nearby.

From this direction, the castle looked south onto the rest of the town of Heiligenberg. Of course, the sun—as it valiantly struggled through the thick, unnatural winter clouds—shone mostly on frost. But Greta could still make out a bit of the red brick roofs peeking from behind the forest of dead trees that surrounded the castle. If she wanted to see more of the city from above, she would have to climb higher.

Fortunately, the stair that she had taken also had another flight leading upward toward the third floor. The third floor looked similarly to the second, although she noticed that there were servants on this floor preparing the rooms for more guests. When she looked out the window here, she saw a small black carriage on the road towards the castle, slowly winding its way towards the structure. One of the guests, she assumed, although with the number of rooms the servants appeared to be preparing, she doubted that she would actually meet this particular guest with all the people who would soon mill about the place. With a brief conversation she had with a passing servant, she had gleaned a little more information about what was happening at the castle. Apparently, the Count-Palatine liked to hold parties on every Friday for his acquaintances and friends. Despite the unnatural weather, the people he invited always came—although the servant had noted that none of them ever were residents of Heiligenberg. They were always from elsewhere, another Germanic country or even different countries. The Count-Palatine, apparently, was quite popular and possibly influential in the political sphere.

Greta paid little attention to politics—unless it directly affected her—and mostly viewed the Count-Palatine's balls merely as a wealthy man's gross excess.

Further up, she found herself entering a small antechamber that led outside to a walkway that rimmed the top of this particular section of the castle. Looking out the slim, narrow window that looked over on this walkway and part of the south tower, Greta was reminded that she did not have her coat with her. Although she wanted quite badly to go out, to get fresh air, to get an unprecedented view from above of the town that she had lived in her entire life, she disliked going out in the cold even more. So she stood at the window, just staring and wishing. Absently, she scratched at the bandages on the back of the hand with the knife wound.

“The last time I was in conversation with the Count-Palatine, he told me that the library was on the west side of the castle.”

Greta hugged herself when the voice startled her. She did not turn around. She knew who it was. “Is that what you and Lord Welf talked about in his study last night, *my lord*?”

He did not respond to her sarcastic use of his title. Instead, he said, “It was one of many things. Besides, aren't you supposed to be with my aunt right now? Don't tell me that you've already grown tired of her and had somehow escaped from your responsibilities.”

“Your aunt is asleep. And I am not to meet her in the library until later this afternoon. I assumed that she was sleeping in. She must be exhausted from her journey here to Heiligenberg.”

“I doubt it. She might exude an aura of vulnerability, but don't let that fool you. She's as hardy as an old goat. In fact, I'm quite sure that she should be up by now, already having eaten breakfast and taken a walk around the grounds. It's not like her to sleep in.”

She finally turned to look at him. The Margrave was dressed in light colored pants and a dark, severely cut coat. It was open, revealing an equally dark waistcoat and his deceptively simple tied cravat. He was standing just behind her, looking pensively out of the narrow window. His dark eyes seemed unfocused.

“From what I can tell, you haven't seen your aunt in a little while. And she is of a certain age. I'm sure that her constitution isn't what it used to be,” she said. “It isn't abnormal for someone her age to be sleeping in until noon. Why, it's quite normal for someone even younger to sleep until noon, especially if they've been staying up quite late.”

“Still, I somehow doubt that she would have changed so fast,” he replied. “The last time I saw her was the year before.” He frowned and finally, his attention was finally turned on her. “But even if her health had remained unchanged, you should probably use your common sense and stayed put in the castle wing that you were put on. You shouldn't run unsupervised through this castle.”

“I am not a child!” she exclaimed. “I am not so stupid as to, say, run down the stairs and break my neck. Or jump out a window. Or impale myself on a battle ax decorating the wall on the third floor.”

“Of course not. But you don't know this castle. Any number of things could happen.”

“And you do?” she shot back. “What if you went out there now,” she said, jerking her head towards the narrow window that overlooked the roof walkway. “What if you slipped on a piece of ice and went hurtling head first down to the ground? You would obviously be dead. But what about me?”

“What about you?”

“This,” she said indicating her bandaged hand. “If you go, wouldn't it take me out as well?”

“It's not the same...”

“It's exactly the same. You're only restricting my movement because you're thinking of yourself. You think you can take the risk because you think you're invincible.”

“That's not it at all.”

“No, it is. You're as human as I am. Or have you forgotten to tell me something—that you think just because you can raise the dead, you're immune to the same mortal accidents that could befall anyone else?”

“You're being irrational and blowing things out of proportion,” he cut in when she took a breath. His gaze seemed hot, terrifying in its restrained annoyance. “You're worrying about nothing. I am perfectly safe. I am doing nothing except visiting with the Count-Palatine.”

“I'm not so sure about that. Last night, I discovered that the Count-Palatine's food taster was dying. Maybe he's already dead this morning. Doesn't that strike you as a little suspicious? Perhaps the next mouthful we take will be our last—even if we're careful.”

“The Count-Palatine assured me that even though he fired the cook who prepared the fatal meal and had it thrown away. He was quite sure that it was just spoiled food. Things like that do happen, you know.”

She paused for a moment, thinking through his words, but she saw something in his expression and felt something though the bond that they inadvertently shared that made her shake her head. “I don't think you believe his words. You think he might be hiding something. What are you doing up here anyway? Perhaps you were looking for evidence that something else is going on in this castle?”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Of course I do. Tell you what. You've placed me in the position of lady's companion. It's a position that many

people overlook. I can help you..." she reached out to touch his sleeve in an imploring fashion—she wanted to do something, anything, besides wandering about the castle in boredom—but inadvertently, her fingers brushed the back of his hand and something made her jerk her hand back. The bond between them turned hot, almost acid when he grabbed her forearms to force her to look him in the eye.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he repeated. "And I forbid you to go around looking for things that don't exist. Go back to your room..."

She shook her arms away from him and scowled. "So you are treating me as a child. Fine. Perhaps I won't go haring about to unknown parts of the castle. But I can't stand being cooped up here with nothing to do. If you remember, I work for a living. If you hadn't pulled me up here using coercion, I would still be quite safe down in the town below working in an innocuous job that had nothing to do with you."

"But you do have something to do," he said, giving her a grim smile. "You were to see to my aunt in the library. But if you want something to occupy your time now, why don't you go there and read a book?"

"What if I don't want to read a book?" she challenged.

"You will," he replied. He grabbed her arm again and bent his head so that his mouth was close to her ear. His scent, she noticed, was like pine and the morning's coffee over something more subtle that she could not quite put her finger on. "Go to the library and find this book for me," he whispered. "Don't let anyone catch you with it."

Then he pulled away, giving her a fierce look, before moving away.

As she stared at his retreating back, something else caught her attention. Briefly, she shifted her gaze and saw the rustling of a nearby velvet drape which hung from another window and reached the floor. She felt no breeze in the corridor that she was standing in.

Slowly, she deliberately moved away as if she had seen nothing and put her hands in her dress pockets as if her hands were suddenly cold. She fisted her right hand and her fingers closed around a tiny scrap of paper that the Margrave had slipped into her pocket before he had parted.

Chapter Eight

After the noon day meal, Greta and Lady Beswick retired to the library where the older woman made her start reading aloud a rather thick tome on ninth-century history of the state of Bavaria. The text itself was old, pedantic, and written in a strange style. But Lady Beswick wanted her to read it, so she read. It was so boring that the older woman appeared to fall asleep while she was in the middle of chapter one—but she dared not stop reading even when Lady Beswick was snoring loud enough to wake the dead. After all, appearances could be deceiving. Perhaps the old woman was testing *her* perseverance.

A few hours before, she had gone into the library as the Margrave had strongly suggested and had searched for the book that he had scribbled on the piece of paper. The book itself was called "The Seven Winds" with no hint to whether the text was fiction, non-fiction, or a reference book of some sort. The library was located on the first floor of the west wing in the section that was closest to the interior courtyard of the castle. It was a rather large room lined with shelves built of golden-hued wood standing several hands above her head. This, however, did not prevent her from reading the titles on the top shelves and a small stool in the room gave her easy access to the books on that level. The library contained one undecorated window which looked into the courtyard. For its angle, she could also see part of the north tower, charred and partially crumbling.

It took her only a few minutes to locate "The Seven Winds". She had been looking systematically, starting from the top shelf near the entrance of the library and worked her way down and to the right. The book was sitting on one of the bottom shelves wedged between two works which appeared to be references on Greek mythology. At first glance, it looked like any other book on that particular shelf, but when she pulled it out, she noticed that there was a ribbon marking one of the central pages. She did not open the book there to read it immediately. Instead, she had wedged it underneath her arm and made her way back to her room—fortunately encountering no one, not even servants, on her way there.

In her room, she lit a match and burned the scrap of paper that the Margrave had given her. She was quite sure that he would find it irksome if someone else had gotten a hold of it and determined that the handwriting was his. Then, she spent the rest of the late morning looking over the book.

"The Seven Winds" was written in an archaic style, in some ways similar to the history tome that the Lady Beswick was now having her recite. As far as she could tell, it contained quite a few folk stories pertaining to the eastern regions of Europe—small myths about fairies, spells, and strange creatures. Greta recalled the fairy tales that she had heard

during her childhood and wondered if these were the same and if so, of what significance the Margrave wanted her to glean from it.

The ribbon in the middle of the book marked a story that was about some strange creatures living in the forests of eastern Europe, the kind of creatures that were already dead.

Lady Beswick emitted a particularly loud snort and Greta stumbled over the current sentence as if her tongue had suddenly found itself wrapped around a tough piece of taffy. She cleared her throat and started over again. She shot a quick glance at the older woman. Lady Beswick's eyes were still closed.

As she ended the second chapter of the history tome, a clock somewhere in the vicinity tolled the four hour of the afternoon. Lady Beswick snorted again and yawned. As Greta said the final sentence of the second chapter, the older woman said, "Well, I believe it is time for tea. That maid, Inga said she would have it ready in my room. And after that, I suppose I will have to prepare for the Count-Palatine's party. A rather idiotic sort of event, if I say so. A frivolous waste. But I suppose, being a guest, I must have the good graces to attend. At least for the first hour. I've heard that there is going to be quite a few other guests. Who they are, no one has seen fit to inform me."

Greta merely nodded at Lady Beswick's imperious complaints.

"Well, tea first. You are dismissed, Miss Silber, until next Monday. Because the Count-Palatine's secretary offered, I am planning on touring the gardens, or what's left of it due to this unnatural weather, tomorrow."

And with that, the older woman got up. Greta hastily got up as well and performed a small curtsy. Lady Beswick frowned, perhaps deeming her quick bow almost improper, and then left with a swirl of her skirts. Greta watched the empty doorway of the library for a moment before placing the book back on the shelf where she had found it.

Looking outside the library window, she could see that the sky was still light. Normally, in the winter, it would have been already quite dark, the color of a sea captain's navy coat. But even so, there was no sun due to the clouds obscuring the rest of the sky so that it wasn't quite as bright as it would have been on a normal summer's day. Instead, it was a teal gray color—as if a gigantic flock of pigeons had blotted out the sky.

Greta rubbed her arms and turned back to head out of the library. Her mind was on the book that she had hidden in her room, inside her luggage bag. She still could not make heads or tails of it and she was still clueless on what the Margrave wanted her to find in the book.

Or, she thought with a self-deprecating smile, it could simply be a joke on her—the Margrave could have simply given her a random book for her to pointlessly ponder to get her safely out of his way while he went on doing who knows what.

She walked out of the library doors and ran into something that felt almost cold. She gave a small shriek as she quickly stepped back.

"Pardon me, miss." It was one of the castle's anonymous looking footmen. His gaze seemed to look through her as he addressed her. "I did not see you there."

It was on the tip of her tongue that he was still not seeing her, but instead, she said, "Please, think nothing of it. No harm done."

The footman nodded, but he did not move—either down the hallway or past her to the library. "The Count-Palatine's secretary wishes to speak with the Margrave. I was sent to find him. You have not happened to see him in the library, miss?"

"No," she shook her head. "I was just in the library with Lady Beswick, the Margrave's aunt. I have not encountered the Margrave recently." If, she amended to herself, you define recently as the afternoon hours. She fought the urge to scratch at her hand, but nonetheless, she mentally touched the bond by giving it a slight tug. She felt an almost immediate response. The Margrave was irritated and wanted her to go away.

"If you do happen to see him soon, please inform the Margrave that the Count-Palatine's secretary is looking for him. As I was given to understand, it was of a somewhat urgent matter."

"I doubt the Margrave would pay any attention to a lady's maid," she said. "But if you wouldn't mind, what is this urgent matter that the Count-Palatine's secretary wishes to speak with the Margrave right away?"

"It is not for me to say," the footman replied. There was a slight focus to his gaze as if he was trying to look at her. Greta shivered. It was as if a sentient piece of ice was interacting with her. A sentient piece of ice with no personality. "Good day, miss."

Greta made her way back to her own room, fortunately not encountering any more footmen, although she did spot a blonde haired woman wearing a rich, ermine lined cloak climbing the stairs up to the floor above. Another guest? She briefly wondered. Aside from the carriage that she had seen earlier in the morning making its way up to the castle, she had not had a chance to look outside to see if more of the guests were arriving. At the noon day meal, she had seen none of the newer guests—only the ones who had arrived with her.

It was to her slight surprise when she discovered the Margrave exiting Lady Beswick's quarters which were just across from her room. While she had noticed that he was nearby from the ache in her hand, she had mostly ignored it, thinking that he was merely on another floor. Perhaps she was getting used to it. Or perhaps the Margrave had discovered something in which to weaken the bond.

Unfortunately, her expression must have been easy to read or she had inadvertently transmitted her feelings through the bond because he shook his head and answered her thoughts. "I haven't made much progress to this." He held out his bandaged hand and then let it drop back to his side. He was frowning yet again, though. "And what was it a moment before?"

"I received a message to tell you that the Count-Palatine's secretary wishes to see you, my lord. Soon."

"Echiel?" The Margrave looked thoughtful. "That's a little strange. If Welf wants to speak to me, he could speak to me directly, not through his secretary. I cannot think of a reason why the secretary himself would want to speak with me. I have little dealings with him."

Greta only shrugged at the Margrave's musings. It was not of her concern what the secretary wanted with him. Perhaps he, the secretary, was irritated about the Margrave wandering about the castle himself. It would serve him right after he had berated her on her wanderings.

The Margrave glanced around them and then said in a lower tone, "Well?"

She knew very well that he was speaking about the book that he had wanted her to find. "I have it, but I'm not sure what you want it for. It's just a bunch of fairy stories."

"It doesn't matter what it is. Was there something unusual about it?"

"Not that I can tell. I was about to go back to my room to study it some more. Perhaps there's something there that I missed."

"And perhaps two pairs of eyes are better than one."

She stared at him for a moment and felt heat creep up her neck. "You are not coming into my room. It is not proper."

"There is no one here. No one will know. Besides, I'm not going to do anything except look at the book."

"If you're only going to look at the book, let me bring it out to you and you can take it to your room."

He shook his head. "If anyone finds it, it cannot be in my possession. If it is in yours, you can easily claim ignorance and no one will be the wiser."

"Why can't you be in possession of it? You can just say that it is a bit of light frivolous reading that you just felt like doing. You're a Margrave. You can pull rank."

"I might have the title," he replied, giving her a tight smile, "but it cannot be my excuse over my other occupation. You do understand that with my abilities dealing with the dead, I will always have a cloud of suspicion over me?"

"You say your stigma is unfounded."

"Maybe, maybe not," he said. "In any case, you must keep it."

"If I may ask, what made you want to look for this book in the first place?"

"Let's just say, I was at the right place and at the right time for a particular conversation."

"With the Count-Palatine?"

He only shook his head and took a step back, as if he was about to leave her. "Go and look at it. If you find anything, you have only to let me know." He moved his bandaged hand again to indicate the preferred mode of communication. "I must admit, this does have its uses."

"Right. But are you sure you want to be permanently connected to me?"

"Who wants to be permanently connected to anyone, anyway?" he said instead. "Look, I had better see to this secretary before he sends an army of footmen after me. Meanwhile, well, I also had a courier leave you something in your room. Last night, my aunt told me that she did not want her lady's companion reflecting poorly on her."

"What exactly does that mean?"

He shook his head again and made a motion with his hand as if shooing her back inside in her room. With a huff, she turned back to her bedroom.

The black cat was already waiting in the bedroom, sitting at the window sill, looking out over the dead trees surrounding the castle. Several large packages wrapped in brown paper were stacked next to the room's desk. She did not remember pulling back the drapes. Although she knew a courier and possibly a maid came into her room, who knew who else had access to her room. It could only lock from the inside.

So she the first thing she did was look into her bag to reassure herself that the book she snatched from the library was still there. Once reassured, she then turned her attention to the packages. Opening took a little time, but she quickly realized that the packages were clothes. New, fashionable clothes. It was then that she noticed that an envelope was sitting, propped up against an ink well, on the desk. She slit the envelope open with a pen knife and unfolded the thick cream colored paper. The writing was familiar—the Margrave's.

As she read it, she sighed in irritation. Apparently, the Margrave felt he was free to dictate what she should wear, citing his aunt as an excuse, because he had bought the clothing.

"I'm not his mistress!" she exclaimed, throwing the note back on the desk. "I never asked for, nor expected, any of this. He brought this upon himself when he made me his aunt's companion."

The black cat turned his head at her small tirade and jumped off the window sill to pad over to her. The feline rubbed his head against her calf and purred. She sighed again and picked up the cat to pet him. Her irritation grew to a

major annoyance as she looked over at the frothy looking fabrics and finely cut cloaks and discovered that there were even undergarments.

If these actually fit her, she suddenly thought, there would be quite a few more questions she would have for the Margrave.

Chapter Nine

The voices just outside her bedroom door made Greta pause. She looked back to her room wishing she could be like the cat by curling up to sleep until everything was over. She did not want to go to the Count-Palatine's dinner. The best she could hope for was to be ignored. The worst—she could be singled out to prove her wit. She knew she had no wit, not the sort that the upper classes would consider as one at any rate, and she did not have the inclination to pretend she did—especially since anyone with a brain would be able to see right through her deception.

As far as Greta was concerned, the Margrave had gotten her too many clothes. It was just a dinner party, of course, and she was just a lady's companion at this particular event so no one cared, or probably even wanted, for her to dress particularly prettily. With that finally in mind, she had chosen the most drab of the evening dresses to wear—although compared to her own wardrobe it was fairly extravagant.

The dress that she had chosen was the color of a blue-gray sky, just before it was going to rain. But that was just her fanciful mind talking, she reminded herself. The discerning eye would probably see it the same way, but anyone else would just consider it to be a shade of gray—a perfect shade for blending in. The waist of the dress was gathered under the bust with a discrete silver trim in the Empire style. She had no jewelry to enhance the dress in anyway and for that, she was glad that the Margrave hadn't obtained any for her. That would just send the wrong message. Instead, she pulled up her dark hair in a simple style. In the mirror, she had seen that the hairstyle had the effect of making her eyes look even wider and grayer even though she had no cosmetics to enhance her appearance.

Not that she wanted any, of course.

But whatever the case, the dress, though long-sleeved, could not hide her bandaged left hand. She had recently changed the bandages and had taken a close look at her wound. It was still an angry red line on her palm, though not as bad as the other night when the Margrave had sliced it open to perform his ritual. It still hurt a bit, still stinging when the skin pulled as she moved her fingers.

She took another breath, steeling herself, and pulled open the door to the hallway.

The Margrave and his aunt were standing outside of Lady Beswick's bedroom doors. They were discussing the guests at the dinner party.

"I don't care if the Kaiser himself was present in the dining hall, wishing to see everyone," Lady Beswick said in ringing tones. She was glaring at her nephew as if he was a particularly naughty little boy. Greta had no doubt that he had been one when he was young. "After dinner, I am retiring. I have no wish to mingle with all of those ridiculous aristocrats."

"That's not particularly acceptable behavior for a guest," the Margrave replied.

"You are not one to talk about what is and what isn't acceptable behavior, Matthias," his aunt said. "Name me one instance when you were a paragon of virtue at one of these events."

The Margrave opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He closed his lips and started to glare at his aunt.

Greta tentatively edged past her bedroom door and down the hallway. Perhaps this was a good time to leave the Margrave and his aunt to their little argument as they did not appear to notice her exit of her bedroom. And perhaps it was a good thing that they didn't notice because that proved that her choice in attire was the correct one.

"Ah ha!" she heard Lady Beswick finally said. "See, you cannot recall the last time you were on your best behavior. I told your mother that she should have been more strict with you. Unfortunately, bless her soul, she isn't with us now to curb your behavior."

"As much as I would like to stay and listen to your lecture about propriety," her nephew replied, "there is the dinner party downstairs. And if you wouldn't mind, I would like a word with Miss Silber first."

At her name, Greta halted as if an invisible wall had suddenly obstructed her path. The Margrave made no sound as he walked down the carpet.

"I see you've found the packages in your room and have made use of their contents," he said. She felt his gaze briefly sweeping down to assess the dress that she wore and then back up to her face. Perhaps it would have been more polite to look at him, but she found herself resolutely fixing her gaze ahead as they headed down the hallway to the stairs to the first floor. "Although," he added, "this wouldn't have been my choice for the dinner party. Perhaps the blue one."

She had seen the blue dress. It seemed a little too daring for her so it was one of the first gowns that she had dismissed immediately.

Lady Beswick made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat. She had walked quickly enough to catch up with them so that she was beside her nephew. “Exactly when have you been an expert on ladies' fashion? Why just last year when you visited me in London and I had asked your opinion on two gowns, you had specifically told me that it hardly mattered to you. And now, you're taking an interest in Miss Silber's attire?”

“It was you, wasn't it, who mentioned that you wished Miss Silber matched your wardrobe since she is your lady's companion for the duration of this visit to the Count-Palatine?”

“It was an idle thought,” Lady Beswick waved her hand. “As long as it is appropriate for her station, what do I care? Although I must say, your sense of what matches is particularly poor, even if she was wearing the blue gown as you say.” Greta briefly glanced over. Lady Beswick was wearing a voluminous gown made of apricot-colored velvet and a broad gold tiara over her graying hair. Under the uncertain light of the flickering lamps in the hallway, one could mistake her as a giant walking orange.

“How was I to know that you owned a gown of that particular color?” the Margrave demanded.

“And why would I tell you?” his aunt shot back. “Besides, it's a pity we cannot blame your poor color choices on color-blindness. You and I know you can very well tell the difference between a red apple and a green one.” She made another derisive exclamation but then said, “Miss Silber, I must commend your choice in dinner wear despite my nephew's ineptness. He should have consulted me or one of the maids. A man knows nothing about clothes—unless he is actually the tailor. And even then, he needs direction.”

“Thank you, my lady,” she replied, unsure of how to take her comment. “The Margrave left an entire wardrobe in my room. I am not quite sure what to do with it really since I brought my own.”

“Take it from me, Miss Silber, don't look a gift horse in the mouth,” Lady Beswick said. “Make use of the wardrobe. If my nephew is foolish enough to throw his money away for clothes he's not going to wear, then it is his own idiotic decision.”

“I am right here, you know,” the Margrave said dryly. “If you want to insult me, insult me to my face.”

“Really, Matthias. Have I ever been known for subterfuge?”

“On occasion,” he muttered.

They turned a corner and suddenly the murmuring of voices which had slowly gotten louder as they approached the dining hall seemed like a low roar in comparison. Greta was suddenly assailed by an attack of nerves. Even though she was approaching the dining hall with two other people that she knew, she felt hemmed in by the advent that she was going to have to meet and mingle with strangers. But she found her feet carrying her toward the dining hall though she fell behind from the Margrave and his aunt.

She found herself being directed to a seat by a footman in gold and black livery. She wasn't quite sure who she was sitting next to, but she did notice that the Margrave and Lady Beswick were being directed toward the head of the table, near where the Count-Palatine—although still absent—was going to sit. This did not upset her. She was, after all, an ordinary person, solidly in the lower working class even though she did arrive with the Margrave and his aunt as a guest. Mr. Beethoven and his nephew were seated midway at the table—with the elder in deep conversation with an elderly man beside him. Strangely, though, she did not see the Margrave's man of affairs—Mr. Wechsler—at the table. Perhaps he would arrive later. Or perhaps he was running an errand for his employer.

The man to Greta's left was perhaps in his forties or fifties. His hair was graying although like the old-fashioned, he grew his hair long and tied it in a queue with a bit of leather. He completely ignored Greta—an obvious snub although she could care less as she did not wish to be forced to make conversation—although from his conversation with the guest on his other side, she discovered that he was a baron of some sort living in southern Saxony. To her right, sat an older woman of about Lady Beswick's age dressed in a ruffled gown the color of plums. What appeared to be diamonds dripped from her ears and neck like so many glittering droplets. This woman, too, also ignored Greta in favor of talking to the gentleman to her other side. From her conversation, Greta discovered that this woman was the wife of a gentleman who happened to be the younger brother of a baronet in Eastern Bavaria and one of the Kaiser's ambassadors.

Across from Greta were several other guests of a younger persuasion, but after brief introductions in which these guests discovered that she was merely a lady's companion and not part of the aristocracy, they too ignored her. Which was just as well.

She knew that those who cared about such things would regard all of this behavior as snubs and that the proper response emotional response was to sulk about no one paying attention to her. But Greta felt none of this. She grew up as an apothecary's daughter and had always found herself too busy to attend any social occasions other than the rare ones with her relatives when they had visited Heiligenberg. Most of her other time, too, was spent alone. Although being alone was not the same thing as being ignored, Greta wasn't one to seek attention anyway so she was content, sitting at her end of the table observing.

The guests themselves, apart from their attire, weren't particularly intellectually stimulating. She did find out that the seat reserved for the Count-Palatine's right was for his heir apparent, his nephew Rudolf Wittelsbach who owned some sort of estate in the hinterlands of the north. Wittelsbach was a portly man—perhaps in his forties and obviously older than the Count-Palatine—who was nearly bald. His face was extremely red, possibly because he was already well into his wine,

and his nose, extremely large. His clothes appeared to be one size too small which made it all too evident the excess flesh. Wittelsbach had also brought his very good friend—the Mrs. Brigitte Sonntag—who was obviously his mistress in all but name. Mrs. Sonntag was a strikingly beautiful blonde woman—perhaps half of Wittelsbach's age—who wore her brilliant green gown for effect.

To his left was for one of the Count-Palatine's good friends who had traveled all the way from the Balkan Peninsula. Someone mentioned the name of the Count-Palatine's friend, but it was a strange name that no one was quite sure how to pronounce. The Count-Palatine's friend was younger, around the Count-Palatine's age she guessed. From what Greta could see, the Count-Palatine's friend—a viscount of some sort—had a bit of a Slavic cast to features. Greta did not hear what he was telling the Count-Palatine's nephew, but it was evident to anyone observing that he wasn't really paying attention to the conversation. Instead, his attention was riveted to Mrs. Sonntag's strategically displayed cleavage.

When the Count-Palatine finally arrived, servants entered the dining room laden down with trays for the meal. There was a rich soup of some kind that was almost like a stew. Due to her training, Greta could easily identify the herbs that the cook had used in the dish. While everyone around her was complaining that the soup had too much tarragon she only smiled to herself as she knew that it wasn't tarragon that everyone was tasting but too much sage. The main course consisted of roasted duck and a boar that one of the hunters under the Count-Palatine's employ had killed earlier in the day. After this was some sort of small noodle and spinach dish accompanied by a white wine that had been fermented from grapes that had been grown in a nearby valley from the three previous years.

It was when the dessert was brought out that the chaos ensued. Just when the server placed a small dish filled with a gleaming pastry in front of the Count-Palatine, a loud shriek reverberated in the air, stopping the rest of the servants from serving the rest of the guests and halting the conversations around her. She and everyone else watched as a young man in an apron rushed up from the small servants' entrance with a tense, white expression on his face. He headed straight toward the Count-Palatine and whispered something in his employer's ear. The Count-Palatine merely nodded as if he was only listening to a report on the weather. A moment later, the young man hustled back towards the kitchens and the servants that had been bearing the rest of the deserts took them back as well.

“Well,” Lord Welf said loudly, in a voice that carried through the dining room, “I suppose we will have to make do without the dessert. If all of you would like to join me, we will be in the north ballroom.”

With that announcement, two footmen hurried over to the doorway leading north from the dining hall and opened them. There were quite a few murmurings from the guests as they turned to each other, wondering what was happening. The Count-Palatine didn't seem to hear the whispers at the table. Instead, he stood up from his chair, leaving the pastry that had been placed in front of him untouched, and walked through the doorway to the ballroom. A moment afterwards, several of the guests—including the Count-Palatine's friend and his nephew with his mistress—followed suit.

Greta only watched the others depart. She heard Mr. Beethoven waving his ear horn and complaining loudly that the lack of dessert completely threw off his schedule—that he had planned on organizing the musicians that he had been training in about half an hour after everyone had finished dessert. It was only when most of the guests were already out of the dining room that she finally scooted her chair backward and stood up. She fisted her left hand when the Margrave and his aunt approached her.

“What happened?” she asked, hoping that the Margrave's proximity to the Count-Palatine at the dinner table would have given him more insight into the situation.

She half expected him to not answer because of his rank, but he surprised her again by admitting, “I don't know. But I'm sure we'll find out soon.”

“Humph!” exclaimed his aunt. “I would expect someone of the Count-Palatine's stature to be more forthcoming to everyone. Now he's only creating gossip. If, of course, it was his intention to create gossip.”

“Actually, I don't think that was his intention,” said the Margrave slowly as he looked thoughtfully toward the servants' entrance. “Perhaps he did not want to alarm his guests with the news that he received.”

Piecing together what she already knew with the evidence of the uneaten pastry, Greta concluded, “So the Count-Palatine's second food taster was poisoned.”

There was an almost imperceptible nod from the Margrave. “However, it is unfortunate that I cannot investigate this matter immediately. I think I would be missed. You, however, will not.”

“What do you mean that she will not be missed?” said Lady Beswick. “Don't you think that someone would have noticed that I came to the dining hall with a lady's companion? And what about that Mr. Wechsler? I thought he was your man of affairs. He could find out all this information for you.”

“Hopefully, they would have forgotten with everything that has happened,” her nephew replied. “Besides, she did not sit next to you during dinner. She was sitting near the other end of the table—and from what I saw, the other guests did not even notice that she was sitting among them. As for Mr. Wechsler, he is currently unavailable. He is running another errand for me.”

Not noticing and actively ignoring were two different things, but Greta did not bother to correct him. If someone noticed that she was not in the ballroom with the others, then so what? She could always claim that she was feeling tired and had turned in early for the night.

"I do expect a report," the Margrave continued.

"What if there is nothing to report?" she countered.

He shook his head, predicting, "I think there will be. Otherwise, you'll have to answer to me."

"I already answer to you."

He gave her an unpleasant smile. "There could be worse things. Besides, you owe me. So you had better do your best or face the consequences."

When he and his aunt turned away to head into the ballroom with all the other guests, Greta contemplated on giving the Margrave a false report just to get him to stop bothering her. But then again, with the connection they shared, she doubted that he would be easily fooled by her lies. Not unless she learned to block part of herself from him.

The last guest had finally turned toward the ballroom without a glance at her. The servants were already arriving to clear away the settings at the dining table. So Greta used the opportunity to slip back toward the servants' entrance which went through the room with the enormous tun before reaching the kitchen. On her way there, some of the servants gave her strange looks. One maid even suggested that she was heading in the wrong direction. But when, instead, she questioned the maid about the desserts, the woman merely shook her head and told her to forget about it.

It was only when she reached the kitchens that she finally cornered one of the cook's assistants into giving her the story. Apparently, the Count-Palatine's food taster had abruptly gone into convulsions about a minute after the first servant had gone out to deliver the pastry to the Count-Palatine. One of the head servants had immediately fired the pastry chef and the assistant handling the Count-Palatine's dishes on behalf of the Count-Palatine. The doctor had been called to handle the latest food taster's illness, but unfortunately the man had stopped breathing shortly after the convulsions and promptly died before anyone could get him to a bed.

"What is going to happen to all the desserts?" Greta asked the cook's assistant.

He pointed towards a small wooden table at the corner of the kitchens where the servers were placing all the pastries. "They are there right now. The cook is hesitant to throw them away because some wandering beggar might find them and get inadvertently poisoned."

"That is good," Greta replied. "The Count-Palatine will want to keep them all for evidence."

Chapter Ten

June 10, 1815

Greta stood by the library window at eight o'clock in the morning, watching the snow blanket the inner courtyard of Heiligenberg Castle further until it was nothing but a white expanse, interrupted only by the strange white shapes of the fountain and various statuary. The library itself was as quiet as a tomb. On a nearby reading table, a servant had arrived with a tray bearing an earthenware mug filled with steaming tea and a plate of toasted bread with a generous serving of butter. The toast was half eaten. The mug, so far, was untouched.

As the servant had apologetically told her when she arrived at the dining room half an hour earlier, expecting a meal, they had not really prepared for it since they were expecting that after the ball which had gone on until the very early hours of the morning, everyone would still be asleep—and would not wake until noon when they, or most of them, would all depart to their respective homes. So in compensation, they would deliver her a small breakfast in the library where she said she would be spending most of her morning.

While watching the snowflakes drift down from the sky, she contemplated all that she had learned from the previous night. Judging from the symptoms that the now deceased food taster exhibited, she could narrow it down to a few poisons that could possibly have been placed into the dessert. It would have to be tasteless and odorless, she reasoned, because the servants had been ready to serve the desert until the food taster himself had actually exhibited signs that not all was well.

"This is a rather ridiculous time for you to be up."

She turned and walked over to her breakfast tray to pick up her tea. She finally looked up to see the Margrave standing just inside the library. His back was to her as he shut the door to prevent any prying servants from overhearing their conversation.

"This is the usual time for me to be up," she replied. "At any rate, I went to bed soon after I talked to some of the kitchen help to ascertain what had happened. You, on the other hand, went to the Count-Palatine's ball. Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"My aunt is. She won't be up until this afternoon, by the way. She told me to inform you that she wishes that you accompany her to the garden tour that Mr. Eichel will be giving her at two o'clock." He finally turned and she saw that he was dressed, impeccably as always. She wondered briefly if his valet was annoyed by his strange hours. "I slept little

anyways,” he said, answering her unsaid question. “There’s something about this place that I can’t put my finger on, something that keeps bothering me.”

“About the castle or about the Count-Palatine?”

“Both, I think. They say that the Lord of Welf is mad, you know.”

She nodded. “I’ve heard rumors.”

“It’s a very subtle thing. What my aunt might consider as rudeness, others might consider it as strange, don’t you think?” He moved toward the table with her tray and watched her take a sip of her tea. “Breakfast?”

“You haven’t had yours yet? Perhaps I should summon one of the servants for you.”

“No need. I’ll find one of them myself in a little while.” He walked passed her to stare out to the inner courtyard as well. “Did what you find confirm our suspicions?”

“Yes. The Count-Palatine’s food taster collapsed soon after he consumed one of the pastries. He’s dead.”

“How unfortunate. What happened to the food handlers for the dessert?”

“They were let go. I did find out their names. I suppose you could give them to Mr. Wechsler so that he could find them and interview them. They’re probably back in Heiligenberg proper now. The deserts themselves have been saved in the kitchen—as I impressed upon them that the Count-Palatine may want them to be used as evidence. I doubt those servants really did put the poison in the dessert. I have a feeling that it might have been someone else who was a lot more circumspect.”

“That’s speculation, Miss Silber. In most cases, the most simple explanation turns out to be the correct one.”

“Don’t tell me that you never have any hunches?”

“I have many,” he admitted, “but I act on them rarely. I mostly depend on science and my deductive reasoning to figure out what is going on. Your report actually gave me more information than what I had hoped for.”

“Does that mean that you will erase my debt to you?”

He turned his head, a faint smile on his mouth. “You did not wear one of the morning dresses that were included in the package that I had sent up to your room?”

Consciously, Greta pulled her own somewhat frayed shawl around her. She had worn her own morning dress, a dark gray one which had a collar that came up to her chin. It was plain and, to her mind, look as nondescript as the other maids wandering the corridors of the castle. “You’re not answering my question,” she replied.

“Maybe, once this whole affair is done,” he said. “But I will have need of you soon. I might have to talk to the deceased food tasters—both of them—and have you identify the poison that was being used.”

“Why don’t you talk to the doctor about that? From what I’ve heard, he has his own theories.”

“I don’t trust the doctor.”

“And you trust me?”

She felt him tugging on the blood bond between them and she fought the compulsion to step towards him. “Yes. Because I can. And I have to,” he said. He finally turned his entire body towards her and he leaned closer as he placed his hands on the table between them. “As inconvenient as it may be.”

“If it’s so inconvenient, why don’t you try getting rid of this?”

“It will take some time,” he hedged. “It will have to take someone who’s skilled at these kinds of things. That’s why I sent Wechsler down to the town yesterday—to send a message. You’ll know when I know.”

She gave him a skeptical glance. “That doesn’t help matters. You and I know that this thing--” she waved her bandaged hand, “isn’t some sort of telepathic bond where I can go into your head and actually read your thoughts. And really, I think in some ways it is a good thing that it isn’t that kind of bond because I’m not sure I want to read your thoughts. Or have you read mine. But I can certainly tell some things. And I can certainly take some very accurate guesses as to what you might be feeling. Otherwise, why converse aloud anyway?”

“Of course.” He leaned back, but his eyes were still on her. “It isn’t as intrusive as it could be.”

Greta placed her mug down and tried to give him a stern glare although she knew that he was better at it.

“Speaking of intrusive, exactly what were undergarments doing on those clothes packages?”

If she wasn’t paying attention, she would have missed the slight blush that stained his throat. “I was trying to get everything that matched. As my aunt says, I am a particular poor choice when it comes to picking the correct clothes.”

“I can understand that if you, say, got me a blue dress and an orange hat to go with it,” she said. “But undergarments? No one’s going to see any of it. Besides, it’s too—what’s the word—intimate? It’s something that a man gives his mistress. I am not your mistress. I should return them.”

“But the fact that you’re telling me this tells me that you aren’t going to do that, are you?” he replied silkily.

“Your aunt did say not to look a gift horse in the mouth,” she muttered. She turned to stare at one of the shelves in the library. After a while, she found his gaze too intense, as if the summer sun was burning her. She would have liked to think that he was trying to bespell her, but with the bond, it was impossible to fool herself.

“You can do whatever you want with them,” he finally said. “Throw them away, burn them, use them as rags, I don’t care.”

“But,” she interrupted, “why did you get them, really? Or perhaps I don’t want to know?”

“It was an impulse buy,” he said. He lied, but she was quite sure that he did not care that she know that he lied. He simply did not want to voice his reasons aloud. “Enough of this. I’m going to get coffee. And possibly some breakfast. I not thinking too clearly right now from the lack of sleep.”

“You seem fairly awake to me.” She turned back to look at him. “What do you think is going on? Why would anyone want to poison the Count-Palatine?”

“Aside from rumors that he is mad? I haven’t heard any rumors about him that may indicate that someone might have some sort of grudge against him. The people of Heiligenberg doesn’t seem to resent his rule. He seems actively concerned about this winter—I don’t believe that he is responsible for this. But there is something strange about him. He definitely isn’t like anyone else in this castle—and it’s not the madness that I’m talking about. Even if he was perfectly sane, there is something off about him.”

“Off? Is it because he was raised from outside of this country so that his mannerisms aren’t quite Germanic?”

“No, it isn’t that either,” he shook his head. “His friend from the Balkans would have had those mannerisms—but he seems perfectly fine to me. How can I say this? He doesn’t set off my gift as the Count-Palatine does, although I am quite sure that the Count-Palatine himself does not possess any significant gifts of his own.”

Chapter Eleven

The death room was dark, the drapes pulled over so that no sunlight—not even the weak unnatural winter light—could filter into the place. Instead, what light was there was emanating from the lanterns which were placed on a small table at one corner of the room and a battered desk that was shoved against the wall. Greta scented something in the air that her mind told her was a mix of cardamon, beeswax, and rosemary which tried unsuccessfully to counteract the smell of rot that was slowly permeating the atmosphere. After a moment when her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she spotted the censer smoldering near the large bed that was placed close to the north side of the room.

The room itself was also cold—as the hearth was not lit—to prevent the rot from spreading farther. For on the bed, lay the two bodies of the Count-Palatine’s dead food tasters. Around the bed were festooned red threads and small bronze bells, a rough carving of what looked like the evil eye, and white ribbons twined among what looked like hawthorn twigs. These she recognized as the superstitious trinkets that the servants had placed, in case something untoward happened to the dead bodies.

Greta stayed on one side of the room, next to the corner table which held two of the lanterns. The little light provided little solace, however, for the fact that she was in the place of the dead that was located on the outer perimeter of the castle, near the north. She knew that if she drew the curtains, she would see the ruined north tower only a few paces away. From the room, there was only a short corridor toward that part of the castle that everyone else ignored.

The doctor was standing next to the bed, adjusting a pair of spectacles on his nose as he took one last look at the deceased men. The Margrave stood next to him, carrying a small black box which contained some of the tools of his trade.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” the doctor said for the third time. “Who knows what will happen if you call their souls back? There’s the possibility that something undesirable will happen.”

“There’s always a chance of something undesirable happening,” the Margrave replied as Greta discretely wiped her bandaged left hand against the back of her dress. “And of course, we have to way the consequences of what is undesirable to what we want to know. But I think we’ve minimized most of the risks. The perimeter of the room has been consecrated and the other servants had taken the precaution of preparing the bodies before burial.”

“Still, I don’t like this.”

“If you don’t like it, then you may leave the room. My assistant and I will be able to handle this.”

The doctor then slanted her a glance. “I do not like that you are using this young woman as a sacrifice.”

Greta didn’t like it either, but what choice did she have? A bad thing that could happen, she reasoned, was that the same thing would happen again—that something would try to break the Margrave’s circle of salt on the floor. And she would be unconscious again while the Margrave fought it. The worst thing was that she could end up as dead as the two food tasters. But she tried not to think about that. Instead, she tried to reassure the doctor. “I’ve seen the Margrave work, sir. You need not worry.”

The Margrave gave her a brief self-deprecating smile but said nothing.

“Fine,” the doctor said after a moment. He took off his spectacles and wiped them on a cream-colored handkerchief before tucking them back in a breast pocket. “Then I’ll leave you to it. I have no need to see your work if I am not needed.” He then stepped back and exited the room. The wooden door closed with a thump and a jangle as the string of bells that the servants had attached to the top of it shook with the movement.

“I thought that Mr. Wechsler was your assistant,” she said as the Margrave moved to the middle of the room and

placed his black box on the floor. He opened it and took out the small pouch of salt.

"Wechsler, as I've told you before, is on an errand for me. I did not expect to do this again so soon, but I think this may be the most expedient way to get some answers."

"Why do you say that? It's obvious that the food tasters did not know about the food being poisoned. Otherwise, they would have just refused to eat it, don't you think?"

"Not necessarily." He beckoned for her to stand beside the box before he started to pour the salt circle around them. "They could have been forced to eat the food, for some reason or other."

Despite the lack of clock in the room, Greta knew that it was about eleven o'clock in the morning, well after the Margrave had gotten his breakfast. After he had left from the library about about nine in the morning, she had not seen him again until ten thirty when he had announced that he needed her help on an important matter. During that time, it was quite possible that he had encountered someone, or overheard someone, saying something. But she doubted that he would outright tell her what they said. Instead, she could only glean his knowledge from a few of his enigmatic utterances. Like this one.

So she assumed that someone did make the food tasters eat the food—someone who could be a suspect themselves. But why would they give away their opportunity in killing the Count-Palatine when they killed the food tasters first? She could think of a myriad of ways that could be better—such as slower acting poisons with no antidote—to could achieve the poisoner's objective far more effectively. Unless, of course, the dead food tasters were being used as a warning of something worse to come.

The salt circle was partially incomplete when the Margrave requested, "There is a bowl of water on that stand next to the bed. Bring that here and place it next to the box."

Greta did as requested. As she passed the bed, she glanced towards the dead men. Separate shrouds of white linen were wrapped around their bodies, covering everything except their heads. Their eyes were closed, but she had the strange feeling that someone, something, was watching her anyway. The hairs at the back of her neck stirred although there was no draft in the room. She hurried back to the circle with the bowl of water.

The Margrave finally closed the salt circle and began muttering under his breath at each of the four points, consecrating their protection. Then, he took out the hand of glory and the knife from the box before closing it and placing both of these items on top of the lid. The dead man's hand in wax appeared to be the same one that she had seen at the summoning at the Ritter House, but she could not be quite sure. This particular hand of glory looked like it had never been used before.

"Exactly how many of those do you have anyway?" she finally asked the Margrave.

"One. These are not easily obtained, you know," he said, as he lit the macabre candle's fingers. "Although any number of criminals are executed in the realm, not many executioners are willing to obtain a hand for you, even if you have bribed them with an exorbitant amount of money. Some of them are very superstitious. But even if you do obtain a hand, there are few candle makers who will be willing to make one for you as well."

"It must have been expensive."

"But necessary."

"What I don't understand," she said as she got to her point, "is why it doesn't look like it's been burned down from the last time? It looks like it hasn't been used at all."

"Ah. Well, that's the nature of the item. It is also difficult to destroy. Impossible by fire." He finally finished lighting all the fingers and motioned for her to crouch down beside him. "I will need your hand."

"Here we go again," she muttered as she bent down and slowly unwrapped her bandaged hand. Still, there was an angry gash on her palm which under the circumstances, pulsed with a dull pain. She was not looking forward to the knife.

The Margrave also unwrapped his hand. She watched the bandages come off and noticed that aside from the fresh wound that he had given himself the few days ago at the Ritter House, also had a number of healed over scars on his palm. Exactly how many times did he have to do this type of summoning? She wondered. And who else did he employ as sacrifices?

With his other hand, he took hold of the knife. With his wounded hand, he grasped her wrist in case she wanted to wriggle away. He made a quick motion. As Greta gasped at the sting of her flesh opening again, she also heard him hiss. When he released her, she noticed that not only did she have blood on her palm, but also on her wrist. The sympathetic magic that bound them caused the Margrave's wound to open at the same time that he cut her.

"Damnation," he muttered. "I was not expecting that." He stared down at his hand for a moment and then looked at her. "Hopefully this will not effect the ritual."

"I hope so too," she told him in a low voice. The dark room seemed to oppressive for loud voices. "I definitely do not wish for this to go worse than the last time."

He nodded and then as if one, they held their hands above the bowl of water to let the blood drip into it. Then, they both stood up. As Greta stemmed the flow of blood with the rest of her bandage, the Margrave said his ritualistic words, urging the spirits of the food tasters to come speak with them.

A strange wind seemed to blow outside of their circle and Greta shivered, wondering if this was supposed to

happen. The light from the lanterns flickered, but they did not go out. She could hear something faint coming from the rest of the room as if someone was faintly moaning.

“Johann Rictor and Fritz Dietrich are you present?”

The moaning became louder and then there were raspy voices that answered the Margrave. “Yes.” The two long drawn-out hisses made Greta wrap her arms around herself. Even after her experience at the Ritter House, she was still not used to the sound of dead men speaking. She suspected that she would never be used to the sound.

Then, the Margrave asked a set of predefined questions—answers of which that he had obtained from the dead men's relatives—to ascertain their identity. Then, the questioning began.

The dead Rictor and Dietrich seemed ready enough to answer the questions. Unfortunately, although they had suspicions that someone had indeed poisoned the food that had been intended for the Count-Palatine, they did not know who the poisoner was. All they had a glimpse of was a man in servant's clothing aside from the cooks and maids coming out of the kitchens from where the food had been stored. That could mean any number of suspects—from other servants to possibly other people masquerading as a servant. But when the Margrave questioned them on who had prevented them from eating the food, they replied—no one.

At those answers from the two dead men, Greta could feel her heart beat faster. There was something amiss here because her gut feeling told her that Rictor and Dietrich lied. Of what gain that the dead men could have for lying, though, she could not ascertain. The Margrave, himself, though did not act as if he was perturbed by the lies although she could feel through their bond that he was displeased with these answers. Instead, he asked another question that seemed completely unrelated to his current line of questioning.

“How long as the current Count-Palatine been in residence at Heiligenberg Castle?”

“About a year,” said Johann Rictor. “He came the September prior.”

“I agree,” added Fritz Dietrich.

“Can either of you recall seeing the Count-Palatine put food in his mouth?”

Greta frowned at the Margrave although his attention was rivited to the two bodies lying on the bed. “What sort of silly question is that?” she blurted out. “Of course people have seen the Count-Palatine eating. Didn't you see him eating at the dinner last night, before the dessert was brought out?”

“Hush,” the Margrave told her.

There was a moment of silence before the second food taster, Fritz Dietrich replied, “I do not recall. I mostly worked in the kitchens. It was only recently, after Johann's passing that I was promoted to the position of food taster. I only tasted the foods right before they were carried out by a server to the dining hall. I have had little opportunity to even meet the Count-Palatine.”

“My situation is similar to that of Fritz,” Johann added. “I also mostly in the kitchens and interacted little with the Count-Palatine. I have not been present when the Count-Palatine actually took his meals.”

“Are you the Count-Palatine's first food taster in Heiligenberg, Rictor?” the Margrave asked.

“No. There were three before me.”

“That is all then.” The Margrave uttered another ritualistic phrase designed to send the men's spirits back to the otherworld. He sighed. “I doubt we would want to contact the other three. They probably have similar stories. And besides, they are all probably already six feet under.”

“Why were you questioning about the Count-Palatine's eating habits?” Greta asked. “I mean, it's obvious he eats. The opposite is impossible. Otherwise, why employ food tasters in the first place?”

“Impossible is different from improbable,” the Margrave told her.

“If it's improbable, are you suggesting that the Count-Palatine may not even be human?”

Chapter Twelve

The Margrave merely raised an eyebrow at her as he crouched down to blow the candles out.

“He looks human.”

“Many things can look human. The Count-Palatine, I think, was a human at one time.”

“Was?” Greta looked around her, noting the strange shadows in the room. More of them seemed present than before after the hand of glory was put out. It was as if the atmosphere was pushing down on them, trying to break the circle. Something unsummoned—yet again—was making its presence known. Whether it was the same entity from before, she could not be sure. “What do you think he is now?”

“I don't know. But I don't think he is of harm to anyone. At the moment.”

“What made you think that he didn't eat? Didn't everyone see him eat the main course last night?”

“No,” he replied. “You sat at the other end of the table so you were probably at the wrong vantage point to notice. But he had a slight of hand trick—similar to that trick you had with the coin that you performed for the Ritters' daughter. Although everyone else will claim that they saw him eat, he, in actuality, fed his dinner to the dog sitting underneath the table.

“He has a dog?” she asked, thinking of the black cat that occasionally wandered into her room.

“It looked like a dog. You can't believe everything you see.” He finally stood up and looked around the room before settling on a darkened corner where Greta was staring at. “I see it has come again.”

“Again?” she replied in a whisper. She was not looking forward to being rendered unconscious again.

“This time, of course, this circle is still intact,” the Margrave said, not looking back at her. “And I also gave the doctor specific instructions not to open the door to this room no matter what he heard. We don't want a repeat of the last time if we can help it.”

“That's reassuring, I think.”

At their conversation, the black thing in the corner moved ever so slightly toward the circle. It made no sound. But it lashed out a thin black tendril suddenly, as quick as lightning, making Greta jump. The shadow arm hit the invisible barrier that the salt created making brilliant sparks that briefly lit the room in an eerie light. The Margrave reached around her waist to anchor her to the spot beside him, preventing her from inadvertently stumbling out of the circle.

“What is that? Is it the same thing from last time?”

“I'm not sure.”

“You're not sure about a lot of things.”

He gave her a grim smile. “At least I admit that I don't know. It would be pointless to lie to you, wouldn't it?”

“Those men lied. For some reason, I could sense it. That's really strange because usually I cannot tell if someone has lied unless they're a very poor one.”

“It's the side affect of the spell that I had used to summon them,” the Margrave said lowly as the black shadow circled them, trying to find an opening in their defense. “I could have made them tell the truth, but it is risky trying to implement another spell—even if it is just a simple truth finding spell—on top of a summoning. Only the most powerful could do multiple spells like them with any reliability. I've attempted it once and have the scars to show for it.”

“Scars?”

He gave a small, hollow laugh. Through the bond, she could sense that he was remembering something unpleasant. “They are unpleasant ones,” he said simply.

The shadow tested itself again as it lashed out at the barrier. This time, Greta was somewhat prepared with the sudden sparks that resulted. The barrier, it seemed, still held. “How strong is the circle?” she asked.

“Strong enough for that thing, I think,” he said. “But we'll have to do something soon. We can't be trapped in here forever. I'm trying to think of a defensive spell. If I try the same one I tried last time, it might not work, especially if this is the same entity.”

“And you mentioned that it's risky to do another spell on top of the summoning.”

“No, this is different. I've already finished the summoning, if you can recall. I am free to work another now. Although what sort of effect it might have on you, I'm not sure. You're not trained for this kind of thing. You have some sort of ability—I can sense that much about you—and I suppose that's a good thing because otherwise, you would have had no defense from the first summoning and it would have been much worse for you. However, it would have been much easier if you were a trained sorcerer of some type.”

“I suppose you can't complain about it now, can you?”

After that second try at the barrier, the shadow arm rested on the floor of the room, slightly twitching as if it had been injured. But Greta wondered if it wasn't just trying to fool them by merely pretending that it was injured.

The Margrave stepped slightly forward, his new position slightly shielding her from the sight of the dark shadow prowling through the rest of the room. He made a motion with his hands, muttering some strange words that Greta could barely make out. Although she did not have any idea of what those words meant, she could sense that he was somehow manipulating the atmosphere outside of the shield as if it was some puppet that he was stirring with the movements of his fingers. The shadow, aside from the tendril on the floor jerked at the movement of the air in the rest of the room, as if it were a piece of paper, threatening to blow away with the wind.

Greta noticed that the shadow's tendril on the floor was now curled up in the shape of a hook, as if it was trying to grasp at the floor, preventing itself from being blown away. She turned her head and saw that the shrouds on the dead men were also flickering as if a wind was blowing in the room. The bells hanging on the bed were ringing slowly—the eerie chimes making her step forward until she almost bumped into the Margrave's back. Aside from the herbal smell of the incense being burned near the bed, she could also smell the faint scent of him, slightly reassuring as she tried to look over his shoulder as he tried to banish the shadow.

A groan behind her made her look back. Now the shrouds on the dead men seemed to be moving on their own. In fact, one of the bodies—the one nearest to their side—suddenly sat up. The dead man's eyes were still closed, but his mouth was open, slack jawed. Something dark hung past his lips and slithered inside. Once it disappeared into his throat, the dead

man's mouth snapped shut and his eyes opened—blackness staring straight at her.

She felt the Margrave relax. “Well, I've gotten rid of that...”

“No, you haven't.” She tugged at his sleeve to make him turn around.

The animated dead man was still staring at them. But now it was making incoherent noises.

The Margrave said an expletive and tried another spell. As a result, the animated dead man seemed to grin and get out of bed. Because the shroud was wrapped around his body, he moved by hopping. He looked like a gigantic white maggot wriggling on the floor when he tripped over an uneven part of the floor and hit his head against the bed post, dislodging some of the bells which clattered as they hit the stones.

Then the dead man suddenly rolled and the barrier seemed to break in a massive shower of sparks and salt. The Margrave shouted and Greta felt a scream boiling in her throat as he tried to push her aside. Greta fell to her knees next to the black box and the Margrave came down with her with a grunt. She could see the faintly gleaming hilt of the knife that was mere inches away from the animated dead man. The dark shadow had learned to make the dead man's mouth move in a hideous fashion—teeth clacking like pebbles upon a glass window. She tried to push the Margrave away the same time that he was trying to get up and accidentally, her wounded hand pulled on his, smearing more blood.

The sudden jolt from the mixture of blood made her snatch her hand away and instinctively reach for the knife.

“Goddamn it, Greta...”

The hilt of the knife felt slick in her hands as the mixture of her and the Margrave's blood smeared against. The wriggling dead man was coming closer, moving his mouth as if he wanted to eat them. Bits of the shroud surrounding the man's body was slightly burnt from the contact with the salt circle shield. The bit of skin that had been exposed was slightly blistered. At the corner of her eyes, she could see that the salt was scattered about the floor, still faintly in the pattern of a circle, but obviously broken.

She thought about complaining that the Margrave's wards were poor ones if this had happened to them twice in a row now.

“Give me the knife.”

“You're a poor excuse of a necromancer,” she told him instead. She threw the knife.

The Margrave cursed again.

By chance, the knife landed close to the moving corpse and its sudden movements caused the blade to sink deep into the shroud. The dead man screamed as she felt the blood on the blade's hilt drawing something from both her and the Margrave.

Involuntarily, she clutched at the Margrave as she watched the dead man scream again, the black thing that had controlled him evaporating out of his mouth like so much smoke. For a moment, she stayed in her kneeling position, staring at the now still body of the dead food taster. She could feel in the air that the room was now free of all malevolent presences. The lights from the lanterns were still burning. The incense still filled her nose. But she felt reluctant to move.

It was the Margrave himself who slowly stood up, dragging her up with him. Reluctantly, she looked down to see that she was clutching his hand, her wounded one to his. Still, she did not release him. She noticed that he too was still looking at the still dead man, seemingly unaware that her hand was in his.

“You did well, even if it was a rather inelegant and messy way of doing things.”

“I think I may have ruined this for you.” Finally, she unclenched her fingers and looked at her bloody palm. If the doctor was still outside, he would have to see to it. Through the fresh wound, she could still feel him connected to her—maybe she was imagining things, but the bond felt stronger because she could keenly feel his sense of bewilderment and annoyance.

“It's not exactly ruined, but this will making it even more harder when the time comes to cut this.” He looked at his palm. “I need to find a new way to do this. I can't rely on something that will making things more complicated every time I try it.”

Greta reluctantly moved away from him when he made no indication to clean up. She bent towards the dead man and quickly pulled out the knife. Remarkably, it came out clean. Not know if she should clean it again or not, she placed it back into the black box with everything else and then put the bowl of water with their blood on a nearby table.

“Let the other servants clean it up,” the Margrave said. He took her arm with his good hand and steered her toward the door. She noticed that he had picked up the black box. “You've done quite a bit. You don't need to do this.”

“It seems kind of rude to leave this room this way,” she said.

He shook his head. “If it is anyone's fault, it is mine. As you've said, I am a poor excuse of necromancer.”

“Maybe you need more practice.”

The Margrave sighed as he opened the door. “I think you mean the opposite. I need less practice.”

The doctor stood outside the door frowning. “There was quite a commotion in there. What had happened?” He stepped by them to look into the room. Seeing the spilled salt and the corpse on the floor, he exclaimed, “My God! What did you do?”

Chapter Thirteen

Outside, the air was bitterly cold. And Greta was grateful for the cloak, discretely lined with fur, that had been in one of the packages that the Margrave had initially delivered to her room. Her own cloak was warm, but she rarely wore it more than the time that it took her to go from the market back to her home. After a while, the warmth would fade and she would have been left shivering outside, wishing for a warm hearth and a hot bath.

“Here are all the rose bushes,” said Mr. Eichel, the Count-Palatine's secretary as he led the Lady Beswick and Greta down a frost covered garden path on the east side of the castle. “In the summer time, they are all a variety of colors. The gardener has developed varieties that produce blooms from red all the way to white and yellow as well as everything in between.” The Count-Palatine's secretary was wearing a puffy woolen scarf over his black coat and was hobbling along with his cane. With his fragility, Greta half expected the old man to slip on the slick cobblestones and break his neck, but it didn't appear that he had any problem navigating the garden paths. In fact, he seemed to go quite fast, forcing Lady Beswick and herself to walk much more quickly to catch up with him as he pointed out one thing or another.

Lady Beswick sniffed at Mr. Eichel's comment and tugged her ermine-line pelisse closer to her body. “That's ridiculous. They all look dead now. And with this unnatural weather, I suspect the prolonged cold has already killed all your plants. I'm quite sure your gardener is displeased with this turn of events.”

“Not so!” Eichel exclaimed. “He is as busy as ever.”

“Busy doing what?” retorted Lady Beswick. “Scraping the frost off all these dead branches? Digging up non-existent turnips?”

Eichel looked offended at the older woman's sarcasm. “Of course the gardener will not be bothering with these outside plants. It is too cold for him to do anything useful for them here. Currently, he works at the greenhouse that had been built on the north side of the castle. It's hidden a bit a not many people go there so most visitors have no knowledge of it unless they're touring the gardens surrounding this place.”

“I'm surprised that they would have a greenhouse in this place,” said Lady Beswick. “Especially since it would possibly be much easier to import things from outside of the city.”

“It may be easier, but it's also more expensive.”

“And just when is the Count-Palatine worrying about money?” The older woman huffed as she tried to quicken her steps to catch up with Eichel who had taken it in his mind to walk even faster. “I thought he was quite wealthy.”

“I don't know about that, my lady,” Greta said. “If he was so wealthy, wouldn't he be repairing the north tower?”

“You do have a point there, Miss Silber.” Lady Beswick slowed her steps to look at the path that they had just passed. The north tower loomed over them, ruined. The top portion of the tower was still slightly blackened underneath the snow frosting the crumbling top—as if the tower had been a giant pastry and something from above had taken an enormous bite out of it. “That thing is an eyesore, if you ask me. It would be less expensive to tear the entire thing down, I'd imagine. Although I've never really concerned myself with the cost of architecture. Have you, Miss Silber?”

She shrugged. “I never really considered the matter since this kind of thing never concerned me, my lady.”

“I don't know about that. Knowledge about repairing castles might come more useful than you think.”

The greenhouse was located in the far northern end of the lands surrounding the castle. They had taken a path past the ruined north tower and down an avenue of dead trees which led to a large fountain of some Roman water god carved in white marble. Just to its west was another path through a thick grove of trees which eventually widened out into a cobblestoned clearing hosting a circular glass structure which bathed in the weakened sunlight. Since the structure was clear, Greta could make out potted plants within—virtually a verdant jungle that was a striking contrast to the whiteness outside.

Eichel hobbled toward the greenhouse and yanked open its door. With his free hand, he waved towards them in a flourish, indicating that they should precede him. Lady Beswick breezed by to look disdainfully at the greenery around her. Greta followed slightly more slowly and Eichel came last, letting the door close on its own. The greenhouse was almost sweltering in comparison to the atmosphere outside. But although Greta wanted to take off her coat, she knew that the tour was most likely going to be brief. It was better to be hotter here and cool down more slowly when she went outside than to start off already cold.

“What does the gardener grow here? Oranges? Bananas?” demanded the older woman.

Greta peered at the closest potted plants. They were definitely not orange trees. No, they looked more like tomato plants. And the smaller pots next to them looked like a selection of herbs—mint, rosemary, thyme. She guessed that they were being grown for food—after all, it would be cheaper to have the gardener harvest these rather than to buy the imported stuff that the rest of the town was forced to obtain due to the strange weather.

“I believe it's mostly potatoes,” Eichel replied.

“Potatoes!”

A slight rustling further down in the greenhouse made Greta look up. There was a man in dirty overalls working at the end of one table, busy pruning a plant and getting another one ready to be transferred to another pot. He was dark haired, the longish locks tied back in a queue. Bright blue eyes peered back at them from beneath a straw hat. Greta had the disturbing feeling that he looked familiar or that he looked like someone that she had encountered earlier. But the gardener's gaze held no recognition when he spotted Lady Beswick or herself.

"That is somewhat incorrect," the gardener replied. Greta frowned. The gardener did not sound like a gardener. He sounded much more educated—if not part of the upper classes then at least a student of some sort. However, his more educated accent was also marred by something else, a foreign tone as if he had grown up somewhere else not speaking the language. "There are potatoes here, but there are other vegetables as well. Carrots, for one. Tomatoes, cabbages, leeks, that sort of thing."

"And who," said Lady Beswick in a haughty tone, "are you?"

"Everyone calls me Ferdinand," the man said, stepping back for a small bow as he briefly took his straw hat off. "I'm the gardener, ma'am. I've been in charge of this place since the current Count-Palatine has been in residence."

"That's not very long is it?" said Lady Beswick. "When did the Count-Palatine arrive in Heiligenberg and how long does it take to grow a tomato?"

"It's quite possible to grow plants this large in a few months," Greta briefly broke in.

Lady Beswick glared at her from down her nose. "And are you an expert gardener?"

At her tone, Greta found herself straightening her spine. "No, but I know some people who are. And I've read about plants—especially since I have sold some of them in my shop."

"Shop?" inquired Eichel. "I thought you were Lady Beswick's companion."

She shrugged. "I am, for now." But she did not elaborate when both the gardener and the Count-Palatine's secretary looked in askance.

When Greta did not say anything else about her past job history, the gardener put the straw hat back on his head and turned his attention back to the plants. "There's plenty to do back here. It takes quite a bit of work to feed a castle full of people."

"You're only saying that because the Count-Palatine refused your third request now for an assistant," scoffed Eichel.

"That's partly true," the gardener replied, faintly smiling as if he were on some kind of private joke. "But I think he's only making it harder for me because he wants me to learn a lesson. What is the saying? That a father always says the punishment is harder on him than the child when he is doling out those punishments? That is what the Count-Palatine gives as an excuse. That it is hard enough on him that he must pay me let alone another gardener."

"Times are lean, especially with this sort of weather," Eichel said.

"I can see that," said Lady Beswick as she leaned closer to a potted plant with flowers—rumpled lavender petals surrounding bright yellow stamens. "These are rather pretty. What are these? Ornamental plants? Shouldn't the space they are taking up be used for something far more practical—like some food plants?"

"Those are actually potato plants, ma'am. I'm sure you're familiar with the brown tubers that we all eat," said the gardener as he finally transferred a plant to another pot, "but they do have the green tops as well. Potato plants produce a variety of flowers—white, pink, purple, red, and even sometimes blue."

Greta wandered down one of the aisles as Lady Beswick discussed potato plants with the gardener and the Count-Palatine's secretary. At one end, she noticed several troughs filled with dirt and several weedy-looking plants growing out of them. However, from the shapes of their leaves, Greta guessed that one trough contained radishes while the other had turnips. And wedged in between both of the troughs was a small inconspicuous looking clay pot the color of a red earthenware jug. The plant growing from the pot made Greta momentarily pause. She looked up to see that the other three people in the greenhouse was not paying her any attention.

The plant was a small one—apparently recently nurtured. The stem was woody and straight and the leaves a dark green. There were no flowers on the plant, but from the distinctive shape of the leaves, Greta could immediately tell what it was. She did not even try to touch it.

The small hidden plant was wolfsbane, also known as aconite and monkshood. She had seen many of these plants in the mountain side during the spring time, but she had never seen one deliberately cultivated. In her apothecary, she had stocked a this for medicinal purposes, but she had never doled out very much as a large dose was enough to kill a person. Upon closer examination, she noticed that the plant was slightly damaged. Something or someone had snapped a twig off.

Was the small pot of wolfsbane in the greenhouse for medicinal uses or something far more sinister? Greta glanced around to find other small pots scattered around the place in between larger pots filled with plants for food. But those pots contained various other herbs that were used for cooking. She spotted something unfamiliar, but before she could walk toward that direction, a strange shivering sensation emanated from the wound on her left palm. It wasn't pain, but it wasn't entirely pleasant either. The sensation left her feeling unsettled and somewhat urgent. She had to get back to the castle.

"Both of you know nothing about gardening," she heard Ferdinand say as she neared the trio. The gardener had

adjusted his straw hat so that it was tilted slightly back. He was glaring at the two older people. “Everyone knows that white potatoes are easier to grow. And probably more nutritious too. I like them mashed myself.”

“Pah,” declared Lady Beswick. “White potatoes are too bland. You should grow the purple ones. They taste much more refined than those white ones. Why, if they're served with rabbit...”

The Count-Palatine's secretary snorted at the older woman's culinary reminiscing. “Everyone knows that the yellow ones are best. They taste much better mashed. Or if you like, candied especially during the holidays.”

“They're much too sweet,” Lady Beswick replied. She then turned her head to look at Greta. “What is your preference, Miss Silber? White, yellow, or purple?”

She halted to stare at the trio. “Potatoes, you mean?”

The three nodded.

“Well, I like the orange ones...”

“Good God, your taste in potatoes is as bad as my nephew's!” Lady Beswick exclaimed.

Eichel moaned. “What, you don't like yellow ones either?”

“Those aren't potatoes,” proclaimed the gardener. “They're sweet potatoes. And those heathens in the Americas call them yams. Yams!”

Greta slowly backed away. “Uh, fine. You wanted my opinion, my lady, and that is it. Now if you'll excuse me, I must really get back to the castle...”

Lady Beswick waved her hand dismissively. “I ask you a question and you give me a useless answer. Why back in England, if you were given a potato of any color, you ate it and were grateful. The purple ones, however, were particularly prized.”

“Prized by you, you mean, ma'am,” said the gardener. “I heard that even over there, the majority of potatoes grown were white ones.”

Greta walked back out of the greenhouse. Even just outside, she could still hear their voices. She shook her head and quickly made her way back down the cobblestone path back to the castle. The strange sensation was now reaching through her arm to her head. The urgency propelled her even quicker down the path until she nearly broke into a run, regardless of the ice on the ground. She told herself that she didn't really care about what happened to the Margrave, per se, only that what was happening to him physically would also hurt her through the bond. And she had, she thought, a strong sense of self-preservation that could not be denied.

Chapter Fourteen

The cold iron handle turned easily under her hand as she pushed in the back door next to the north tower. Inside, the air was only marginally warmer. She recognized the end of the hallway where the Count-Palatine's secretary, Mr. Eichel, had taken Lady Beswick and herself out of the castle for the tour of the gardens. The hallway itself was bare stone except for a pair of faded tapestries hung on the wall between two windows looking out into the dead gardens. Once, they had been a brilliant red depicting a vibrant forest filled with game animals. Now, one could hardly make out one colored thread from another—it was almost as gray as the landscape outside.

Greta quickly walked down the hallway to where it intersected a staircase leading up to the second floor. As she moved closer, she could feel the ache in her hand intensifying. He was nervous, she realized. He wasn't in danger, at the moment, but he was in a situation that he felt uncomfortable in. Whether or not he needed her help—or even if she could help—was something that she did not know. If she were more level-headed, perhaps she would have proceeded more cautiously. Or at least reasoned that he was probably one who could handle most situations better than she could anyway.

The stair briefly paused at a landing before continuing upwards towards the third floor. She stepped on the landing and briefly surveyed her surroundings. The hallway on the second floor continued north toward what would have been the second floor of the north tower, but the doorway at the end leading to the tower was barred with a heavy iron plank. To the south, the hallway continued on until it branched to the east and west wings. Greta headed in this direction until she reached a few paces before the intersection. She turned on her heel to face a pair of double doors, intricately decorated with gilt flowers. On the wall next to the door was a portrait of one of the Welf ancestors—particularly the ancestor who bore an uncanny resemblance to the current Count-Palatine. In the portrait, the man gave an enigmatic smile to his viewers.

Before opening the door, Greta pressed her ear against a panel in an attempt to hear what was going on inside before barging in on a situation that she was ignorant of. She heard a murmuring of voices, but it sounded like people in conversation. No one was yelling out. But despite the seeming innocuousness of it, the ache in her hand told her otherwise.

She put her hand on the handle of the door and turned it. The air inside was warmer since there was a hearth on the other side of the room blazing ferociously. In fact, it was more than just a little bit warmer. It was almost like an inferno. No wonder that the Margrave was feeling a little uncomfortable. Greta unbuttoned her cloak as she looked at the scene in

front of her.

The Margrave was standing at the back of a plush high-backed chair near one side of the room, somewhat close to the fireplace—with only a small table with a coffee pot separating the two. The Margrave himself was standing straight with a very bland expression on his face as if he could not care less about what was going on. His eyes were slightly blank so that an outside observer would be unable to discern his feelings about the matter. But Greta knew what was going on behind the masked facade. The aching wound on her hand told her that.

There were two other people in the room. And they were not located where one would expect them to be located. The Count-Palatine's friend—the guest from the Balkan peninsula—was lounging on an embroidered sofa smoking a pungent smelling cigar. From the scent of the cigar, Greta believed that it was a certain strain of tobacco that was grown in the South Seas. Barbados, probably. Although Greta did not smoke, her father did and he was a connoisseur of the different types of cigars that were imported to Heiligenberg. As a result, she too absorbed information about the different types of tobacco used in cigars.

But the Count-Palatine's friend was not the person who drew Greta's attention the most. What grabbed her attention was Lord Welf, the Count-Palatine himself. He was standing next to the Margrave in a provocative pose, his mouth slightly open as if to whisper something in his ear. Why he would whisper in a room with only him, the Margrave, and his friend, puzzled Greta.

“Excuse me,” Greta began.

At the sound of her voice, it seemed as if some sort of spell was broken. The Count-Palatine's friend slowly turned his head and looked at her. He puffed a smoke ring and gave her a confused look. The Margrave also turned to look at her, but the expression on his face changed—until he was frowning, looking displeased with her appearance. Then the Count-Palatine looked at her. Really looked at her. It was not the sort of cursory glance that he had given her when their party had arrived at Heiligenberg Castle and that the guests had met him at dinner. No, his attention was wholly on her now and she found that this was not pleasant. It wasn't the sort of angry look that the Margrave sometimes gave her. It was a focused look, as if the Count-Palatine wanted to burrow into her head from his gaze alone.

“Who are you?” the Count-Palatine asked. His voice sounded friendly enough, but there was a thread of hypnotic steel through it as if it were trying to reach into her and attach itself like puppet strings.

Greta briefly shook her head, mentally trying to force it out. In a moment, the strange hypnotic pressure stopped. “Your Grace,” she began again. “Please excuse me. I am Greta Silber, Lady Beswick's companion. I have been in search of Lord Baden since her ladyship wishes to speak with him.”

“When does my aunt wish to speak with me?” inquired the Margrave. He was still frowning, but the lines on his forehead eased somewhat. “I thought she had given me a significant litany of complaints earlier this afternoon before her tour with Mr. Eichel. Is there something that was not to her liking?”

“She wishes to speak with you right away,” Greta lied, “although as to what she wants to speak with you for, it is not in my knowledge to say.”

“Well, Conrad, wouldn't you say that Matthias should go and speak with his aunt?” said the Count-Palatine's friend on the couch as he sucked on his cigar and blew another smoke ring. “You know how the older generation is. They're always wanting to direct the younger with whatever they feel is right. I'm sure you'll understand.” He then nodded to Greta. “Forgive me, Miss Silber for not introducing myself to you earlier. I am Apollo Valebona from Albania. I went to school with old Conrad here—before he inherited the title of Count-Palatine.”

“Mr. Valebona, a pleasure to meet you,” she said briefly before turning back to the Count-Palatine and the Margrave. She noticed that the Margrave had slightly taken a step back, away from the Count-Palatine. Lord Welf was still staring at her, but this time, he gave her a close lipped smile. He looked very urbane, but she felt something in the atmosphere surrounding him that gave her the impression that he was definitely not pleased with the interruption. And that he was also not pleased that she was apparently making friends with Valebona and that his friend was somehow siding with her.

“Well, Apollo, you're right of course,” the Count-Palatine said finally. “We musted keep Lord Baden from his aunt. She could be ailing for all we know and might wish to give her final words to her nephew.”

The Margrave did not appear to have noticed the sarcasm in the Count-Palatine's words. Instead, he moved noticeably this time, towards Greta. “You must forgive my sudden departure then,” he said to the Count-Palatine even though he was not looking at his host. “Family does call. As I'm sure you're aware.”

“Ah, family.” With that mention of that subject, the Count-Palatine turned his head to look into the flames of the hearth. “Yes, I'm aware of familial obligations. As much as it pains me.”

“You're being over-dramatic,” said Valebona. The man stood up and walked to the Count-Palatine's side. The higher ranked man almost imperceptibly jerked as Valebona neared and seemed to shrink into himself when the other man blew another smoke ring. “Perhaps it's time for your afternoon tea.”

“Yes, tea. I've almost forgotten about that.”

The Margrave was now next to her and he briefly jerked his head, indicating that she should precede him to the door. As the Count-Palatine and Valebona continued to converse in lowered voices, she hurried out the door. The

Margrave was close behind. When he stepped through the threshold, he pulled the door closed behind him.

"I'm sorry," Greta said as they were now in the relative privacy of the empty corridor outside the room. "I had to interrupt. I sensed that something was wrong. Maybe I was too paranoid and that nothing was happening, but..."

"No, don't be sorry." He raised a finger to press it to her lips to keep her from rambling. The skin against her lips felt hot and electric and she gasped. He pulled his finger away, but her grasped her elbow instead and steered her down the corridor towards the stairs. A brief glimpse of his face told her that he was as surprised as she was by the impromptu contact. "You're right, there was something wrong."

"But what was it?" she asked. "I went in there and it just appeared to be you and the others having a conversation. Well, the Count-Palatine was acting a little odd. I presume he was trying to tell you a secret?"

"He was not trying to tell me a secret." They were now standing at the foot of the stairs. They had stopped and the Margrave had let go of her elbow. They were looking at each other and Greta could tell that he was very troubled. "I wasn't prepared at all. The Count-Palatine had given me an invitation. It was more a summons, really. He said that he had some important things to talk to me about concerning the poisonings of his food tasters. The meeting itself started all right when he inquired about what we had found so far. But then things became strange."

At his continued disturbed expression, she prompted, "How did it become strange?"

"I'm not sure. I can't exactly remember. I was sitting down on one of the couches and then..."

"And then what?"

"I was supposed to be talking to the Count-Palatine and his friend was sitting on that other couch." The Margrave shook his head as if trying to clear cobwebs from his mind. "And then I found myself standing up and the Count-Palatine was beside me. I knew he wanted something from me, but I didn't know what. I was attempting to think about my situation, but something in my head was telling me not to worry, that everything was going to be all right."

"Something in your head? Do you mean someone was in fact in your head?" Greta began to feel a little disturbed as well. "It wasn't me, was it? I was with Lady Beswick and Mr. Eichel at the greenhouse. I wasn't aware that I was projecting any thoughts."

"No, it wasn't you," he said. He looked down the hallway and Greta could tell that his gaze went towards the closed doors where the Count-Palatine and Valebona were still ensconced. "It was something else. I couldn't really tell who or what it was. In fact, at first, I thought it was me—that I was telling myself not to worry. But I know myself. I would never tell myself that. Especially in a situation where I had already assumed it was going to be a rather routine meeting. I think the thought came from him. That he was trying to control me. What for, I can't be sure."

"Mind control?" Greta shivered. "Because of this," she said, waving her hand with the knife wound, "do you think that he would be able to control me as well if he got to you?"

"Or vice versa," the Margrave said grimly. "I was lucky that you got there when you did. I'm not sure I would want to test my skills against him myself. I don't really want to find out who is mentally stronger in that kind of scenario. However, with your presence, I think Lord Welf suspects something. What he suspects—it could be anything. But I'm sure that your sudden arrival was not noted as a coincidence."

"That's not something I wanted to hear." The Margrave had finally turned to walk up the stairs. She was forced to follow him up to the third floor.

"Of course not. What this means is that you should try not to find yourself in a situation where you will find yourself alone with the Count-Palatine."

"What about your aunt? I unwittingly mentioned Lady Beswick as the instigator of your leaving."

"My aunt really doesn't want to see me right away, does she?"

"Well, who's to know if she wants to see you right at this moment or not. The last I saw her, she was in the greenhouse with Mr. Eichel and the gardener discussing potato plants. But I do not like the thought that I put her in the line of fire, too."

"If it consoles you, I doubt the Count-Palatine really thinks my aunt has anything to do with it. After all, he already has a servant who is her maid—so she is under observation almost all of the time. He would be pretty confident that the Lady Beswick is not any threat to him. You, however, are a lady's companion. He never paid any attention to you. Until now."

"Yes, perhaps so." Greta mulled the facts over, but then concluded, "but I am also beneath his notice, I think. I am merely a lady's companion. Why would I be of any threat to him?"

"Who knows what he thinks," the Margrave replied. "Although you were lucky that his friend Valebona was there to redirect his attention, it might not happen the next time that you meet him. Don't discount those rumors about the fact that he may be mad."

"Do you think he's mad?" she asked.

They had now stopped at the landing on the third floor and the Margrave had walked over to a window to look out over the wintered countryside. She stood a step away from him to look out the window as well. Nothing but dead branches and the occasional roof peaking out from the woods.

"Mad is a relative term," he said slowly. He finally turned to look at her. "I would not say that he is mad. Mad in

the usual sense of the word at any rate. He is a powerful man—not only through his rank but also through the abilities that he has yet to disclose to anyone. But aside from those things—which normally in themselves wouldn't be cause for much alarm—there is something very wrong about him. And today, we simply got another piece of evidence that there is something wrong with him.”

Chapter Fifteen

June 11, 1815

Greta pulled her cloak tighter around her body as if she was about to choke herself. The carriage that the Count-Palatine had insisted that Lady Beswick and the Margrave take to the cathedral was as cold as ice. And it bumped uncomfortably as the driver made the horses go at a fast pace. Lady Beswick was sitting beside her in her fur-lined pelisse, grumbling under her breath about losing her breakfast while the Margrave sat across from them in his black coat, his eyes almost closed as if he had fallen asleep.

She had queried about the presence of Mr. Wechsler, but the Margrave had simply said that his man of affairs was still attending to a previous matter that was taking some time. Wechsler might look like an uncomfortably thin man with a dour attitude, but Greta found that the thought of someone else who was employed by the Margrave not being at Heiligenberg castle did not set her mind at ease. Instead, she found herself surrounded by guests and servants of whom she did not know the motives of.

Mr. Beethoven and his nephew Karl had wanted to go with them to church, but had later declined when they found out that they were going in the early morning hours. Mr. Beethoven had been summoned by the Count-Palatine to entertain him with his musicians on the evening before which resulted in the composer and his nephew going to bed very late in the evening. Instead, Mr. Beethoven and Karl were to head down to the cathedral in Heiligenberg proper in the afternoon to one of the smaller services.

With one hand, Greta reached out to pull the curtain of the carriage over slightly to look out the window. The carriage itself was careening down the steep cobblestone roads from the castle towards the town. They passed a myriad of houses, all packed together tightly as if they too were huddling together for warmth in the unnatural winter. All of the house windows that they passed were closed, the curtains drawn tight.

They soon made it to the cathedral, the Church of the Holy Spirit, which Greta had on occasion attended. It was more in habit, really, out of the memory of her mother who was a habitual churchgoer. Her father had rarely gone—his obligation had only been on holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Other than that, he avoided the church altogether. Greta's belief was a rather casual one—she thought of herself as someone who dealt with the concreteness of the present. As for the afterlife, well, she would leave that once she got there.

Lady Beswick, however, seemed to be a very devout and showy believer as she headed towards the front pews of the church. Greta gave a small resigned sigh and sat beside her—as was required of her as a lady's companion. The Margrave sat on the other side of his aunt with a stony expression. Was he indifferent about going to the Sunday service or did he dislike it? Her hand did not give her any sort of twinge to indicate that the Margrave was feeling. So either he was indeed indifferent to the pomp and circumstance of this religious habit of his relative's or he had somehow learned to shield his part of the bond with her between the previous day and this morning.

As the service went on, Greta felt her mind wander as she glanced about the church. She had seen many of the things at the altar before. She had seen the stained glass windows numerous times and had memorized their scenes. But there was something this time that made her briefly pause and to look behind her when the priests bowed their heads to say a prayer.

The pew that the three of them were sitting on was to the right of the altar and before a short wall that partitioned the front section from the next session. There were few other people sitting in the church—which did not surprise her since it was an early morning session and the weather was unnaturally cold. But on the short wall, which she had always passed by but never looked up, she saw paintings near the top of several heraldic signs. None of which she recognized. Then to the right of the wall which intersected with the main right wall of the cathedral, there was a small wooden confession box,

ornately carved with the likeness of vines and flowers. But that was not what drew her attention.

Beside the confession box was a stair that led downward to darkness. It was roped off, but beside it was a small rack of candles, burning like tiny pinpricks. There was a collection box next to the candles and then a sign. The Crypt, it said.

Quickly, she looked back ahead of her as the priests closed out their prayer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Margrave almost imperceptibly look at her.

After the service, Lady Beswick decided to have a few words with the priests, probably to complain about how they were conducting the service. Greta stood back watching as the conversation became a whole scale argument. As the Lady Beswick began gesturing wildly and one of the priests looking very red in the face, Greta started backing away toward what she had noticed earlier. The Margrave was moving purposefully toward her.

“Is she always like this?” Greta asked when the Margrave was finally a few paces from her.

“She always has very definite ideas about how things are done,” he replied. He glanced at the shelves of white flickering candles and the sign leading towards the crypt. He reached into a pocket in his coat and took out a few coins to put in the collection box. The coins rattled when they hit the bottom of the box. “Let's go and see, shall we?”

“What, you think I'm interested in seeing a bunch of dead people?” she said in a low voice. “I'm perfectly fine waiting up here for your aunt to finish.”

“I'm not sure you'll want to do that. She can take a while and it would be quite boring standing around here. Meanwhile, you could come with me and explore the bowels of this place.”

She frowned.

He leaned closer so that his mouth was almost touching her ear. “I know you want to. I dare you.”

She felt her cheeks burning up with a blush. She remembered when she was younger, when she had on occasion played with the neighborhood children. Sometimes they would dare her to do things, like going into a neighbor's garden to pick the apples off their apple trees or to sneak by the grocer's stall to pull the cat's tail. And she could never resist a dare, especially if the other children had taunted her with their sing-song voices. She was mostly a loner by nature, and theoretically should not have cared what anyone else thought of her. But in those situations, she did.

This situation was no different. She could not resist the Margrave's dare. It was as if he was able to read her thoughts even though she knew that he could only sense her feelings through the bond.

“Fine,” she said. “I'll go down there. And I'll show you that there isn't anything interesting down there.”

The Margrave gave her a taunting smile that showed teeth and then descended the stairwell. With no other choice—except to look like a coward for going back on her word—she followed him down into the darkness. Her steps were cautious as she went down and slowly her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

The stairwell down into the crypt was not completely dark. There were a few lanterns placed strategically along the walls to provide a little light. The atmosphere reminded her of the rituals that the Margrave had done on the dead food tasters back in Heiligenberg Castle and the Ritters' dead relative back in Ritter House. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps the Margrave had enough skill to call back from the dead those who had passed many, many years ago. Centuries ago.

The Margrave strode confidently forward through the crypt. The place itself looked like a large corridor held up by numerous stone columns sculpted in a Romanesque style. The place was mostly empty except for a small altar at one end that contained a cross and a few brass objects—a bowl, a cup, an empty candlestick holder. The air inside the crypt was still and cold which made Greta hug her arms to herself. Otherwise, she did not see any sign of any coffins holding the dead.

“This isn't a crypt, is it?” she asked as she quickened her pace to keep up with the Margrave who was moving towards one end of the room. “I don't see anything that would indicate that it is so. It just looks like...”

“Another worshiping room,” he finished for her. He was not looking at her. Instead, his attention was riveted towards the other side of the room. “No, this isn't the main part of the crypt. That part is slightly hidden from any usual visitor.”

“Then why did they advertise that there was a crypt down here if they don't want anyone visiting this place?”

He gave her a grim smile. “They advertise it under the assumption that no one of sane mind would want to go down here, except, perhaps, the relatives of the dead.”

The Margrave turned around a pillar and appeared to have disappeared.

Greta hurried forward and discovered that the Margrave had found a small doorway leading down a narrow flight of steps. This narrow corridor was also lit with lanterns, but the light flickered violently as if the candles in the lanterns were guttering in a strong wind. But she felt no wind. Carefully, she made her way down, conscious of the stifling aura of the narrowing walls. The air, as she went lower, began to smell stale. The shadows that the lanterns made danced like black snakes writhing against the walls and floor.

At the bottom, the Margrave stopped to look around. Greta stopped behind him to glance over his shoulder.

The crypt was another wide open space except for one portion that was fenced in by carved stone. In this area, there were the obvious stone coffins, each carved in strict rectangular shapes and decorated by carvings of crosses. Along part of the wall were rectangular holes carved onto the sides. Some of the holes were filled with more coffins, but the ones

nearest to them were still empty.

"This looks quite ordinary. I don't think there's anything of interest here except for all these stone coffins," Greta said in a quiet voice. In the cavernous room, one might expect one's voice to echo, but here, she felt as if she were speaking through layers of cotton. "I don't even know why you want to go down here when all there is are dead people."

He turned back to look at her, his gaze enigmatic. "It certainly appears that way, doesn't it? I had heard that there was someone down here from a comment that one of the priests made earlier. You weren't there at that conversation, I'm afraid."

"What conversation?"

"It was before the service. I bumped into one of them while I was looking around. You were with my aunt at the time."

"Ah, yes." She followed him as he walked into the room towards the guarded enclosures. He briefly read the plaque nailed on one of the posts and then looked into the array of stone coffins. She glanced at the plaque as well and noted the names and the dates which went back to the ninth century.

"I believe that these were some noblemen who had made their residence here in Heiligenberg all those years ago," he remarked. "These were not the men that the priest mentioned in his conversation, however."

As the Margrave moved away towards another corridor that she had not noticed before, she took one more glance at the coffins and noticed that they were all neatly arrayed like a grid. Except for the one in the furthest corner that appeared slightly crooked. She was not sure if that was true or simply an optical trick that the dim lighting was playing on her eyes. At any rate, she turned back to see where the Margrave was going now. She was feeling slightly uneasy as she moved deeper into the crypt.

The corridor itself was narrow, except for a small alcove that contained a statue of a saint holding a candle. There was a small plaque at the base of the statue with a blessing for all of those entombed in the lower levels of the cathedral. The corridor ended in another room similar to the one that they had recently vacated. Here, the Margrave was reading the plaque on one of the pillars next to another array of coffins.

"They called themselves Kaisers," the Margrave told her in a low voice. "But they were only Count-Palatines, like the current one. The Lord of Welf's ancestors lie here, dating back to the eighth century."

"They've been rulers of Heiligenberg for that long?"

"Yes. But this list here stops about a fifty years ago—the last man entombed here was the current Count-Palatine's great-grandfather."

"What happened to his grandfather and father?"

"They say that they died abroad and never had their bodies brought back here. One would think that coffins would be made for them anyway, for the sake of completeness, but the priest who I had talked to said that the current Count-Palatine preferred that his grandfather and father stayed where they were. I could tell that the priest was not happy with that. It disrupts the tradition, you know, after so many centuries."

"I can hardly contemplate so many centuries let alone, say fifty years ago. My family never cared much about the past. I'm sure it was different for you. You are the Margrave after all."

"It is a title, a formality." He turned to her, frowning as he glanced down. "Does your hand pain you?"

She looked at her wounded hand and found, to her chagrin, that she had been rubbing it absent-minded against her dress. "No, not really. It's just the bandages. They itch a little."

"Let me look at it." He took her hand into his.

When his bandaged hand touched hers, a shock seemed to run through her and she gasped. She could see him gritting his teeth at the sudden jolt. "Maybe this isn't a good idea," she said as she tried to pull her hand out of his grasp.

"No. I want to figure out what's going on here." He tightened his fingers on her and she stilled. "I thought this was supposedly a magical blood bond that was mostly mental. I did not think that it would extend to the physical."

"I don't know either. I thought you were the expert, trying to figure out a way to cut it."

"I know about such things, but I am no expert. If I were, this wouldn't be a problem." His fingers moved, making a slow pattern against the inside of her wrist. "You're trembling. Is this place making you nervous?"

"You should know that I'm not the sort who gets nervous in the presence of dead men," she replied as he took a step toward her, crowding her against one of the pillars behind her.

"What about a live one?" he inquired. His mouth was faintly curved as he looked down at her. His other hand came up to cup her chin.

"Live ones are so unpredictable," she said before he touched his mouth to hers.

He felt hot, she thought, as though he had somehow poured fire into her veins through the hand wounds that they shared and flames down her throat. All of her senses seemed to amplify as they briefly melded together—touch, scent, taste—and sound?

The faint scraping sound of stone against stone from the next room forced them apart as effectively as a bucket of cold water. Greta stared at the Margrave who looked at her through lowered lids, but cocked his head to listen to the noise. His hand tightened on hers as he began to pull her away, toward the other side of the crypt's inner room. The grating sound

of stone against stone was getting louder.

"What's wrong?" she whispered tightly. His strides became longer and longer and she struggled to keep up. With her free hand, she gathered up a fistful of skirts and began to break into a slight jog beside him. "Do you think someone's followed us here?"

"Something's here," he said. "But I don't think it's someone who's followed us. My senses tell me that it's not alive. Doesn't yours?"

"I don't have your gift," she replied. "But I can tell what you're feeling through this bond. You're nervous about what you think what this thing might be. But I can't tell exactly what you're thinking so I don't know what this is."

"The animated dead," the Margrave replied. They went through another short corridor and then through a small anteroom filled with funerary statuary. "Something must have caused it or them to rise up."

Greta heard stone crash behind them as they rounded a corner and spotted a narrow stairwell leading up. "A spell, you mean. Or a sorcerer? You didn't, by chance, work a bit of your gift down there while I wasn't looking, did you?"

"You know I didn't. It would be impossible to hide something of that magnitude from you."

He pushed her in front of him and she used her other hand to pick up another fistful of her skirts. She began taking the stairs two at a time, pushing herself to go faster. By the time she was at the top, she was breathing hard. The stair had led to the opposite side of the first level of the crypt. The stairway to the main level of the cathedral was merely paces away.

"You don't happen to have some sort of weapon with you, do you?" she said as he emerged from the stairwell. She could also hear a loud, disturbing moan coming from below. "Are you good with a pistol or a sword?"

He gave a short, harsh laugh as she grabbed his forearm to hurry towards the stairs. "I don't have either with me today, unfortunately. But I'm afraid such physical weapons would be useless against this type of creature—unless we go for the head."

"The head?"

"If it is what I think it is, decapitation will be the only answer."

"Does it have to be that drastic?"

"I'm afraid so."

They finally reached the top stair to the main part of the cathedral, slightly out of breath. Greta was aware that she probably looked quite flushed. A quick glance at the Margrave told her that his dark hair was slightly mused from all of their running. Behind them, they could hear the moaning getting louder.

Lady Beswick said something to the priest and then turned to look at them. She squinted disapprovingly. "I turn my back for one second," she said in haughty tones, "and the two of you do something naughty. It's a wonder that you don't spend the rest of your life in a confession box, Matthias."

The Margrave seemed to ignore her words. Instead, he said, "We will probably have to be going, aunt. I'm sure the Count-Palatine is expecting us for the noon day meal."

"Humph!"

"I'm sure your nephew is quite correct," the priest said in a clipped voice, looking for all the world as if he wanted to get rid of the older woman as quickly as possible. "The Count-Palatine has been such a generous patron to the church and is such an amiable..."

"Of course, you would be on his side," she sniffed. "He's giving you money."

"Now that's not the only..."

The priest's words faded as the moans from the lower level grew louder. Something was coming up from the stair.

Greta hurried over towards Lady Beswick, certain that the older woman needed support if she managed to see the shocking thing that had followed them from out of the crypt. "My lady, please, this way."

"Why, you and Matthias have been naughty while I have been preoccupied!" the older woman exclaimed as she dug in her reticule and pulled out a pair of spectacles to perch on her nose. "What is this?"

"Good Lord!" the priest exclaimed in spite of himself. He made the sign of the cross on his chest and then hurriedly grabbed a few items lying on the altar. His movements were too quick for Greta to tell exactly what he carried in his white-robed arms, but she soon found out when the priest hurtled what looked like a glass ball toward the shuffling abomination coming towards them.

The glass ball exploded on contact and showered the undead creature with what appeared to be water. The moaning ceased and the thing fell with a heavy thud that echoed throughout the mostly empty cathedral.

"What was that?" the Margrave demanded.

The priest looked slightly shaken, but otherwise none the worse for the wear. "Just some holy water, Lord Baden. It's quite effective on many things. Including the restless dead. Do not worry. It is mostly harmless. This happens from time to time, although this has been the third time this month that something has come out of the crypt. We will probably have to call in one of the masons to nail the coffins shut."

"How perfectly dreadful," said Lady Beswick with a nonchalance as if she saw the walking dead on a daily basis. "That's quite impolite of the dead to disturb the living like this. Why in England, the dead never bothered anyone like this,

let alone in a church!”

Chapter Sixteen

The evidence was gone.

The poisoned pastries which had been set aside by the castle cooks had disappeared from the side table in the kitchen. Everyone in the castle, aside from the guests, knew that the pastries were poisoned and it was highly unlikely that any of the servants had eaten them. Which left one other possibility—that someone involved in the poisoning did not like having the evidence lying around. So he or she took the desserts to be destroyed.

The Margrave was clearly upset about the disappearance of the evidence. Greta could feel it through their bond. But instead of raging about it to the rest of the kitchen staff, he remained almost immobile while staring at the empty table, his fists clenching and unclenching. He had told her, after he had seen his aunt back to her room, that he wanted an analysis of the pastries by her—to see if there was anything added to them.

She already had a suspicion of what was added due to the dead food taster's symptoms and what she had seen at the greenhouse, but she had not had a chance to tell the Margrave of her suspicions yet. Besides, there was still a way of observing the evidence, even if it was not present.

“Do you have a cleaning rag that you do not mind parting with?” Greta asked one of the kitchen maids in a low voice.

“Aye, ma'am.” The maid produced a grayed rag from a pocket and handed it to her.

Greta took the rag and then requested a bowl of cold water to be sent to the library along with a tea tray. The maid did not bat an eye at the strange request and hustled away to carry out the order. Then she went over to the table which had held the pastries to wipe off any residue remaining on the surface.

“What are you doing?” The Margrave reached out to still her hands. “You're mine, not one of the Count-Palatine's servants.”

She shook him off and continued to wipe until all of the residue was gone.

“We can always try with what we have left,” she told him. “I can't guarantee you that I can find out what sort of poison might have been used from the crumbs left. In fact, it is most likely that we won't be able to find anything. But what can we lose if we just try?”

The Margrave glanced around them. The servants in the kitchen were busy with their tasks, preparing for the evening meal, ignoring them. “I suppose you have a point there.”

After the noon day meal, which was only attended by Greta and the other guests that she had arrived with—the Count-Palatine himself, his friend Valebona and his nephew had elected to take their meals in their rooms while the rest of the guests had left during the morning—the Margrave had decided to finally look at the evidence that had been kept in the kitchen.

“I don't know what Lord Welf was trying to do to me yesterday,” the Margrave had told her when they had headed toward the kitchen earlier, “but I am not feeling particularly magnanimous towards him, even if he had requested that I look into this matter. However, I supposed I should look into it. After all, I am a guest. And well, there are other things that I wish to look into in the meantime. I do not want to be dismissed prematurely.”

“You're looking for something else?”

He had only shook his head at her question and had refused to answer it. There was, apparently, another reason why the Margrave had decided to accept the Count-Palatine's invitation to stay at his home, something that he did not wish to share with anyone. She wondered if it had anything to do with his suspicions about the Count-Palatine being not quite sane or not quite human.

Greta took the rag that she had wiped the table down with and held it slightly away from her so that it would not drip on her gown. That morning, she had decided to wear another of the gowns that the Margrave had delivered to her room—a rather modest peach-colored dress that looked quite respectable for a morning out for a church service. But even if she did not pay for the dress, she was hesitated to ruin it. It was made of a very fine muslin that she was quite sure had been imported by the Ritters.

In the beginning, she had no idea why the Margrave wanted her to work as a lady's companion to his aunt while they visited Heiligenberg Castle. Lady Beswick, although older, seemed fit enough not to require a lady's companion. And while Greta was perhaps a perfect “sacrifice” for the Margrave's rituals for talking to the dead, it did not seem that it was his primary reason for wanting her here. After all, they had not expected the recent deaths of the food tasters. So it must have been something else. And that something else must have been her abilities which made her a little more than just an average apothecary.

Greta had inherited the talent from her father who had inherited it from his father and so on. Although the gift

allowed her to tell one chemical from another and sometimes one ailment from another, she did not think it was a particularly strong one. Her father had told her stories about her great-grandfather who had the gift like a bloodhound. He could literally tell what was what by sight alone. And sometimes not even then. It could just be within his vicinity and he could tell one herb from another. The talent, unfortunately, seemed to have diluted through the generations. Her father had a very keen sense when he was younger—but it had diluted through time as he began to take to drink and gambling with the death of her mother. Then, he had relied on her to work the apothecary—but as he had constantly reminded her, her skills were not quite up to par. Perhaps it was her diluted blood—as her mother had no gift—or maybe it was because she was a daughter instead of a son.

The maid had placed a tea tray for two on the long table on the first floor library. The bowl of water was sitting next to the tray.

Normally, Lady Beswick would have wanted her to read to her in the library, but this afternoon, after listening to Mr. Beethoven loudly complain about the musicians he was working with—no fault of the musicians, his nephew Karl had whispered to her, except that his uncle was always cranky after just waking up—the older woman had complained of a headache and had decided to retire to her room for the rest of the day.

Greta walked over to the bowl of water and slowly dropped the rag into it without splashing the water over the sides. The Margrave had followed her into the library. Once he was inside, he pulled the door closed.

She looked up at him and said as he twisted the lock, “I don't think that is quite proper.”

“You and I both know that we're both beyond propriety now,” he said. “Besides, I doubt anyone would care.”

“I would.”

He held out his palms in a gesture of mock surrender. “You know as well as I do that I would not do anything that you do not wish me to. If you are harmed, it will come back to me.”

She shook her head and then pulled up a seat so that she could look into the bowl without bending over too far. “If you would please, my lord, close the drapes on the window. The sunlight is making a bit of glare on this.”

“I think under the circumstances, you may call me Matthias.” He walked over to the window to pull the drapes over the window. The curtains made a soft swishing sound as he adjusted them.

“That's not proper either.”

“No. But there isn't anyone else around to call me on it, is there?”

She sighed and instead of rebuking him said, “Do you want me to concentrate on this or not?”

“Go ahead and concentrate. I'll be quiet now. I've only seen you do this once before in your shop and it has—quite impressed me.”

She frowned but kept her gaze on the bowl. The rag lay quiescent at the bottom. There was no ripple on the surface.

From a pocket in her dress, she withdrew a small wooden box that at first glance looked inconsequential with its dark pewter hinges and battered panels. Greta flipped the top open and took out a watch glass about the size of a pocket watch. She took it out from the box by its edges with her fingers, careful not to smudge the lens. While it looked like normal glass, this watch glass was made of a clear quartz found in the mountains in the north. It was an instrument that had been passed through generations of apothecaries. If her situation became so dire that she had to sell everything that she owned, this would be one of the last things that she would have parted with.

She placed the watch glass, concave side facing outward. Then she took out a small silver spoon that was also in the box and carefully spooned out a little of the liquid from the bowl of water and placed the drops of liquid in the watch glass. Unlike liquid in a normal watch glass, however, the liquid evaporated quickly in about a minute, leaving a filmy residue that tinged the glass slightly green in the light of the library. Then she took a saucer from the tea tray and poured a little hot water in it to rinse out the spoon before putting it in the box.

The watch glass began to glow with the same tinge as the residue until the residue itself disappeared in the light of the glow. To Greta's eyes, she saw the glow come out like a trail of smoke that wafted up towards the ceiling. Every compound had its own distinctive smoke patterns. The particular pattern that she observed was one that she was familiar with. It also was a pattern that was not completely unexpected to her.

“What do you see?” the Margrave asked. He stood a little ways away, with one of the shelves at his back so that she had room to do her work. He was watching her intently, perhaps trying to observe for any little sign that she knew what she was looking for. She did not notice him as her attention was focused solely on the watch glass.

“It's some sort of solution containing wolfsbane and foxglove,” she replied. “A particularly potent combination. Fatal if ingested in significant quantities. An apothecary would never think about putting the two together let alone prescribe the two together.”

“They're poisons then?”

“In large amounts, yes.”

Greta then took the watch glass and put it on the saucer with hot water. She poured more hot water into it until the sickly green tinge became diluted. Then she took a napkin from the tray and wiped the glass clean before putting it back into the box. Then she put the box back into her pocket before standing up from the table. She looked pensively at the bowl

still containing the rag that had wiped the table with the poisoned pastries.

“Did you see that?” she asked. “Did you see what I saw when I was looking at the watch glass?”

“I sensed something, certainly,” the Margrave replied. “I know that you were working your gift—perhaps in the same way that you know that I’m working mine. But I did not see what you saw. I wouldn’t have been able to divine the answer if I had been the one doing it.”

“Hm.” Greta walked toward the library windows to pull back the curtains. The weak light outside penetrated the room, somewhat dispelling the strange atmosphere that had accumulated while she had been using her gifts to find answers. She looked outward, only seeing the castle’s inner courtyard and part of the north tower. She knew that beyond, there was the garden and the greenhouse. She would need to visit that greenhouse again—preferably without the gardener standing watch.

“I can feel your mind working.” The Margrave had not moved from his position next to the shelves, but for some reason, he felt closer. “You have an idea about why these poisons were used?”

“I’m not quite sure. What do you think?” she asked, deflecting the question back to him.

“How am I supposed to know? I’m no apothecary.” He finally moved, walking over to the window to stand across from her. “But I am quite sure that the Count-Palatine is correct—that someone is out to poison him. It’s obvious that the evidence was taken because the poisoner feared that something about it would point back to him. But why the poisoner would want to kill the Count-Palatine...”

“It could be a number of reasons. The poisoner could simply hold a grudge against the Count-Palatine. Perhaps one of his servants dislikes him.”

“Yes. But the Count-Palatine is also quite wealthy. Any of his heirs would have a rather strong motive for murdering him.”

“But didn’t the Count-Palatine grow up in the Balkan peninsula?” Greta asked. “I thought all of his relatives had moved down there, especially since his grandfather had moved down there. Why, even in the crypt at the church—his immediate family is not buried down there since the priest had told you that he wished for his grandfather and father’s bodies to remain where they were.”

“That’s true. However, you’re forgetting one relative who is staying under this roof. The Count-Palatine’s nephew.”

Greta glanced at him and found herself shrugging. “Somehow, I don’t feel that should be the case. For one, the Count-Palatine’s nephew did not arrive at Heiligenberg Castle until that dinner party the other night. By that point, at least one other food taster had already been poisoned. It is more probable that this is the work of one poisoner, not two separate ones. And secondly, the Count-Palatine’s nephew appears older than the Count-Palatine himself. Generally it is the older relative who should be worried about being offed.”

“Generally, but that is not always the case. You’d be surprised by the number of older people who do not consider their own mortality when certain things like money come into question.”

She crossed her arms. “Unless they go visit an apothecary. The very notion that one needs medicines to keep going tends to bring mortality to one’s mind.”

“The Count-Palatine’s nephew seems to be in relative good health.”

Greta turned back toward the window. “I accompanied your aunt to see the greenhouse over on the north side of the gardens. There are mostly food plants being grown there. But there are other interesting things that I did not get a very good look at. Unfortunately, there was the Count-Palatine’s secretary. And the gardeners. Both present.”

“You wish to visit the greenhouse without the eyes of the Count-Palatine’s employees, then?” The Margrave faintly smiled. “The only time we can be sure of that would be at night.”

Chapter Seventeen

The hearth in her room crackled like dry leaves as the fire burned through the log that one of the servants had placed there earlier in the day. In the eerie silence of the room, the fire seemed cold even though it was putting out much heat. Greta curled up in the large settee that had been shoved in one corner and wrapped her robe closer to her body. The black cat sitting beside her let out a soft, disgruntled meow.

She should go to sleep, she told herself, but she did not feel sleepy. Her wide awake state made her want to pace, but she did not feel the inclination to waste the energy. If she was honest with herself, though, it was as if she was waiting for something. The constant twinge on her palm, indicating the Margrave’s mental and physical whereabouts was currently quiescent—which either meant that the Margrave was either not doing anything strenuous, or that he was already asleep.

The clock on the desk indicated that it was quite late—although if the rest of the castle was still on the schedule

from the Saturday before with the late night dinner party that the Count-Palatine had held, some people should still be awake.

A sudden loud thump startled her from her musings on the fire. The black cat yawned at the noise, showing his sharp teeth. Then he blinked his eyes and stretched before jumping off the settee and padding toward the window where the curtains had been pulled shut. Greta watched the animal pace before another loud thump made the cat yowl.

The noise was definitely coming from the window. From the quality of the noise, it sounded like it was something hitting against the window. She hugged her knees to herself wondering what it was. It could be the wind, she reasoned to herself. Sometimes when there were particularly large storms, the wind could make the windows in her own home, back in Heiligenberg proper, creak and moan as if they were ghosts. She hadn't expected a storm since the day had been overcast but otherwise clear. But she was not one to predict the weather.

There was another thump and the black cat began to yowl and hiss as if it were trying to intimidate an invisible adversary.

It could be the wind, but then again, it could be something else. Uneasy at where her thoughts were taking her, she finally stood up from the settee and walked over to where the cat was prowling. The animal looked up at her and meowed plaintively. Unsure of what the cat wanted, she picked him up and patted his head as if to calm him. The cat slitted his eyes in pleasure, but his ears remained pricked to the noise at the window.

Thinking that she too needed a walk elsewhere, she slowly moved toward the door to her room and turned the handle. When she pulled the door open, a figure loomed in the threshold, a hand raised in readiness to knock.

"Why are you here?" Greta said in an irritable voice, although if she had to be honest with herself, his presence made her feel a little relieved. "It's late. Shouldn't you be sleeping or something?"

"I was feeling a little restless," the Margrave replied. He too was wearing a robe—a plain navy blue one that shone richly in the dim hallway light. It was thick and covered his neck to his toes. "And I thought you might be too. We could go down to the kitchens and bother some of the servants for coffee."

"That's a ridiculous idea."

The Margrave looked down at her arms. "And what is that?"

"What do you mean, 'what is that?' It's obviously a cat."

The black cat peered up at the Margrave and craned his neck toward him. The Margrave reflexively raised his hand to the cat. The cat sniffed his hand briefly before being allowed to be petted.

"I know it's a cat. I'm just wondering where you found it."

She shrugged. "He found me, actually. He just appeared in my room." She looked at him as he continued to scratch the cat's head. The cat was purring against her. "I did ask around, but it appears that the cat doesn't seem to belong to anyone."

But before he could ask her another question, yet another thump sounded at the window. His hand paused on the cat's head as she felt her body stiffen at the sound. The cat flattened his ears to his head and gave a low, inquiring meow.

"What was that?" he asked lowly. His eyes were on her now and they narrowed in suspicion as she felt herself flush. "Is there someone hiding in your room? Is that why you keep telling me that what we're doing isn't appropriate?"

"No, that's not it at all," she retorted. "This isn't what you think it is. There's no one in my room. Except me and the cat." She briefly glanced down the hallway and seeing no one, glanced back at him. "This isn't a good idea, but I suppose you could come in. Something, I think, is at my window. At first I thought it was the wind, that there is a storm out tonight."

"Have you even looked outside?" he said as another thump rattled the windows. "It's as clear as it was this morning. I think it may be something else."

She stepped back and allowed him to come into her room. She took another glance down the hallway to reassure herself that no one else had noticed the Margrave stepping into her room before slowly closing the door. She was quite sure what she was doing wasn't appropriate. The Margrave's aunt, Lady Beswick, was sure to be extremely disapproving if she ever found out. In fact, Lady Beswick might even argue that she no longer wanted Greta as a companion.

The Margrave gave a cursory look at her room before turning his attention to the window that was covered by the curtains. He walked forward and gave the curtains a yank.

A gray-skinned face with yellow eyes and long white fangs glared into the room at them with an almost hypnotizing malevolence.

Both Greta and the black cat screamed as the Margrave gave a curse and quickly lunged towards the fireplace to grab a poker.

The creature on the other side of the window made some sort of movement with its mouth as if it was gnawing on a nonexistent bone before it reached out with a claw and smashed the glass in. Shards of glass exploded into the room and the thing shrieked in triumph as the Margrave yelled, swinging the hot poker in a wide arc with one arm.

Greta ran back to the door and yanked it open. She saw that the doors leading to Lady Beswick's guest room was open. The Margrave's aunt was hastily tying up her white satin robe and was frowning at her.

"What on earth is the matter?" the older woman demanded. "And what was that dreadful noise? I thought

someone had died out here.”

“Please, my lady,” Greta implored. “Stay in your room.”

“No one tells me what to do!” Lady Beswick marched passed her to see what was the matter in her room.

The Margrave had finally loosed the poker and it went flying, straight towards the creature's head. His aim was true—it struck the creature right between the eyes. But it merely shrieked as if the Margrave had done nothing more serious than to cut it's skin with a particularly keen piece of paper.

“Good God, what is that thing?” Lady Beswick shouted.

“The undead,” the Margrave replied as he stumbled back and grabbed his aunt by her shoulders to steer her out of the room. Once he and his aunt were in the hallway, he shut the door. “That didn't work.”

“You did say that in order to stop such a creature, we would have to decapitate it,” Greta said. While the Margrave had been dealing with Lady Beswick, she had pushed one of the small tables located on the opposite side of the hallway to the wall next to her room. Mounted on the higher part of that wall was an enormous battle ax bearing the insignia of the House of Welf. Greta climbed up on the table as the cat sat below, watching with an impatiently swishing tail. She grabbed the handle of the ax and managed to yank it down from the wall with a grunt.

“Yes, I did,” the Margrave replied. When she climbed down, he took the ax from her hands. “I will have to do that.”

Lady Beswick looked at her nephew disapprovingly. “Did you have one of your little rituals run amok recently?”

“No, aunt. This things just came out of nowhere.”

“It did not come out of nowhere,” said Lady Beswick. “It targeted Miss Silber's room. You don't think that's significant?”

“I apologize, Aunt Catherine, but this isn't exactly the time to debate what did or did not go wrong.” The thing that had entered the castle was now pounding at the door. At any minute, the door was going to give way. The Margrave was staring at the portal with his feet slightly apart, his hands holding the ax up in a ready position. “We have more urgent matters to take care of.”

“Humph.”

During the argument, Greta had found two spears that a nearby suit of armor had been holding up. “My lady, perhaps you would like this.” She handed one to Lady Beswick. The older woman looked at the weapon in distaste, but she did not refuse it.

“This is barbaric,” the older woman declared. “What we need is a bayonet.”

“I'm afraid that there aren't any here,” Greta replied.

The Margrave gave them a brief glare. “Hush. If I can't put it down, it's up to you. Aim for the head.”

Greta's bedroom door splintered open. The creature stepped out.

Now that Greta had gotten over her initial shock, she took stock of the thing in front of them. It was an animated corpse—a man who probably only died a short while ago as his flesh was still intact and his clothes, while dirty, had not rotted away yet. But in a way, it wasn't really a corpse—whatever had animated it had also twisted the physical body somehow so that it looked more frightening. Its vacant stare was yellow, its canines seemed elongated. It was quite strong if it could punch through the window and the door, but with its strength, it seemed to have sacrificed speed.

It did not seem to see them. Instead, the animated corpse raised its head to sniff the air before before charging.

Apparently, speed had not be sacrificed for strength.

It was so quick that Greta had no time to move the spear that she held. But fortunately, the Margrave's reflexes were quicker. The ax he wielded slashed through the thing's shoulder, amputating the arm. No blood spurted out. Instead, something dark and congealed oozed out onto the floor, plopping against the stone in sickening splatters. The creature made some sort of noise that sounded like a mix between a shriek and a moan—the creature was trying to say something in its contorted mouth, but it suspiciously sounded like the word “brains” although Greta had expected some sort of expletive.

The amputated arm seemed to move of its own accord, but Greta brought the spear to bare down on it, pinning the lone limb to the floor. The fingers continued to wiggle.

Meanwhile, the Margrave had swung the ax a second time while the creature was trying to regroup from its loss and this time separated the head from the rest of the body. The body, devoid of its control center, crumbled to the ground. The head rolled down the hallway before it hit part of the wall. The mouth moved for a few more seconds before it became slack.

Greta only realized that she had been staring at the immobile corpse when there was a bit of a commotion near the end of the corridor behind them. Several people had come to the second floor via the staircase. The first to arrive was Apollo Valebona, the Count-Palatine's friend from the Balkan Peninsula. He stopped beside Lady Beswick to survey the carnage. He pulled his night robe closer to his body as if he wanted to hide himself from the dismembered corpse. Then he looked at the Margrave who was leaning the ax on the side of a wall.

“Good God,” he simply said.

The next to arrive was the Count-Palatine himself, who looked rather angry. “Who dares disturb me at this hour of the night?”

"You're always up at strange hours," Valebona said, contradicting the Count-Palatine.

"Well, there was this noise as I came by this place." The Lord of Welf made a disgusted face as he took on the scene. "This is the fifth time this month that this has happened. I thought the priests down at the Church of the Holy Spirit had reassured me that this would not happen again!"

"This has happened before?" the Margrave said, briefly looking at the Count-Palatine.

Their host did not appear to have heard his question. "This is ridiculous! I enrich their coffers in order to keep this from happening, but nothing is done! It's a scam, I tell you." The Count-Palatine began to pace back and forth as if he was trying to think. "I will have to go down there and have another talk with them."

Valebona shook his head. "Conrad, I doubt anything could be done, especially if the priests' techniques are not working."

Lady Beswick huffed. "Well, if men of God can't get rid of this menace, then you must look elsewhere, my lord. Have you ever considered contacting a necromancer?"

The Count-Palatine stopped in his pacing to stare at the older woman. "Do you think I haven't thought of that?" He moved his head towards the Margrave. "He's one, isn't he? And look how he handled the situation. Very messy. I'm sure the servants won't appreciate it."

"In my defense," the Margrave replied, "I was not expecting the attack. And the reanimated dead are not my specialty. I only try to talk to them, all the good that that's done for me. Besides, it was lurking outside of Miss Silber's bedchamber. Perhaps this has nothing to do with..."

"It has everything to do with me," the Count-Palatine interrupted. "Yes, the last times that this has happened, the attacks have always been in other rooms with other people, but I am sure that these—creatures--only wanted to find a weak spot before trying to find me."

While he was talking, someone else was walking up the stairs. It was Lady Beswick's maid, Inga. "Lady Beswick?" the woman inquired. "I heard some noises up here. Are you all right?"

"As all right as I ever will be," Lady Beswick replied. She threw the spear she was holding toward the side of the hallway. "Really, Matthias, you shouldn't expect an old woman like myself to fight. Have you ever heard of respect for your elders?"

Greta saw him roll his eyes before he turned to address his aunt. "I was on the front lines of this, as you may recall. And you would have to fight, if you were faced with this yourself. You can't tell me that if something like this," he waved his hand at the inanimate corpse, "was coming at you, you would just stand there and let it take you?"

"Well, of course not," she blustered. "But there's the principle of the thing!"

The maid had walked up to where everyone else was standing and with one glimpse of the dead thing, she screamed and fainted. The Count-Palatine caught her before she hit the floor.

"This is ridiculous!" Lady Beswick continued. "I am going back to bed. I hope that this mess is cleaned up before I wake tomorrow." Then she gave the Count-Palatine a glare. "And you, young man, get that girl some smelling salts. If she isn't here in the morning to dress me, I will have far more complaints than I have tonight. And I assure you, you do not wish to hear all of them." With that, she turned with a swirl of her voluminous night robe and slammed her bedchamber door behind her.

"Yes, of course," the Count-Palatine said with an exasperated voice at the closed door. He looked down at the maid in his arms who was beginning to come around. He stood up with the maid's body draped over his arms like a limp white cloud. "I will see to the maid. If you would do me the favor, Apollo, and get someone to look after this mess?"

Valebona nodded.

"I can't stay in my bedroom," said Greta. "It's ruined."

"There must be an empty bedchamber somewhere, especially since all of the other guests have left earlier," Valebona said.

The Count-Palatine shrugged. "Do whatever you think is most expedient. I'm sure there's another room on this floor." He nodded toward the Margrave. "Forgive me for my earlier outburst. This has, obviously, touched a nerve with me. I will see that this incident is looked into. My apologies to your disrupted sleep, Miss Silber." Then, he turned and carried the maid down the stairs with Valebona close behind him, intent on finding some servants to clean up the mess.

The Margrave shook his head at their departure. "How strange."

"What do you mean?" Greta asked. She bent down to pick up the black cat that had been pawing at her leg for attention.

"It's just, very strange," he repeated. "It is not their reaction that I am worried about, but why they were here. They said that they heard a commotion up here."

"Yes, but I don't see anything usual about that," she replied as she walked down the hallway to a door that was a few paces closer to the stairwell. She tested the handle and found that it turned easily under her hand. "I mean, anyone could hear the racket we were making."

"Are you that sure about that?" said the Margrave. "The walls to this castle are fairly thick. Would you be able to hear someone on the floor below or above you? Have you heard anyone from another floor while you were in your

bedchamber?”

“Now that you asked that, I’m not sure. If there was noise, I did not notice.” She opened up the door and peeked inside to the gloom. By all appearances, it looked almost identical to her previous room, except that the fireplace and the bed were in opposite orientations. “I think this would do.”

“Greta.”

It wasn’t the first time that he had called her by her first name, but still, it felt odd hearing it from him—as if they had known each other for a very long time. If she was honest with herself, their association had begun months ago, when he first patronized her father’s apothecary shop. He had met her father a few times, but had mostly dealt with her in his transactions. Technically, in those months, he was just a customer. But then again, there were always the things that had been left unsaid.

“I should thank you,” she said slowly, “for coming to my defense like that.”

“I’m not sure I came to your defense,” he said. “after all, if anything happened to you, it would happen to me as well.”

“I’m not sure that you’re really as self-centered as you always say you are.”

He watched her for a moment before saying. “Maybe you’re right. If I was truly as self-centered as you say, perhaps you would be compromised long before now.”

Her hand tightened against the handle of the door until she felt the metal biting into her palm. “Perhaps you should go. It’s getting late. When people are tired, they say things that they don’t mean to say.”

“What’s the point of formalities?” He raised his hand to put on her shoulder. Fingers trailed at the collar of her robe but stopped short of actually touching the skin of her neck. “We probably know more about each other than some married people.”

She scoffed as she heard the sounds of Valebona and some of the servants coming up the stair. “You must be exaggerating.”

He released her robe collar, his hand dropping to his side. He gave her a tight smile. “Good night, then, Miss Silber.”

Chapter Eighteen

June 12, 1815

“This is ridiculous!” Lady Beswick exclaimed for the umpteenth time, interrupting Greta’s recitation of one of the history tomes in the library. “I could not believe what had happened!”

Greta paused and glanced back at the text that she had read. Nothing in the history tome indicated that there was anything controversial about it. It was mostly talking about the economic impacts the Black Death in the southern regions of Hamburg. The last sentence she had read was something about potato sales suddenly increasing because there wasn’t enough labor force to harvest the crops, since about a third of the serfs had died from the disease.

“Excuse me, my lady?” she said tentatively.

The older woman jumped up from her seat next to the library window. Today, Lady Beswick had donned a rich turquoise colored velvet gown with a low waistline—reminiscent of the dress styles from the previous century. Her graying hair was pulled up in a bun and covered with a fine gold mesh which made her look like a lady of a medieval manor. Her dress made swishing noises as she paced from her chair to the fireplace at the end of the library and back.

“Last night, Miss Silber, are you dense?” Lady Beswick said. But the older woman was not looking at her as she ranted. “You would think that a fortification of this size and magnitude would have at least wards to keep things like that—creature—out!”

“I’m not sure...”

“Of course you’re not sure. You’re young and ignorant.”

Greta decided to pretend that she did not hear the insult. Lady Beswick, it seemed, liked to insult a lot of people, including her own flesh and blood. “Surely the Count-Palatine may be trying to cut too much spending by not warding this place? After all, how often does place get attacked?”

“You are forgetting, Miss Silber, that this town is under some sort of weather spell,” Lady Beswick said. She had

stopped at the fireplace and had placed her hands on her hips as if she was lecturing her. Perhaps she was. "It should not be so cold in June. This fireplace should not be lit at this time of the year. Why, if the Count-Palatine spent more time trying to figure out why the weather is so strange rather than planning all of his parties, he would save quite a bit, financially."

"He did say that he was going to ask the priests about how to prevent more attacks."

"The problem is that they are down there in the town proper and this castle is up here." Lady Beswick sighed. "I am tired Miss Silber. My sleep was disrupted last night. And I am in no mood to listen to these histories, especially if all they talk about is the economic decline of potato farming. I am retiring back to my rooms."

"As you wish, my lady. Will you be coming down to dinner tonight?"

"No. Tell whoever," she waved her hand vaguely, "that is in charge of such things to bring dinner to my room."

Greta placed the history tome back to its place and accompanied the older woman back to her room. It was the afternoon, not long after the noon day meal. Once the Lady Beswick was back in her rooms, Greta felt slightly at a loss now that her duties as a lady's companion was finished for the day. She decided to wander back into her new quarters.

The previous night, Valebona and two other servants had arrived just as the Margrave left her to help her move her things into the new room. Valebona offered his condolences and his relief that she nor the Lady Beswick were harmed in the incident and then politely retired back to his own rooms. After all the excitement, thought, Greta did not think that she could sleep. But with the black cat snoozing obliviously beside her, she too fell into a slumber.

In the afternoon light, the room seemed almost cozy and intimate. The black cat, however, was nowhere to be found. To that, Greta did not care too much about it. She had resigned herself to the fact that the animal had a mind of his own and wandered off to wherever he wished to be. Perhaps, she thought whimsically, the cat had gone off to other parts of the castle to catch his own midday meal.

She briefly walked over the desk at the end of the bedchamber to glance at the time on the ormolu clock. It was about two in the afternoon. But before she looked away, the sunlight from the window caught at an object on the desk that she had not noticed before. She picked up the shiny metal object and turned it over in her hands, wondering.

It was a small silver key with tiny, sharp teeth, the kind that could open someone's diary. But after looking through the desk drawers, she found no diary or any other object in which the key could fit in. She pocketed the object and started to look around in the room. On the fireplace mantel, there was an ornate box inlaid with mother-of-pearl in the patterns of oak leaves. It resembled a tinder box, but without a lock. She grabbed the box, intent on getting a closer look at it, but the box seemed stuck on the mantelpiece.

She yanked and the box itself slid forward as if she had turned a lever and the left panel of the fireplace swung open, leaving a narrow dark space that extended beyond to who knows where. Greta delicately sniffed and the air coming out of the opening smells like stale lavender petals.

Curious, she first checked her bedroom door to make sure that it was locked on the inside. Then she grabbed a fat white candle from the desk and lit it using the flames in the fireplace. Then, she squeezed inside the space.

The light cast from the candle in her hand showed that the only narrow portion of the space was the opening from the fireplace. It led into a widened corridor with a spiral staircase which led to the floor below. After careful examination of the stone and mortar walls around her—which appeared blank from any markings—did she descend the steps.

The last step ended in a blank wall. The wall itself, however, was not seamless stone. On one side, the stone stopped at a narrow panel, approximately the same size as the panel that had opened in her room. Her intuition told her that there was most likely another room on the other side of the wall, but how to get the panel on the wall to open, she was not sure. First, she wiped a patch of the stone at face level and then put her ear to it. Regardless of what the Margrave had told her about the castle having thick walls, she did not find the harm in trying. She heard nothing, so she began to search the seams of the wall. That was when she found the small hole near the bottom of the panel.

Greta took the silver key from her pocket and put it into the lock and twisted. She heard a grinding sound coming from the other side of the panel. Quickly, she took the key out of the lock and watched as the panel swung outward.

This other room was quite different from her own. It was furnished lavishly with a four-poster bed and an enormous lacquered wardrobe made of cherry wood. A desk, intricately designed with many drawers painted in dark blue, was pushed against the wall where there was a window. She looked back at the fireplace, though, and found that it also had a similar mother-of-pearl tinder box sitting on the mantel.

Although it appeared that the room had been recently used from the ashes on the fireplace, she was fortunate that there was nobody in the room at the time of her explorations.

She knew that it was not appropriate to snoop into other people's private things, but her curiosity won out as she stepped into the room and first rummaged through the desk. In the top drawers, she found paper and ink as well as envelopes. In a lower drawer, she found a letter addressed to the Margrave. The return address indicated some place in Bavaria. However, as she was about to pull the letter out of the envelope to see who had written to the Margrave, she heard something at the door of the bedroom.

With her blood pounding her ears, she shoved the letter back into the desk and hurried back to the opening at the fireplace. Despite the candle in her hand, she managed to shove the panel back into place just as she heard the door open. She breathed a sigh of relief and slumped against the panel, grateful that she had been quick enough before the Margrave

had caught her. If she wanted to examine the rest of his room, she reasoned, she would have to try to find out the Margrave's schedule to see when he would be out.

But as she was catching her breath, she began to become aware of a strange feeling coming over her—as if someone was staring at her back. She turned around and put her ear against the wall again. She heard nothing, but she was quite aware that someone was on the other side. Not just a random person, but the Margrave.

She clenched the hand that had the knife wound. She had almost forgotten that they were connected. While he could not read her mind, he could sense what she was feeling and whether or not she was near. While he could not see her, she was quite aware that he was probably feeling her nervousness and her proximity despite what the fireplace was telling him visually. She shivered as if someone was touching her.

Greta backed away and with as little noise as she could muster, fled back into her room and shut the fireplace panel.

Chapter Nineteen

It was about three in the afternoon when Greta ventured towards the castle kitchens and discovered everything in chaos.

Apparently, one of the cook's assistants had hanged himself on a ceiling beam near the water well while no one was looking. His swinging body was only discovered when one of the kitchen maids had gone to the well to fetch some water for the evening soup course.

From the flurry of voices, Greta found out that a magistrate had been summoned from Heiligenberg proper for the formalities of recording this death and that the doctor who had been about to leave after his examinations of the dead food tasters had been forced to come to the kitchens to examine the cook's assistant's body. The body itself had been taken to one of the empty servant's quarters, but although the kitchen itself was cleared from everything, a few of the servants strongly advised Greta not to come back to the kitchen.

“But I merely wanted to inform someone that the Lady Beswick wishes to take her dinner in her rooms tonight,” she had protested.

One of the servants, a middle-aged man in an apron stained with a variety of sauces merely nodded. “Yes ma'am. Someone will see to that order. But in the meanwhile, you may want to leave. We are busy enough as it is.”

“But the cook's assistant...”

“They are taking care of him,” the servant told her curtly. “You needn't worry on that score.”

Greta found herself walking out of the kitchens with little more knowledge than she had gleaned from overhearing the stressed conversations of the servants around her. She walked up the narrow stair to the short platform on top of the tun and looked down at the dimness below. Even in the afternoon, there was no light aside from the lanterns in this basement room where the beer was kept.

While a suicide could be obviously blamed on the victim himself, there were a multitude of other things to consider due to the circumstances. The most obvious conclusion she was sure the magistrate and the Count-Palatine would reach would be that the cook's assistant was the most likely culprit for the poisonings. After all, he would have likely access to the food and probably the poisons as well. But her gut feeling told her that although in most cases, the most likely answer was also the true answer—in this situation, it was not so straightforward. The cook's assistant, she was sure, was possibly going to be a scapegoat in the end. And a death in a place that had high traffic? This spoke of either intricate planning on the part of the cook's assistant or something far more complicated involved in his death.

As her mind went over the hearsay that she had so far compiled, her thoughts went back to the Margrave. If there was someone that she could talk to about this latest development, it was him. But after her near discovering in his rooms about an hour before, she did not feel like encountering him any time soon. She was sure that he would inquire about what she was up to in the time between accompanying his aunt back to her rooms and coming down to the kitchens.

A loud thump beneath her feet made her jump back from the railing on the platform on top of the tun. There was another thump again and reflexively, she moved towards the stairway leading out of the tun room. The previous night's experiences had made a mark on her—now all she could think about was the fact that there might be an animated corpse beneath her feet. And unlike the previous night, there was no weapon handily available.

She clattered down the steps, nearly tripping on her skirts and ran back out into the dining hall, feeling slightly flustered and foolish. Nothing appeared to have followed her. She could have just been hearing things. Besides, as she realized, from the direction of the thump, whatever it was could have only come from within the tun.

But whatever the case, she resolved not to drink any beer that was going to be served to her.

“I am quite sure that Mr. Valebona was to meet us at the Count-Palatine's study, not the dining room,” she heard a

woman's voice coming from just outside of the dining hall. "It would make more sense."

"Oh hush, my dumpling," a man's voice replied. "I'm sure you've gotten it mixed up. Remembering appointments isn't your strong point, you know."

"My mind is quite fine," she replied.

The couple finally turned a corner and entered the dining room. It was the Count-Palatine's nephew, Rudolf Wittelsbach and his mistress Mrs. Brigitte Sonntag. They were both wearing matching clothes—he a dark green suit with a waistcoat which was probably one size too small and she a low cut lighter green dress underneath an open dark green riding coat with brass buttons. She was also wearing a hat with an enormous green feather that she was constantly trying to brush away from her face.

"Well, it looks like I was right!" Mrs. Sonntag exclaimed as she looked around the dining room. Her gaze briefly landed on Greta and took in her slightly disheveled appearance with a slight sneer. "There's no one here."

"So you are, sweetie pie," Wittelsbach replied. He too glanced around, but when he saw Greta he said, "Oh ho, but there is someone here. You look familiar."

"Miss Silber," Greta said, introducing herself. While she did not find herself liking the Count-Palatine's nephew's mistress very much due to her attitude, she also believed them to be rather harmless—no matter the possibility that the Margrave had planted in her head about the Count-Palatine's nephew being involved with the deaths of the food tasters. "I'm Lady Beswick's companion."

"Ah, now I remember," said Rudolph Wittelsbach in a hearty voice. He waved his hand dismissively. "Good afternoon then, miss. You don't happen to know where the Count-Palatine and his friend Mr. Valebona are located?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," she replied.

"You're not listening to what I was saying," his mistress said in a shriller tone. "I told you that they were in the study."

"So you did." The Count-Palatine's nephew pinched his mistress. She made a slight, quick grimace, but if Greta had not been watching her, she would not have noticed it. "Well, we'll go there now. Afternoon, Miss Silber."

"Good afternoon to you," Brigitte Sonntag said to Greta with the very slightest nod of her head that bordered on impolite.

As the two was about to walk out of the dining hall, the Count-Palatine's nephew hailed someone else coming in the opposite direction. His mistress gave the other person a sweet, almost salacious greeting in comparison to her interaction with Greta. In response, the other man gave a chillingly short greeting to the both of them.

Greta felt her palm itch. Apparently she was going to be meeting him sooner than she had anticipated.

"Miss Silber." The Margrave stepped into the dining room as soon as he saw the other two guests heading off the corridor towards the study. His voice was as cold as his greeting to the Count-Palatine's nephew and his mistress, but his expression was far from chill. Greta could not quite tell what he was feeling. It was a mix of things—irritation, annoyance, and slight panic. There was something underneath those feelings as well, but she deliberately shied away from it. There were some things that she knew that she was not ready to know.

"My lord," she replied. She did not bow or curtsy. She simply returned his regard as coolly as she could. They were only a few paces away from each other—he a few steps away from the threshold between the hallway and the dining room. She was just outside of the room leading to the tun. But even through their distance, she was not going to let him intimidate her. "What a surprise to see you here."

"You could say that." He moved suddenly, but not exactly toward her. Instead, he stopped at the entrance of the room to the tun. He peered down the steps as if he could see where it led. "Something brought you here."

"Well, yes," she replied. "Your aunt had requested that she be brought dinner to her rooms tonight rather than taking dinner at the dining hall. I think she was feeling fatigued from the events last night. So I went to the kitchens to tell someone of her request."

"I see." He turned back to look at her and then beckoned her to come closer. When she did, he indicated the steps. It was only now, after her brief scare at the tun and her encounter with the Count-Palatine's nephew and his mistress that she noticed the stones leading down. There was a residue trickling along the sides as if there was a water leak somewhere. But she knew that there was no water in the dining room that could possibly be dripping from this direction. "Is this what surprised you?"

"I'm only noticing it now because you pointed it out," she replied. She looked behind her and saw no one else in the dining hall. Then she turned back to him. "One of the cook's assistants hanged himself earlier. The kitchen was in chaos. And then I heard something here. But after thinking about it, I think I may have been hearing things."

"Someone hanged himself?" The Margrave straightened. "That's a new development. Are you sure there was a hanging and not a murder?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "The rest of the servants had moved the body before I found out about this. The doctor is there and the magistrate is being summoned. I assume the Count-Palatine is being informed by someone, but I doubt that he will care—except for the fact that another person will have to be hired."

"He should be used to it considering how many food tasters he has run through during his residence here," the

Margrave remarked. "Come with me. I'm not sure we should be speaking about this in the open."

Greta glanced back towards the steps and saw only darkness. But that did not mean that someone else was lurking at the tun, overhearing their conversation. "I heard that the study was occupied."

"The library, then."

The Margrave turned, but then something at the edges of her hearing made her throw herself on him, tripping him so that he fell to the floor with a curse. Something had leaped out from the darkness of the tun room to the place where he had been standing. Greta grabbed the nearest weapon she could find. A wooden chair.

The chair exploded into splinters when she swung the piece of furniture as hard as she could at the dead man's head. The head tilted back at an unnatural angle from the force of her hit, but the dead man only roared with an incomprehensible garble, black congealed blood bubbling out of his mouth.

Shouts erupted from down in the tun room as a gaggle of servants erupted from the stairs, bearing a variety of kitchen implements—from cleavers to pans to whisks.

"Goddamn it, Greta." The Margrave had gotten up after her shove and had grabbed her arm to pull her away as the undead creature reached out towards her. "Don't try to be heroic."

"Get out of here!" shouted one of the servants to them. "It's the cook's assistant. He just got up and came here." He then turned to one of his fellows. "It's all your fault you know."

"Well, how am I supposed to know that a suicide would suddenly rise up like that?" the other servant retorted.

Greta ignored the byplay between the servants and concentrated on the Margrave's words. "Heroic?" She felt her voice edge upwards, almost to a scream. "I was trying to save *you*."

"The sentiment is much appreciated, but unnecessary." They both ducked as one of the cooks threw his butcher knife and missed. The blade rammed into the kitchen table with a thunk. "Let's take his suggestion and get out of here."

Greta looked back as the Margrave tried to drag her out. The servants were waving their kitchen tools about but were being fairly ineffective. With an annoyed swipe, the undead creature roared again, sending the servants scurrying back into the tun room like frightened mice. She stumbled after the Margrave as the undead man turned its attention towards them.

The hallway was empty except for the suits of armor. One of them had a sword which the Margrave pulled out. He raised the sword and hit the undead man with the flat of the blade as it rounded the corner of the archway between the hallway and the dining hall. The corpse collapsed to the floor, writhing.

"What is this?" exclaimed a voice from the other side of the hallway. It was Mr. Beethoven with his nephew Karl. The composer looked at the twitching corpse with irritation. "Who is that? And why is he flopping around like a beached whale?"

The Margrave briefly looked up. "One of the servants, I think. He's dead, though."

"If he's dead, why is he still moving?"

Karl moved towards the corpse while the others were looking elsewhere. The undead man grinned when it noticed the boy and suddenly grabbed his foot. The boy let out a scream.

With a flick of his wrist, the Margrave brought the sword down and severed the corpse's hand. The boy stumbled back, kicking off the severed hand from his ankle. He ran to his uncle who frowned.

"Good God, Karl, don't be an idiot."

The undead man screamed and began to gather itself up. The Margrave raised the sword again, intent on cutting its head off, but before he could move, the creature leaped over him in a supernatural spurt and landed in front of Greta.

She saved her breath for running.

A brief look behind her told her that the creature was gaining on her as if there was some sort of magic propelling its locomotion. She stumbled into a wide room that seemed to contain all manners of strange things—mostly hunting trophies either mounted on the walls or stuffed on pedestals.

The room itself was dark. The only light that came into it was from the doorway. Greta stumbled over something and went sprawling on the floor.

This is it, she thought as the undead creature lumbered into the room and headed in her direction. I'm going to be done in because of a stuffed squirrel.

It trudged forward and took a swing at her with its remaining hand. She rolled, feeling her skirts becoming entangled in her legs. She struggled on her knees and grabbed the nearest thing that she could find—a brass hunting trophy—and hurtled it towards the creature. She missed and it laughed—from its broken vocal cords, it sounded like crackling branches under a mortar and pestle.

"Greta!" The Margrave along with Mr. Beethoven and Karl had finally arrived at the room. Karl was carrying a lantern in his hands, but the pool of light that it emitted was not enough to illuminate the room.

She moved again, past a couch and some upright contraption that looked familiar but did not register in the midst of her panic. She breathed hard as she reached one end of the room and pulled something off of the wall and smashed it into the creature's face. Something shattered. Bits of mirror rained down onto the floor. It reeled back momentarily as she scooted past it and ran toward the frantically motioning Margrave.

“Through here!” he cried.

Without thinking, she climbed through the contraption that she had passed earlier—it was narrow which forced her to pull up her skirts as she stepped through—and fell onto the other side in a gasping heap. The Margrave hauled her against him as the creature followed. But as its head passed through the contraption, Mr. Beethoven pulled a long rope and something in the contraption made a frightening sound that resembled the scraping of flint against stone.

The dead man's head rolled onto the floor, only to stop at her feet. The eyelids were still blinking.

Greta found herself gasping and buried her face in the Margrave's shirt. He pulled her back into the hallway and simply held her.

“Well!” Mr. Beethoven exclaimed as he rubbed his hands. “That was a job well done.”

Karl said something in a mumbled voice.

“What?” The composer raised his ear horn to his head. “What did you say boy?”

His nephew set the lantern he was holding to the floor and pulled out a small writing notebook and a pencil. He scribbled a sentence on it and handed it over to his uncle to read.

“Huh,” Mr. Beethoven finally said as he gave the notebook back to Karl. “Well, I suppose we would have to give Miss Silber some credit for not fainting like any other silly woman.” He turned his attention back to Greta who had finally decided to pull away from the Margrave. “Are you all right?”

She discretely wiped her face with her sleeve. “Yes. I suppose I'm as fine as I can be.” She glanced at the head and shuddered. “I thought this was all over last night.”

“I thought so too,” the Margrave said grimly. “But apparently something else is at work here.”

“I've heard rumors that something happened last night,” said Mr. Beethoven in contemplation. “At first I had only thought that it was just gossip that the servants were spreading. But now that I've seen this, I'm not surprised.”

Chapter Twenty

Greta dreaded the night. Perhaps she was developing some sort of phobia.

After the evening meal, Greta had gone straight to her room, taken a bath, and climbed under the covers of the bed. The black cat had appeared again, this time to curl up at the foot of her bed. So far, she had heard nothing from the window. And this time, she had left the curtains pulled back so that if anything was coming in from the outside, she would see it immediately. But at the moment, there was nothing but the blackness of night.

The only noise that she heard was the crackling of flames in the fireplace. She lay on her back in her bed, staring up at the ceiling. But no matter how she tried to clear her mind, she could not fall asleep. After another minute, she pulled back the covers and got out of bed. She pulled on her robe and again took up the candle.

During the evening meal, the Margrave had mentioned that his man of affairs, Mr. Wechsler, had finally arrived back from his errands down in the town and that he would be in conference with him until about ten or eleven at night. Gravely, he had told her that if anything went wrong with her room that night, she was to get out and find his aunt.

A look at the clock told her that it was only nine in the evening. The Margrave would still be in a meeting with Wechsler. That meant that he would not be in his own bedchamber for another hour at the latest.

She lit the candle from the fireplace and pulled the tinder box into position. The hidden panel slid open. She looked back. The black cat was still sleeping on her bed, oblivious to her machinations. She slipped into the hidden alcove and descended the stairs to the bottom where she once again opened the panel to the Margrave's room with the silver key that she had found.

Greta stepped into the room. It was dim except for the fireplace that a servant had started a little earlier. The room was still a bit chilly as the warmth had yet to penetrate all of its corners. She walked over to the desk and reached out with her left hand to pull out the drawer where the letter to the Margrave lay.

Something closed around her left wrist which caused her to shriek and involuntarily let go of the candle that she held in her other hand. Someone took the candle from her hand before it fell to the floor.

“I knew something was up with you earlier this afternoon.” The Margrave's voice was close to her ear. She could feel his body behind her. He still held her wrist, but he brought up her arm towards her chest so that she could not break away from him with seriously injuring herself.

“I thought you were at a meeting with Mr. Wechsler,” she hissed.

“It ended early,” he replied. He set the candle on his desk so that it would not fall from his own hand and turned her around in his arms. “You're not fighting me.”

“What would be the point? You could easily beat me.”

In the darkness, his eyes seemed like fathomless black pools which reflected none of the light that the candle or the

fireplace was putting out. "I have no wish to beat you." He briefly looked back at the hidden panel in his fireplace that was open. "I had wondered. I sensed you behind the fireplace earlier today, but I could not figure why I was feeling so."

"I didn't even sense you here tonight," she said bitterly. "Have you found out how to block yourself from me? It hardly seems fair that I not know where you are while you know my every move."

He turned back to her. "I did not block myself from you. You just weren't paying any attention. You've gone complacent during the days that we were linked."

He was right, of course. She had simply assumed that he was gone and had not paid any attention to the ache in her hand. It was always twinging while she was in her room—which she had incorrectly attributed to the fact that his room was below hers. And, of course, from the events earlier in the day, her mind was still on undead monsters rather than the Margrave himself.

"Why are you here anyway?" the Margrave asked. "You seemed particularly intent on my desk."

Greta did not say anything for a moment. She knew that if she made up any story about her reasons, he would immediately know that she was not telling the truth. So she settled for evasiveness. "I was curious."

"About the desk?" He glanced at the piece of furniture before back at her. "You were in here before, weren't you? You found something, but didn't have a chance to thoroughly examine it before I came back."

She felt her mouth tighten. He was entirely too perceptive. And the link between them did not help matters. "And so if I was? What of it? You never tell me anything. I'm just here because you want me to be."

He sighed. "Sit down, Greta." He directed her to the seat at the desk. Reluctantly, she sat down and watched him as he reached towards the drawer which contained the letter. He opened it and pulled the letter out. "I assume you were looking for this?"

"It was addressed to you," she replied. "I knew you had another reason for staying here at Heiligenberg Castle than just accepting the Count-Palatine's invitation. I think I know you well enough that after the incident with the Count-Palatine the other day, you would not have stayed here—unless there was something else in more urgent need of your attention."

"There is definitely something wrong with the Count-Palatine. And normally I would not concern myself with the mad. I would rather leave them to their own devices—as long as they are not doing anything to me. But, well, there is something greater at stake."

He opened the envelope and handed her the letter. "Perhaps you should know, after all that has happened. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the two attacks against you so far were coincidental."

"Me? Why would anyone want me dead?"

"It's quite possible that whoever is responsible believes that we may be connected." He narrowed his eyes on her as she read the letter. "Or they believe that you are my weakness."

"Pah. Why would I be your weakness if they did not know about this?" she said, briefly waving her injured hand. "I think everyone else believes that I am merely Lady Beswick's companion."

"True. But that is if they don't know Lady Beswick and have not considered the matter deeply enough. A very observant person would say that I am seen with you as much as you are seen with my aunt. There are certain conclusions one might draw from that."

She put the letter down. "I know what you're trying to say, but even if that were so, I doubt that I would be targeted in such a way. No, I think the Count-Palatine was right—that these things are merely seeking the most easy way in. I just happen to be a convenient target because I move much slower than everyone else." She picked at her skirt. "If I were a man, however..."

He shook his head. "I would rather than you weren't a man."

"And if I were?"

"It wouldn't be the same." He glanced at the letter. "What do you think?"

"You're in correspondence with the Prince-electors," she said in an even voice. She watched him, trying to see if his expression would give him away. "You're one of his agents. He suspects something is going on here that may be related to the wars that the German states are having with France."

"He had certain information from another of his agents," he replied. "Although he hasn't told me what exactly was making him suspicious."

"Could it possibly be the weather?" she said. "It's not supposed to be winter in June."

"It could be, but I suspect the winter weather is something altogether different. Why on earth would the weather here have anything to do with battles fought hundreds of leagues away? It is probably something local that hasn't been figured out yet."

"That sounds logical." She watched as he took the letter and put it back in the envelope. Then he put it back into the desk drawer. "Are you sure that it's safe in there?"

"There's a certain ward on this particular drawer." Once he closed it, he made a motion across the drawer and a faint snaking sigil briefly glowed on it. It was a rather simple one that anyone who possessed any sort of gift could master—but it was also very specific to the person who cast it so that anyone else would find it nearly impossible to crack, unless

they were willing to part with an arm and an eye. “Ever since I received the letter, I had the ward made, but it did not deter you.”

“I almost didn't sense it,” she admitted. “I thought it was just my nervousness. Or sensing you through the bond. By why didn't the ward react with my touch?” She reached out to the drawer to pull it open. The ward did nothing to her hand when she touched it. “It is supposed to deter me, isn't it?”

“Yes, that is puzzling. Unless there's some sort of complication going in with this bond that is making this think that you are me.”

“Odd. But this only means that you can't hide things from me,” she said with a slight smile.

He frowned. “You might think this is funny, but it can be dangerous. If anyone suspects that you might know something, you would be in danger too. There are those who are not the Prince-electors ally.”

“Yes, I understand that.” She finally stood up from her chair. She looked at the candle. “I should go now, since my curiosity has been satisfied.”

“For now, you mean,” he said. He nearly brushed by her as he reached out to take the candle for her but stopped when he felt her hand on his sleeve. “What is it?”

“This,” she said roughly. She could no longer resist. She stood up on her toes and melded her mouth with his.

The Margrave stumbled back, hitting the panel that had swung open when she had opened it up from the secret passage. His arms came up to steady her waist before she fell over.

He forced his lips away from her momentarily. “Greta. I wish...no you can't.”

“Why? Because you think you're compromising me?” She stared at him. “I think I probably thoroughly compromised myself coming into this room. And it's not as if anyone would care, especially neither of us will shout this out to the world.”

“No, but if we were discovered...” he shook his head. “I think my aunt already thinks of the worst, but in reality, I don't believe she really cares. She had never cared about what I do with my life before.”

“Before you became the Margrave?”

He shrugged.

“Whatever you think,” she said. “Do you or do you not want me?”

He gave a short laugh. “What do you think?” And then he was the one kissing her.

Just as he tugged her robe open, someone pounded on his door. “My lord? Are you there? The Count-Palatine wishes to speak with you.”

“Damn it,” he murmured in her mouth. “I do not wish to speak with the Count-Palatine. He can just wait until tomorrow.”

“Hm.” Her fingers found his cravat and was busy trying to undo it.

There was some loud muttering out in the hallway outside of his bedchamber until a man shouted, “I don't care if he's in there or not. I say we go in. The Count-Palatine thinks he's a suspicious character. If we find out evidence that he is, then the Count-Palatine wouldn't make us...” the voice trailed off to more furious murmurings before a distinctive sound was heard at the door. Someone was attempting to unlock the door.

“I can't do this,” he breathed as he pulled himself away from her. “Go back to your room before they find you here.”

“And what about you? What are they going to do if they see you here but you didn't answer their summons?”

Greta pulled on his dangling cravat and dragged him toward the secret passage.

He was forced to follow. “You can't mean...” He let her shove him into the dark passage first. “Greta!”

She climbed in after him and slammed the secret panel closed just as the door to the Margrave's bedchamber slammed open.

Chapter Twenty-One

Once again, Greta nearly tripped over her skirts as she tried to climb up the stairs in the dark. In a few moments, she emerged in her bedchamber, blinking in the light. She felt herself color as she spotted the Margrave peering out the window of her room, looking no more ruffled than the cravat that she had managed to untie while she was probably looking like a disheveled mess after stumbling about in the darkness in the hidden passage. To her credit, though, the Margrave did not try to adjust his demolished cravat.

“This looks secure for the moment,” he said as he took one last glance out the window before turning back to her. “I suppose there's no help for it—but I had prepared for the eventuality that my room would be searched. The possibility was almost a hundred percent.”

"You were that certain?" The black cat had awoken from his nap and had jumped down from her bed. The animal batted at her ankles and she bent down to pick the cat up.

"If you're someone like me, you always have to prepare for the eventuality of being searched."

She shrugged. "I suppose they can search away. I have nothing that anyone would find interesting. Unless you count the gothic novel that I had put in my luggage. Although I suspect the only person who would disapprove of it would be your aunt."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. Gothic novels are one of her guilty pleasures."

"She didn't give me the impression that she liked them when I interviewed with her."

"She only likes to give the impression that she has very proper tastes." He stepped towards her, smiling. He fingered a lock of her hair that had come undone. "Speaking of impressions, you look somewhat flustered."

She hugged the cat tightly to her chest and the animal yowled in protest. She eased her arms. "I must look like a mess. I was too forward. And you're right, it wasn't the appropriate occasion for a tryst."

"But we're here in your room now."

He leaned close. She tilted up her head and felt his lips almost brushing hers when a knock was heard at her door.

"Don't answer it," he whispered before he kissed her.

The knock came louder. "Miss Silber? Are you in there?"

This time, Greta broke away at the sound of the voice. "Goodness. That's the Count-Palatine, isn't it?"

The cat in her arms hissed as the Margrave made a sound at the back of his throat that sounded suspiciously like a growl. "Why would he be here?"

"Maybe he just wants to check up on his guests?" Greta suggested.

"At this hour?"

"Well..."

The knocking came again which made the Margrave stomp towards the door. "I've had it with all of these interruptions."

"Wait, I don't think it's such a good idea that you should go answering my door. The Count-Palatine will get the wrong idea."

He turned to briefly frown at her. "And having a strange man knocking at your door at this hour is one?"

"Well, I didn't mean that, but..."

He yanked open the door just as the Count-Palatine was raising his hand to knock again. "Oh! I thought I had someone else's door, but I suppose I was mistaken."

"You certainly were mistaken," said the Margrave belligerently.

Greta peeked over his shoulder. "Actually, you weren't, but he..."

"Ah!" Strangely, the Count-Palatine looked far from displeased. "Two for the price of one!"

"Excuse me?" said the Margrave in a low, annoyed voice.

The Lord of Welf seemed completely oblivious to his tone of voice. "May I come in? I wish to speak with you."

"No, you may not," the Margrave said before Greta could reply.

Their host gave them thorough, penetrating stares. "I apologize if I've interrupted something in progress, but if you feel uncomfortable discussing this in your room, perhaps we can speak about this here in the corridor. I suppose it is just as well since everyone else is already tucked in for the night."

Not everyone, Greta thought as she remembered the Count-Palatine's henchmen rummaging through the Margrave's bedchamber on the floor below. The main question one had to ask was not if anyone else was out an about at this hour but why the Count-Palatine wanted to speak with them at all.

The cat in her arms hissed as he got a glimpse of the Count-Palatine. Greta patted his head as she told the animal to hush. Reluctantly, the Margrave stepped out into the hallway. As he moved, the Count-Palatine glanced at her and suddenly she felt rooted to the spot as he eyes bored into her.

She tried to move her mouth to shout a warning, but for some reason, her lips refused to obey her mind's instruction.

The Count-Palatine grinned at her as he snatched the Margrave's neck in a lightening fast move that was too quick for him to react to. "I thought you might be an easy dinner, but since he's here, I'll save you for dessert."

Was he going to *eat* them?

Then the Count-Palatine pinned the Margrave with a stare that suddenly made his body go abruptly slack from his struggling. Their host grinned, revealing sharp teeth. His blue eyes took on a strange gleam. "You're a difficult man, Lord Baden. Do you know how badly I wanted you when I first saw you?"

In horror, Greta watched the Count-Palatine's head descend toward the Margrave's neck. In desperation, she shoved her energy through their bond. If she couldn't get herself outside this paralysis herself, perhaps she could help the Margrave get out of his. But their link had turned muted and as she tried to push her energy through their link, it felt like getting caught in molasses.

"Shh," the Count-Palatine crooned in a hypnotic voice. "This will feel good."

His fangs pierced the skin on the Margrave's neck. The Margrave's body convulsed. Greta found herself crying out as a pain struck her in her neck and something dark and sweet pulled throughout her system. Her arms went slack. The cat fell to the ground and yowled. The animal ran to the Count-Palatine and tried to paw at his pant leg, but it seemed as if the cat could gain no purchase.

Greta felt her knees strike the floor. "No," she weakly cried.

The Count-Palatine licked at the Margrave's neck with a long red tongue before looking at her. "How interesting." He suddenly released the pale man to walk toward her. He grasped her shoulders and she suddenly found herself facing blue, blue eyes. She tried to move, but her fists seemed feeble against his demeanor.

"Bastard! Don't you dare touch her!" shouted the Margrave as he struggled to a sitting position.

"Too late, my dear Lord Baden." The Count-Palatine's voice lowered, amused. "I think you've both intrigued me." He forced her face aside and bit her. Greta screamed.

"Greta!" the Margrave yelled hoarsely before he too was consumed by the pain-pleasure that was flowing through their bond.

She awoke in her bed, but she was aware that she was not alone.

The Count-Palatine was staring down at her. He gave her an urbane, close-lipped smile. "I see you're up."

Greta gave a strangled shriek as she tried to move back, but nearly rolled over another body.

The Margrave groaned. "God damn it. Who's trying to wake me at this hour." He cracked an eye open. "Greta?"

"Matthias!" She glanced back and saw that the Count-Palatine seemed to loom closer. She spread out her arms as if to shield the Margrave. "Stay back!"

"Stay back? I thought my technique was better than that, but considering that I don't remember at all taking you to bed, I suppose that's just as well..." his voice trailed off as he tried to sit up and got a glance of the Count-Palatine at the side of their bed. "You!"

"Yes, it's me." The Lord of Welf cocked his head as he considered them. "It's not as I expected."

"I should say so," exclaimed the Margrave. "How did we end up here? The last I remembered, we were in the hallway."

"I put you here. Especially when I sensed that your aunt, the honorable Lady Beswick was stirring and probably about to come out of her bedchamber to investigate the commotion. I, of course, did not wish to endure another of her countless litanies of complaints."

Greta discretely examined herself and then the Margrave. They both appeared to be still dressed. The only difference now was that they had matching neck wounds. She privately sighed in disgust. She didn't suppose she was now connected to another person. Correction, she admonished to herself, some sort of creature.

"I don't see what's so terrifying about that," the Margrave retorted. "You controlled us with just one look. What makes you think you couldn't do something similar to my aunt?"

"Don't put those ideas into his head," Greta whispered loudly. "Do you really wish your aunt to be attacked by this—thing?"

The Count-Palatine looked amused by her assessment. "And do you think that I had not considered that earlier? No, I only use my powers sparingly, when necessary."

"Like when you have the urge to bite people, my lord?" Greta said scathingly.

"And take blood?" the Margrave added.

The Count-Palatine shrugged as he grabbed the nearby desk chair and sat down as if he was merely having a conversation at tea. At the movement, Greta and the Margrave tried to get up at once, but the Count-Palatine stared them down. "Stay. I'm not finished with you yet."

His compulsion slammed into Greta like a stone and she fell back onto the bed. The Margrave did likewise although he managed an angry expletive.

"You intrigue me, Lord Baden," said the Count-Palatine. "I suppose I was drawn to you because we are both similar in a way. You are a necromancer of a certain reputation. And I am, to put it, the undead."

Greta blanched at the news. "So you were like those creatures? Are you behind all of those attacks?"

The Count-Palatine seemed offended by her assessment. "Not at all. I am not behind those attacks. Why would I want my home overrun with those things? Besides, I am nothing like them. They are nothing but reanimated corpses with no thought of their own. I am much the same as when I was alive—albeit much more powerful. I can be very much like the living, although," he continued regretfully, "my heart doesn't beat, I don't breathe, and there are certain bodily functions I cannot perform."

"You're one of those creatures they talk about in folktales from the east," said the Margrave as he sneaked a protective arm around Greta's waist underneath the bed covers. "A vampire."

"That's such an ugly word," the Count-Palatine exclaimed. "I prefer the term, 'immortal'."

Greta didn't think "immortal" was an apt term at all. The Count-Palatine was more undead than alive. "So you aren't really the original Count-Palatine's grandson. You *are* the original Count-Palatine."

"In the flesh. But you must admit, if I had kept my own identity through all these years, people would have grown suspicious." The Count-Palatine shook his head. "But someone who doesn't know my status is trying to eliminate me. That, I'm quite sure of."

"If you had not pulled this stunt," the Margrave said, "I would have continued investigating the matter, none the wiser. I'm not sure I wish to remain doing so now."

The Count-Palatine gave him a charming smile. "But my dear Lord Baden, you must know that I have poor impulse control when I am faced with something that I desire. I told you as much in that meeting."

The Margrave muttered something too low for Greta to hear, but she was sure it was not complimentary.

"And you, Miss Silber, I think I've underestimated you." The Count-Palatine's attention was on her now. She shifted uncomfortably and the Margrave's arm tightened on her. "I had thought that you were merely Lady Beswick's lady's companion. I had briefly suspected something when you had interrupted our meeting the other day, but I had soon dismissed it thinking I was making things more complicated than they actually were. But I see I was mistaken."

"She is my aunt's companion..." the Margrave began.

"No, it isn't quite as simple as that, is it, Miss Silber?" The Count-Palatine lowered his eyelids which hid most of his gaze from them, but she was aware that he was still looking at her. "You are as bound to him as the both of you are surely bound to me now." He gave them a slow smile that showed teeth.

The Margrave hissed at the Count-Palatine's pronouncement. "You're going to pay for this enslavement!"

The Count-Palatine was suddenly out of his seat, pulling the Margrave up by his shirt front. The two men glared at each other, unwilling to back down. "Careful what you say to me," the Count-Palatine said in a low voice.

Then, in a strange fascination, Greta watched the undead creature give the Margrave a punishing kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Two

June 13, 1815

The opening toward the north section of the castle was empty except for the Margrave who stood next to the eastern wall, observing the tapestries.

"All I see," said Greta as she walked nearer to him, "is a few animals among foliage."

He turned to look at her. The bruise she knew that was inflicted on him by the Count-Palatine was covered by a newly tied cravat. An identical bruise also decorated her own neck where the Count-Palatine had bitten her. So she had chosen a high-necked morning dress to wear that day.

"It's an allegory," he told her. He pointed toward the center of the tapestry where there was a mass of white thread. At first, she had assumed it was just a patch of the tapestry that had worn away after repeated exposure to the sun, but after close examination, she saw that it was a horse, no a unicorn, sitting in a small enclosure. The animal looked pleadingly at them with faded gold eyes. "The unicorn stands for purity. It's trapped inside its own cage against the rest of the world."

"Really?"

"The tapestry is of Celtic design," he said. "I'm sure my aunt could tell you more about it since she had lived in England for quite a while, but I can tell you that whoever bought this tapestry had gone to ancient Britain to take it back all the way over here."

"Does that mean it's quite possible that the Count-Palatine himself had gotten the tapestry?" she murmured.

He frowned. "Possibly."

They were silent for a long moment as they stared back at the tapestry. In the previous night, the Count-Palatine had left them in Greta's room without further molesting them, but it was quite clear that his compulsion was still on their minds because even though they could move, they could not get out of the bed until the morning. Once they discovered that, they had merely fallen into an exhausted sleep until the black cat had woken them by his impatient pacing on top of their bodies.

The Margrave had suggested that they meet after breakfast in the north end of the castle. Why he wanted to meet, he did not tell her, but she had an idea.

"You're still thinking about it," she said.

"Hm." He tucked his hands in his pockets. "And you are too."

"He's only fixated on me because I'm connected to you. I think you're the one he's after. Can't you..."

"In those stories, they say that you can only put one down if you decapitate it, stake it, or expose it to sunlight. But he's smart. He won't let us do any of those things. Especially since he's gotten into our heads."

"Is there a way to eliminate this bond?" She thought back. "The compulsion that he put on us wore out after the sun came out. So it wasn't permanent."

"I don't think he meant for it to be permanent," he replied. "Especially since we've seen him up and about during the day."

"But that meeting room was shut from sunlight."

"That's true." He paused for a moment, but he was staring at the tapestry with unseeing eyes. "I can still feel him in the back of my mind. I think he is sleeping right now."

She nodded. "I think that even though he can go about during the day, as long as sunlight does not touch him, he is still vulnerable. He is probably the most vulnerable while he's sleeping. I'm sure we can find something about this castle that we can use as a weapon." Her eyes moved deliberately toward the a suit of armor holding an ax at the end of the hallway.

"Not today."

"You're conflicted."

He moved back, finally looking at her. His expression was angry. "Yes, I am. But you don't have to voice that aloud." He walked toward the door at the end of the hall that led towards the courtyard before joining up with the north tower. "In some ways, it wasn't surprising, unfortunately."

Greta moved to follow him out. They weren't dressed for the outside, but they only had a few paces before reaching the doors to the north tower. She had expected the derelict structure to be locked, but the door easily parted under the Margrave's hands. They stepped inside the first floor of the dark tower and the door automatically swung shut. It was cold in the tower. She could see their breaths as white clouds and she was glad that she had at least a shawl around her. There was only two thin windows, slits really, in the room that they were in, filtering any light from the outside into thin, weak beams.

The Margrave struck something at the side of the wall and she saw a spark before he lit what looked like a torch that he had picked up from the ground.

"That seems rather fortuitous," she remarked.

"I don't think it is a coincidence that this is here," he replied. Their voices echoed in the room, sounding eerie and empty. "It means that there may have been someone in here before us, relatively recently."

The room was vaulted and completely empty. Most of the ruined tower was at the top so that this bottom floor was still seemed intact, except for a char stain that started from the ceiling on the north side and trickled down toward the floor. There was no furniture in the room, but the floor was streaked with dusty trails. It was obviously disturbed so someone had visited the tower before, but there was no distinctive footsteps for her to observe.

Although there was no way to tell how large the feet were that had made the dust trails, the dust trails had a direction to them, leading directly to a stairway that was almost hidden at the side of the room. The Margrave led the way as he walked toward the stairs. Greta followed, wondering what would be at the top of the tower aside from a ruined and burned room from the time that the tower had been struck down by lightning.

"What do you hope to find in here?" she asked as they climbed up the stairs, past the second floor which looked as empty as the first floor.

"I had heard rumors of something happening in this tower from the informant that had fingered Heiligenberg Castle as a possible location for certain things occurring," he replied. "Of course, from the letters that the Prince-electoral had sent me, he did not mention exactly what these happenings were. Perhaps he did not know and was hoping that I would find out for him. Or perhaps he does know but did not want to risk putting the information on paper."

"I can imagine. Transporting messages is not particularly safeguarded in this day and age." They finally reached a short landing and then a wooden door that looked heavy and immovable. There was only an iron ring at hand height to serve as the handle. "The situation on the Continent isn't particularly stable."

"No." He grabbed the handle and pushed inward.

Greta was immediately assailed by the odor. It was a pungent mixture. She stood on the landing for a moment to gather her wits as the Margrave entered the room first. The odor was heavily overlaid by a musky flower smell—the kind of smell that she associated with scented candles and potpourri. But then there was something underneath that smell. She tried to concentrate on it, but for a long moment, it remained elusive. The heavy flower smell was an effective camouflage for whatever else had been in the room.

"Someone's definitely been in this room recently," said the Margrave, drawing her out of her reverie.

She looked about herself as she stepped into the room. Part of the roof had been blown away when the lightning had struck the tower so that the sunlight now streamed into it. No one had made any effort to cover the hole so that there were severe water and weathering stains on the stone around and below the hole. The room itself appeared empty at a first glance, but then she began to notice small signs that it had been occupied.

There was a hearth at one side of the tower room, still streaked with ash. Something had been scraped on the floor and then rubbed out so that she could not quite tell what sort of symbols had been written. But there was something else that also drew her attention—dark spots near the center of the room. Something jolted in her mind and she suddenly realized what sort of scent that she had been trying to determine. She suddenly gagged and rushed toward one of the slitted windows to get some fresh air.

“What is it?” The Margrave had rushed to her side. She felt his hand on her neck, warm and rough.

She gulped air and forced her breathing to slow. “Blood,” she finally said. “So much blood.”

“There’s evidence that someone has been trying to do something here, but...”

“They tried to clean it up,” she replied, finally facing back into the room. She concentrated on his face rather than the floor where she could easily imagine awash with red. He eyes were dark, his brows angled downward in thought as he regarded her. “But either they weren’t very thorough or it was too difficult for them to erase everything.”

“I would think of the latter,” he said. “If it is blood, as you say, it is very difficult to erase something that requires that.” He raised his palm so that she saw the slash on his palm. “Assume that it is quite a lot?”

“Many people,” she said curtly. “It was either that or they completely butchered one victim. I don’t know what they were trying to do. My gift only tells me what was in here. They tried to cover up the scent by burning a lot of myrrh and rose and other thick, pungent scents. And they would have succeeded, if the only people who visited this place did not have the nose or the inclination to determine why it would smell thus. What do you think might have happened for such a thing to occur?”

“A very large ritual of some sort. If the amount of blood that you suggest was used, then we would talk about some very violent blood magic. Or black magic. It is hard for me to tell for sure since all the markings on the floor have been erased.”

“What would one want to do with either one?” she asked. “And what would all of that accomplish?”

He shrugged. “A number of things. You know that a little bit of blood allows me to talk with the dead. More blood would bring more magic...”

“And could reanimate the dead,” Greta supplied. “Do you think whoever was here created all of those undead creatures that we had encountered so far? Could it have extended the Count-Palatine’s life?”

“They are all possible.” He stepped back to look around at the room again. “So there is blood here. It is enough for us to use to get answers. But that would require more blood.”

Greta shivered. “You want my hand again?” She gave herself a self-deprecating grin. “I suppose you’re very lucky that technically I did not compromise myself with you last night. Otherwise, I could not be your sacrifice.”

“No, it isn’t that,” he said as he took out his knife that he had strapped on a belt underneath his jacket. The blade seemed to gleam in the darkness. “That’s not why you’re the sacrifice.”

“But Mr. Wechsler said that I was the ideal sacrifice because I was a maiden...”

“I gave him that reason because it made sense to him.” The edge of his mouth briefly curled up, but it was a cold smile. “It doesn’t really matter if the blood sacrificed was that of a maiden or not. The dead do not care in either case. You were targeted as a sacrifice because I wanted you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to put wards around us before you do this?” she asked as the knife neared her palm.

“Although,” she said with an afterthought, “the wards didn’t work last time either.”

“It is only old blood this time,” he replied. “We only have a few questions for it. If something attacks us here, I have finally devised something that would get rid of it once and for all.”

“And what would that be?” she asked as he slit her hand.

“Believe it or not, the doctor who was taking care of the food tasters gave me something. You’ll see it if I have to use it.” The skin of his palm parted when hers did. She turned her wrist so that her palm was facing down. Their blood dripped on the floor where it joined the other faint blood stains. The Margrave said something under his breath and a thin black stream of smoke issued from the floor. When the sunlight hit the bit of smoke, it seemed to shimmer green.

The bit of black smoke wavered a bit and then steadied as if it was a small flame burning in a giant fireplace. It remained there, seemingly unaware that anyone had summoned it.

“Spirit,” said the Margrave. “I have called you to answer some questions.”

The top of the black smoke curled as if it was smiling. “Then ask, necromancer. From your sacrifice, I do not have much time.”

“Here is the question, spirit. Who were *you* the sacrifice for?”

“I do not know. I was simply taken. They were but shadows in the night.”

“What were you used as a sacrifice for?”

“I do not know. I did not understand their language.”

Despite being morbidly fascinated with the appearance of the dead spirit, Greta scoffed. “That’s really helpful. Wasn’t there anything that you noticed?”

The black trail of smoke seemed to twist as if it were regarding her. “There were markings on the floor here. I could restore them for you. If you pay more.”

Greta began to turn her palm downward when the Margrave stopped her by grasping on her wrist.

“What is it?”

He bent down so that his mouth was close to her ear. “You don’t want to do that. Not without a lot of thought. You cannot trust the dead, even if you’ve known them in life.”

“But it said that if there’s more, it would show us what those marking were. Then you would be able to tell what

had exactly happened here.”

“That’s true. If the spirit actually does follow through on its word, we would gain that bit of information. But I hesitate to even do that. There was a reason that the markings were erased rather than left on the floor.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Greta stared at the part of the floor where the spirit had eventually dissolved into when they had decided not to add an additional blood sacrifice to find out more about what the spirit had observed while it had been alive. She understood the Margrave’s reasoning. It would be an unnecessary risk that they should not take. Who knew what sorts of opportunity they would create for more malevolent spirits if they had inadvertently opened a doorway with the reestablishment of the ritual markings.

Then again, she was disappointed that they would not find out more about the room that day. It would mean that they would have to expend energy to keep their ears and eyes open for other rumors.

A creaking noise startled her from her thoughts. She looked up at the Margrave who had been contemplating one of the smudged markings, perhaps trying to figure out what it had been. He looked back at her and then at the partially open door to the room. Someone was on the other side. Or something.

The crack in the door briefly darkened. Then the door swung open with a loud screech.

“Ah, my lord. Miss Silber. They said that you might be here.” It was Apollo Valebona. He was wearing a cream colored coat which he was busy brushing dust off his sleeves.

The Margrave raised an eyebrow at Valebona’s appearance. “They said? Who are they?”

“Oh, it was just some servant I passed by when I was going for breakfast in the dining hall,” Valebona said as he waved a gloved hand. “The maid said that she saw the both of you heading in the direction of the north part of the castle. She thought that you were going to see the tapestries, but I didn’t see you there. So I came here.” He sneezed. “Drafty place for a tryst, don’t you think?”

Despite the cool air, Greta felt her cheeks heat. “We were just curious about this tower, Mr. Valebona.”

“Conrad did tell me this place was off-limits,” said Valebona as he stepped into the room to look around. He frowned in disapproval. “Not much here, if you ask me.” Then he looked up at the roof and made a tsking sound at the back of his throat. “Well, I understand his concern now. Don’t you think this place is unstable?”

“No more unstable than the rest of the castle,” said the Margrave lowly. His hand came up to the small of Greta’s back and discretely led her toward the door and down the stairs as Valebona started to look around the room and sneezed again. “Let’s go, Miss Silber. There’s nothing here.”

“I’d say,” exclaimed Valebona. He took out a handkerchief from his coat pocket and put it to his nose. He sneezed twice. “I think I’ve got a cold just standing here. It’s either that or my allergies are acting up.”

“Allergies, Mr. Valebona?” inquired Greta as they were walking down the stairs. “What sort of allergies?”

“Mugwort,” the Count-Palatine’s friend said in a muffled voice underneath his handkerchief. “I’ve had them since I was a boy. My mother would make a pomander of the stuff to scent the kitchen, but I kept coughing so violently that she had to replace the mixture with rose and lavender. It wasn’t the same, she claimed, but at least I didn’t try to cough a lung out whenever I wanted to have lunch.”

“I have just the solution for allergies,” said Greta. “I could make a tincture for you, if the kitchen staff here has the ingredients.”

“Oh? How kind of you, Miss Silber.” They had finally walked out of the north tower. In the sunlight, dimmed by overcast clouds, the north tower loomed like an ominous sentinel. The Count-Palatine’s friend finally removed the handkerchief from his nose and stuffed it back into his pocket. “Do you also suffer from allergies?”

“Not that I know of,” she told him. “But I do have some knowledge of medicines.”

The Margrave chuckled at the description of herself. “She’s an apothecary, Mr. Valebona.”

“Ah, an expert then!”

Once they had traversed the bit of the internal castle courtyard and had entered the castle proper again, the Margrave asked, “So what was the reason that you were seeking us out?”

“You make it sound so serious!” Valebona opened his coat to take out a cigar. He stuck it in his mouth and then reached into his coat to take out a match. Once he lit his cigar, he puffed out a smoke ring before answering. “I was wondering why the dining hall was so empty. I wished for some company while I had breakfast. The maid who I had passed had mentioned that Conrad’s nephew and Mrs. Sonntag were still asleep. As well as Conrad himself since this is too early an hour for him. Both of you, however, were awake.”

“Thank you for thinking of us, but we’ve already had breakfast,” said Greta. “But we wouldn’t mind accompanying

you, would we my lord?"

The Margrave was frowning, but he nodded.

When they arrived in the dining hall, it was not empty. In fact, Mr. Beethoven and his nephew were already seated at one end of the table taking bread and tea.

"Good morning!" the composer boomed when he noticed their appearance at the door. "Please, join us for breakfast!"

"Good morning, Mr. Beethoven," Greta said as she took a seat next to the composer. The Margrave and Mr. Valebona took the seats across from them. "How is your progress with the Count-Palatine's musicians?" she spoke a little more loudly in his ear.

The composer beamed at her. "Very well, Miss Silber." He accepted the fresh cup of tea that she poured him. "They are currently learning a new piece that I have written for them. Officially, it is named String Quartet in A minor."

Valebona had dropped his cigar to smolder in a small porcelain dish in favor of grabbing a bread roll. "What is it unofficially named, Mr. Beethoven?"

"Death of the Vampire," the composer exclaimed.

The Margrave raised his eyebrows and exchanged a look with Greta as he sipped his own tea. Valebona's bread knife clattered onto his plate. Mr. Beethoven's nephew Karl just shook his head and continued to chew the bit of sausage that he had put in his mouth.

"Excuse me?" Valebona said.

"Death of the Vampire," he repeated. "I've been reading up on some folktales from Eastern Bavaria. The vampire is a somewhat gruesome night creature and it gave me additional inspiration for the string quartet that had been brewing in my head for quite some time."

"I see," Valebona said slowly. "So you are playing with the theme that the vampire is a monster?"

"What other theme is there?" Mr. Beethoven said. "I can't see the vampire not being a monster. I mean it sucks blood! And it can only be killed by nonsensical means because it is a supernatural creature. Like with sunlight."

The Count-Palatine's friend slowly picked up his bread knife again and looked at the composer warily. "I'm not quite sure that I follow you, but all right. What made you want to research Eastern folktales in the first place?"

"I've just been visiting the library on my hours off," the composer said airily. "And I was inspired to search out the folklore in the first place because I have heard of some rumors."

"Rumors?"

"Of guests coming for the weekend." The composer took a sip of his coffee before grabbing another bread roll to slice open. "I overheard a conversation the gardener having with one of the cooks in the kitchen when I was visiting to inquire about tea a few days ago," he continued. "Apparently the Count-Palatine had invited a troupe of gypsies for entertainment because he easily succumbs to ennui."

Valebona knotted his eyebrows in thought. "That's the first I've heard of it."

"The last time I had the pleasure of conversing with gypsies was in a small town just outside of Vienna."

"Really?" the Margrave finally spoke up. "I thought they were a rather closed group. That they didn't like talking to strangers."

"Well, that's true," said Mr. Beethoven. "But the circumstances were a little strange at the time. I was heading to Vienna after a concert in Salzburg. I had just received a message that Karl's parents had died in an accident."

Greta wondered at the composer's brief pause before he said "accident."

"I was coming to take care of Karl, but apparently I wasn't quick enough." The composer began to saw at the bread roll in a particularly vicious motion. "Some unscrupulous people claiming to be cousins kidnapped Karl before I got there. I have an associate in Vienna who employed various means to get Karl back. Some gypsies came to help as well."

Karl nodded in collaboration with his uncle's story.

"Unfortunately, Karl doesn't like to talk much about his time with his captors." The bread roll suddenly fell open as his knife clacked on the plate. "If I could just get my hands on those two..."

Karl briefly touched his uncle's sleeve and the storm on his face suddenly cleared as if had never been there before. Mr. Beethoven gave a chuckle and ruffled his nephew's hair with his free hand.

"Well, what's past is past," said the composer magnanimously. "Mostly."

"That's all very interesting," said Valebona. "So what does the gypsies have to do with your most recent composition?"

"It was written to be danced to, not for a concert hall," Mr. Beethoven replied. "The gardener and the cook were of the opinion that the gypsies might find it amusing. As for that, we shall see. Once the gypsies arrive."

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was just after dinner, when the men retired for a little chat and port in the Count-Palatine's study that Greta found herself cornered by Rudolf Wittelsbach's mistress, Brigitte Sonntag. The only other female guest at the castle at the time was Lady Beswick, but the older woman had quickly retired citing her flagging energy due to her age. Which left Greta no excuse to leave when Mrs. Sonntag approached her to accompany her to the "hunter's room" where Greta had had her latest encounter with the undead cook's assistant.

That evening, Brigitte Sonntag had donned a long light green gown, strategically cut to maximize the amount of bosom that she was revealing. As the previous dinners, she had been seated to the right of the Count-Palatine's nephew and had comported herself with manners fitting that of the widow that she purported to be. Although her protector was oblivious to it, it had not escaped Greta's notice that she was trying to catch the attention of the other men around her. Brigitte Sonntag's efforts were not entirely in vain. The Count-Palatine and Valebona did more than once leer in her direction. The Margrave's expression did not reveal anything, but through their bond, she could sense that he was not entirely unaffected by the woman's charms. But he was quite good at hiding what he was feeling.

To be honest with herself, Greta did not want to talk with Mrs. Sonntag. Instead, she felt the foreign need to gouge the woman's eyes out with her fingernails. But she did not do this either. She's seen enough blood already to last several lifetimes. So she paced beside the widow down the hallway, conscious that beside her, she was merely a wren. A nobody. A lady's companion. Easily forgotten.

"Someone had told me that all of the Count-Palatine's trophies were displayed in this room," Brigitte Sonntag said in her calculated melodic voice. She slanted a glance at Greta and she felt cold as her ice blue eyes appraised her apparel. Greta had decided to wear one of her own gowns tonight because no other guests were present at the castle at the time. The gown wasn't at the height of fashion, but she did not think that anyone else would care. But apparently, the window decided that her taste in clothing did not match to hers as Brigitte's mouth briefly curved in a derisive snicker before she turned her attention to the hall in front of her.

"I was in the room for a short while the other day," Greta decided to reply, ignoring the widow's subtle disdain. "I did not get a chance to look at any of the hunting trophies very closely. But I got the impression that there was quite a few of them."

"I see."

They had finally reached the threshold of the hunting room. Greta looked in and could immediately tell that someone had come in before them to light the lamps to give the room light. That someone had also cleaned up the mess that had occurred the previous day—minus particular items that had been damaged beyond repair during Greta's flight.

Brigitte was the first one to enter the room. Her gaze was upon all the stuffed animal heads on the walls, particularly of a few bear heads hanging over the fireplace. "Oh my. Apparently the Count-Palatine has had quite a few conquests."

Greta disguised an exasperated sigh with a cough. "Hm."

"I do hope that the Count-Palatine does go hunting while we are here," Brigitte said as she now contemplated a gigantic deer head nearby. "I would like to see all of that virility in action. Why, this is, what—eighteen points? Very impressive."

She remained silent. She would just wait the widow out. Her intuition told her that Brigitte Sonntag did not bring her here to mindlessly look at stuffed animal heads. Wittelsbach's mistress wanted to talk with her about something else—something that she probably didn't wish to discuss.

Finally, they made their way back to the fireplace in the room after Brigitte commented on everything in the room with vaguely suggestive remarks.

"Miss Silber, you strike me as a sensible woman."

Greta found herself linking her hands behind her back. "Really?"

"I know why you're really here."

Her blood ran cold. Did the widow know about the investigation? If so, what was her role in everything that had happened at the castle so far?

"You're actually the Margrave's mistress."

Greta felt her face go into a disapproving grimace as she looked at the flames in the fireplace to avoid the widow's taunting gaze. She knew someone would come to that conclusion sooner or later. But would Matthias listen to her doubts? No.

"Although I don't really see what he sees in you. I've met the Margrave once."

She forced her gaze to remain on the fire. She did not want Brigitte to have the satisfaction that she had startled her with that bit of information. "You have?"

"From the women that I've seen him with, you don't fit the profile at all." The widow lowered her voice. "Perhaps he is merely amused by you because you are different. He will go back to those other women when he tires of you."

"I suppose you consider yourself more like those other women than I am?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Brigitte smile. An outside observer might conclude that she looked like an angel. But she saw the vicious expression in the woman's gaze. "I am like no one. But I am quite sure that no one, in turn, can resist me. I could see tonight that the Margrave could not resist me. You will lose him, Miss Silber."

She raised her palms outward. "You wish for me to do something, Mrs. Sonntag? Fight for him? I know I will lose. But I am curious. Why go for the Margrave when there is a Count-Palatine? Surely the Lord of Welf would be a better catch. Or is your game more about intimidating other women? If that is it, then take him. For contrary to your belief, I am not like you. I am no one's mistress."

At the face of her logic, Brigitte glared at her. "What exactly are you implying?"

"You know exactly what I'm implying," Greta smiled coldly.

They were briefly at an impasse before Brigitte said, "It was interesting that you mentioned that the Count-Palatine was a better catch. I think you have it wrong. My very good friend is the Count-Palatine's heir. As the Lord of Welf's nephew, Rudolph stands to inherit everything."

"Well, good luck to you then, Mrs. Sonntag," Greta replied as she took one step backward. "The Count-Palatine appears to be in quite good health these days. Why, one would say that he is in his prime of his life. And although Mr. Wittlesbach is his nephew, your friend appears to be in a more advanced age than Lord Welf. It would take a while for the Count-Palatine to pass on." It would take forever, she thought, if the Count-Palatine's claims of "immortality" were true.

"Not unless he met an unfortunate accident sometime in the near future."

She paused at the woman's remark but then continued to move back as she filed the remark to the back of her mind to ponder later. "You are right there, Mrs. Sonntag." She made a show of glancing at the clock on the fireplace's mantle piece. It wasn't even nine in the evening, but she had just thought of an excuse to escape. "You must pardon me, Mrs. Sonntag. I just realized that Lady Beswick wished to meet with me early tomorrow morning. I'm afraid I must turn in."

"Good night, Miss Silber," the widow said to her back. "And be careful as you head back to your rooms. The hallways are dark. Who knows what lurks in the shadows? I've heard about your unfortunate encounters in previous nights."

Greta did not dignify Brigitte Sonntag's parting words with any sort of response.

As Greta walked down the hallway in the direction of the guest rooms in west wing, something glimmering at the edge of her sight made her pause. She walked over to the object lying on the ground next to thick floor-length drapes that a servant had closed earlier over a window. She bent down to examine the object.

It was a thin glass stopper that probably belonged to a small vial. At the end of the stopper where it would have been inside the vial, she could tell that there was a faint brown residue. She took out a handkerchief and used the cloth to pick up the stopper so that she could examine it more closely in a better position. But before she could do so, she heard something coming from the opposite direction of the hallway from where the dining room was located.

Quickly, she shoved the handkerchief with the stopper into her pocket and stepped behind the curtain, making sure that her entire body, including her feet, was covered. The curtain itself was a little dusty, but she fought a sneeze as she brought her forearm to her nose.

"Ah, my little muffin!" It was Rudolf Wittlesbach. Greta could imagine him maneuvering his bulk out of the dining hall, barely. "There you are!"

"Rudolf! What a surprise to see you here." There was a pause. "Did you see Miss Silber?"

"Miss Silber? You mean Lady Beswick's companion? No. Why?"

"I was speaking with her and then she said something about turning in early."

"She probably went back to her bedchamber then. Forget about her, my dear." There was an odd smacking sound that Greta suspected was a kiss. "She doesn't merit your attention."

"You may be right. She is nothing."

"Well, speaking of turning in, I was thinking about that myself."

"Oh were you?" The couple had started moving down the hall and this made Greta strain her ears to hear what they were saying next. "I thought you were having some port with the other gentlemen."

"A rather boring lot, I'm afraid, my sweet pastry. All the Count-Palatine wants to talk about is his time on the Balkan Peninsula with his friend."

"Well, he did live there for most of his life."

"And he should have stayed there. This would have been mine if he had simply renounced his title. I decided to take my leave after they began talking about farming practices there. I decided to go to the kitchens to see if they had anything stronger than port. Wine perhaps."

"Rightly so. But why would you want wine?"

"To celebrate us, my dear. I'm having it sent up to our chambers."

At that point, they were too far away for Greta to hear what Brigitte said in response to Wittlesbach. She leaned back against the wall and sighed, breathing in a lungful of dusty air. She sneezed loudly and then guiltily peeked out from the curtain. The Count-Palatine's nephew and his mistress had turned a corner, leaving her part of the corridor empty. She slipped out and breathed some clearer air.

She wasn't sure what she had in her pocket, but she was definitely going to examine it tonight. From the residue that was left, she was reasonably sure that she would be able to identify what sort of vial the stopper belonged to. It might be something very interesting due to the fact that the stopper was located in such an incongruous place as the hallway to the dining hall. Or it could be something as mundane as gravy.

Chapter Twenty-Five

On the first floor of the west wing, in a small shadowed alcove right before the stairs leading up to the second floor, she spotted the glass vial.

She picked this up as well with her handkerchief. She did not try to put the stopper into it although she was quite certain that it matched the vial. The vial itself was made of a thick quartz crystal, carved plainly with a simple maker's mark on the bottom of the container. There was nothing in the vial and from a cursory glance, it did not appear that there was any residue in it either. Which meant that the vial had either been cleaned of its contents or the stopper belonged to another identical vial that did contain whatever that had stained the stopper.

Greta put the vial into her pocket with the stopper and was about to step out of the alcove when she heard noises coming from the other side of the wall. She remembered that the Margrave had told her that the walls in the castle was probably too thick for any sound to penetrate. She was beginning to think that he was wrong.

She put her ear to the wall and listened. The voices were somewhat muffled although she could tell that there were at least one woman and one man.

"Well, what have we here?"

She yelped and turned around quickly. A dark form was lurking just outside of the alcove. When he stepped forward, the light from the dim wall sconces hit his face. It was the Count-Palatine. And Greta abruptly realized that she was trapped in the alcove.

The Lord of Welf smiled, showing teeth. Greta shivered.

"Did you not want to retire, Miss Silber?"

"I was about to, my lord."

"A funny place to be heading back to your bedchamber. The stairwell is in the other direction."

"I am aware of that."

The Count-Palatine stepped closer until he was merely a few fingers away from her. He was so still that she could not feel his breath. But then she belatedly realized that he didn't breathe. At all.

"This is a rather odd location," he said. His hand came up to her shoulders to make her turn around. Heavy cold soaked through the fabric of her dress. "This is actually just outside of my nephew's room. Why would you be here?"

She didn't answer.

His fingers tightened ever so slightly and she felt him tugging in her mind. His bite had started to fade and so had his influence as time progressed, but she did not want him to feel like he needed to renew control over her.

"I heard a noise while I was heading back to my room," she finally said. It was the truth so that it would not alert him, but it was also not everything. "So I came to investigate. There is nothing here."

"Nothing? I wouldn't be too sure of that." The Count-Palatine crowded closer to her. It was as if the unnatural winter had blown into the castle. She watched his hand move past her face. "There is something here. Ah." His fingers had pushed against part of the wall molding and a small bit of it swung aside, revealing a small hole. A bit of light streamed out of it. A peephole.

"What is that?"

"You know perfectly well what it is, Miss Silber." She could feel him bending his head, his mouth close to the skin on her neck. "Look."

There was still a bit of compulsion in his voice. And she was curious. So she looked through the peephole. And promptly gasped, trying to pull back. His hand was at her neck, keeping her in that position. She shut her eyelids. "No! I can't. This isn't proper!"

The peephole had a perfect vantage point into the Wittlesbach's bedchamber. Particularly the bed. The Count-Palatine's nephew and his mistress were on his bed. They were still mostly dressed, but it was obvious that they were not just sitting around talking. Wittlesbach was sitting on the edge of his bed with his trousers at his ankles. Brigitte was crouched between his knees, occupied.

"A pity you don't like to watch," the Count-Palatine whispered. "I like watching."

"You pervert! Let me go!"

"Hm. You're a feisty one. I begin to see why the Margrave is so fascinated with you."

He eased his hold on her, but only a little so that she could wrench her head away from the peephole. Instead, the Count-Palatine put his own eye to the peep hole. She could see his lips curving into a lecherous smile as he watched the proceedings in the bedroom. She shoved backward, but the vampire was unyielding.

"Mrs. Sonntag appears to be very talented," he said, seemingly oblivious to her struggles. "I wonder if she would utilize her talents on me?"

"Her talents would be wasted on you," Greta said scathingly as she tried to jam her elbows into his abdomen. With no avail. "Due to your undead state, my lord, you lack any sort of vigor for her to work with. No wonder you like spying on people. You're trying to live vicariously through them."

"Now that isn't true." He finally took his attention off the lurid proceedings in the next room to look at her. His eyes had a hypnotic quality to them as his gaze was focused on her. "I liked watching others even when I had been alive."

She tried to shore up her will so that he could not control her mentally, but he seemed distracted as he looked beyond the alcove. She took the opportunity to finally shove herself out of his grip. And promptly stumbled into the hallway into another man's arms.

"Greta, what are you doing here?"

She felt the Margrave grasp her forearms to look at her searchingly. She knew that he had felt her distress through their bond and had most like rushed over to see what was the matter.

"I thought you were touring the first floor with Mrs. Sonntag."

She shook her head. "We finished the tour. I was about to go retire for the night when I was sidetracked." She turned to glare at the Count-Palatine when he slowly edged out of the alcove to look at them. "And then he was here."

The Margrave turned his attention to their host. "Welf, you've gone too far."

"Have I?" the Count-Palatine replied in an almost languorous attitude. "Perhaps you are over-reacting, my dear Lord Baden. I simply wished to speak with Miss Silber about a matter."

"Speak?" she said incredulously.

"Well, perhaps speak is not precisely the correct term," the Lord of Welf amended. "But I did tell Miss Silber that I liked to watch."

The Margrave furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "Watch? Watch what?"

"He's a voyeur," Greta clarified.

He tightened his hold on her. "I do not wish to hear about Lord Welf's deviant proclivities."

"Oh, how straight-laced of you," the Count-Palatine seemed amused as the Margrave took a belligerent stance. "Yet how forward. You're such a complicated man. I think I like that."

"We should go, Greta."

"Oh, run away if you must." The Count-Palatine leaned against the edge of the alcove with his arms crossed at his chest. "Although you would have to keep in mind that I might want to watch you. The walls here may have eyes."

"Are you threatening us?" demanded the Margrave.

"Forget about it, my lord," Greta said. "It's not like he has anything to threaten us with. He might watch. But he cannot physically participate, ever. It has to do with his undead state, I think."

"It is true, what she says," the Count-Palatine said mournfully. "At first, after I was turned, it seemed as if everything was all right, but everything eventually died."

"I can see how a man could go mad after a while if that is the case," the Margrave murmured.

"Why am I not surprised that that is how men definite their masculinity?" Greta replied with a roll of her eyes. "Which is just as well. I doubt anything medicinal would help his condition."

"Is that your opinion, as an apothecary?" said the Count-Palatine.

"How do you know that I am apothecary?"

"Valebona mentioned it. He said something about you brewing him a tincture for his allergies. But then again, that would work on him." The Count-Palatine grinned, showing his teeth. "Although I do not function quite the same as before, there is one way that I can still experience what it is to be still alive."

"Oh no, you're not biting us again," said the Margrave grimly. He reached into a pocket and took out a flask that was stopped by cork. The glass itself was green so that it was impossible to tell exactly what was inside. "Come close and your face will be dripping with this."

The Count-Palatine seemed to sense the power of the flask's contents and he shrunk back, hissing. His blue eyes glittered eerily in the dark. "What makes you think that you can stop me with that? What if it's just water?"

"Do you really want to test me?"

Their host seemed to shrink back further. "Fine then. Go. But I may be closer than you think."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Margrave ushered her into his room after he took a quick look down the hallway to make sure that no one of importance observed their movements. He had insisted that she not go to her room by herself—who knew what the Count-Palatine would do if he had the opportunity. Safety, the Margrave argued, trumped propriety. Of course, Greta thought pragmatically, that did not eliminate the fact that someone could be hiding somewhere to watch her walk into the Margrave's bedchamber. But if someone was hiding, he or she probably already knew that there was something happening between them and come to the obvious conclusion—as had Mrs. Brigitte Sonntag.

But she did not want to think about Wittlesbach's mistress at the moment. She brushed by the Margrave as she made a beeline toward the dressing table in his room as he locked his bedchamber door. She found a pitcher of water and a washbasin. She stuck a finger into the pitcher. The water was cold, but it would have to do. Too many strange things have been happening in the castle lately and she did not wish to compound upon it by requesting yet another bowl of boiling water. The people in this part of the world were long past the custom of burning suspected witches at the stake, but she did not want to test that assumption even further than she had to.

The Margrave ran a hand through his hair as he strode toward the fireplace to brood over the flames. “I do not like this. I am seriously reconsidering my decision to bring you here. Perhaps you would have been more safer back down in the town.”

“Well, it's too late now. You're stuck with me here.” She tried to smile at him, but he did not respond. “What's wrong?”

“Everything.”

Greta poured a little water into the empty shaving bowl next to the wash basin until a thin layer of water covered the porcelain bottom. Then she brought it over to the small coffee table standing next to the fireplace. She tugged over a stool and sat before bringing out the objects that she had discovered.

“What are you doing?” The Margrave brought over a chair to sit across from her. He watched as she set the empty vial on the table next to the shaving bowl and then dropped the vial stopper into the shaving bowl.

“I hope you're not using this any time soon,” she said.

He shrugged. “I can always get another one. That is not the problem. You found something of interest. Do you need hot water?”

“It can make things easier, but I do not wish to bother the kitchens with my request tonight.” She took hold of the bowl and tilted it a few times, the glass stopper clinking against its sides. The water washed over the stopper and the brown residue disappeared into the liquid surrounding it. To her eyes, a sickly film began to form over the water. She knew that not everyone could see it.

“Where did you find these things?” The Margrave picked up the empty vial and turned it in his hands, the light striking it so that it looked like an amber stone.

“They were in the corridor, discarded. I found the vial in that alcove, before the Count-Palatine interrupted me.” She frowned as she tilted the bowl one last time and the film on top of the water dissipated. “Well, I'm not sure if I should say this would be progress or merely the obvious.”

“What do you mean?”

“I do not know if that vial is the same one that this stopper belonged to, but the stopper certainly belonged to a vial that contained a distilled mixture of foxglove and wolfsbane. The poisoner had possessed this at some point.”

“I see.” The Margrave finally put the vial down as he glanced at the bowl. “That is one piece of evidence, but it doesn't give us any more clues as to what is happening. Or who the poisoner might be.” He smiled without humor. “Not that I blame the poisoner. I'd like to see him dead, permanently, myself.”

“Granted, he is an annoyance, but...”

“Greta, he has the ability to take away free will.” The Margrave was staring at her now. “If I could, I would rip him from my mind. He's still there, although fading. But there is no doubt that he would soon renew that connection if he still finds me of interest. And he has shown no indication that his fascination is flagging.”

“You kept him at bay earlier.” She stood up and took the bowl to the fireplace where she carefully poured the water at the edge of the fire so that the flames would not be put out. “Was that really holy water?”

“This?” He took out the flask in his pocket and chuckled as he placed it beside the empty vial. “It was an old container in the kitchens that no one noticed I had taken. Originally it had been labeled as a cooking wine, but I managed to take the label off.”

“Did he not go into your mind to see if you were lying?”

“He only assumed. Besides, I never really said it was holy water in the first place, did I? It would have been impossible for him to sense a lie.”

“No. Ah, I see now. A truth with omission.” She placed the bowl back on the table. “What are we going to do about him? Do you think all the things the folktales say apply to him? Would we find the answer in the library?”

“Folktales are just that, folktales. They're stories that might have some truth to them, but they've been elaborated so much over the years that it is hard to tell what is fact from the fiction.” He gave her a brief smile. “But as you're fond of

saying, what's the harm in trying? Perhaps we should go down to the library to see if we could find the book that Mr. Beethoven talked about. Of course, this is the Count-Palatine's library, so there is the possibility that he deliberately put in a book filled with falsehoods.”

“But your trick with the holy water worked, didn't it?”

“Yes, I did read about that. But somewhere else.” He looked down at the table where she had rested her hand that had the knife wound, only inches from his. “It is getting late.”

“Hm.”

“You're probably tired.”

“Not as much as I should be.” She was still standing, but she made no move toward the secret passageway that one of the fireplace panels concealed. “I don't want to go back to my room.”

“You should.”

He stood up to open the panel of the secret passageway. The fireplace panel swung open and he took one of the candles on his desk to light the way.

“I'm not sure it's a good idea,” she said.

“You're stalling.”

She sighed and finally followed him up the passageway stairs to the second floor. Greta took out the key from another pocket in her dress and opened the panel to her room. Her room felt cool despite the warmth coming out of the fireplace that a servant had lit earlier.

“Don't look so despondent.” He raised a hand to cup her cheek. The bandage on his palm briefly scraped against her skin. “We'll find out what's going on and make sure he doesn't pay us any more attention.”

“Us? I think he has more interest in you.” She moved restlessly away as she paced her room. She tugged at the window curtains and looked out, seeing nothing but the night. A thought occurred to her. “You don't suppose that he has anything to do with the poisoning?”

“Why would the Count-Palatine want to poison himself?” said the Margrave. “That doesn't make any sense at all.”

“I'm trying for logic here, Matthias. Just humor me.”

“All right. So why are you reasoning this?”

“In our last conversation with the Count-Palatine, he implied that not even my medicines could even restore his manly vigor.”

The Margrave frowned. “What does that have to do with anything? Besides, I thought it was you who said that—as an insult.”

“It was, but he didn't refute my claims either. And he is undead. So putting those two facts together, we can conclude that medicines do not have any effect on the Count-Palatine's state. Does that also mean that poisons would not have any effect on him either? If so, why would he care if his food was poisoned? He doesn't eat food. And even if he did, it would do him no harm.”

“Yes, but you forget, there is also the intent. Someone is trying to eliminate the Count-Palatine...”

“What if this is just a trap to keep us, you, here?”

The Margrave rubbed his forehead. “I think you're ascribing much more complicated motives to the Count-Palatine than you should. He is just some undead thing who is more concerned about his own appetites and his will to live than what happens to anyone else around him. You should have heard him in those meetings in his study. He did not really care that the food tasters were dead. It was just an inconvenience for him.”

“And I think he is perhaps more crafty than you give him credit for.”

A noise coming from below the hidden passage kept him from answering her comment. Instead, the Margrave turned toward the hidden passage to say, “What was that? I hope they haven't come to search my room yet again. I'm sure they didn't find anything the last time. And I'm sure they wouldn't find anything this time either.”

“Perhaps they only searched part of your room the other night?” Greta hurried after him as he strode back down the hidden passageway's stairs.

“Only part of my room? Doesn't that strike you as particularly incompetent? If I had the opportunity to search someone's room, I'd do it once so I wouldn't have to risk myself with going into the room again.”

“Maybe they were interrupted previously.”

The Margrave snorted. “Certainly not by us. We were detained, remember?”

When they arrived back in the Margrave's room, nothing appeared to be disturbed. But surprisingly, the black cat was present. It was standing at the desk, looking toward the window of the Margrave's bedchamber, seemingly yowling at the moon.

“Crazy cat.” The Margrave shook his head, but he approached the desk to check the drawers.

“I'll just take him back to my room then, if you don't like him,” said Greta. She pulled the animal into her arms, but the cat seemed restless, his paws still reaching towards the window. “What is it?” she asked the cat.

The cat only yowled some more.

The Margrave closed the last drawer of his desk. “Everything seems like it's in place.” He glanced at her. “What

are you doing? I thought you were going straight back to your room.”

“In a minute.” Greta had walked over to the window. With a free hand, she touched the latch. “Was this open before?”

He looked at where her finger pointed and swore. “So someone has been in here.”

“Unfortunately, we can't...oh!”

The black cat finally wriggled his way out of her arms and pounced, hitting against the window. It creaked open a sliver, letting in a cold tendril of air. The black cat pushed the window open with his paws and quickly leaped out into the night.

“No!” Greta rushed to the edge of the window, ignoring the cold wind hitting her face. She looked down into the darkness. “Isn't this the second floor? The cat is going to hurt itself.”

“Come away from the window, Greta.” He pulled her away and then shut the window. The latch snicked closed. “Cats can survive falls from great heights. Besides, I don't believe it was an ordinary cat.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

June 14, 1815

Greta slowly traced figures in the moisture that formed on the window pane when she had breathed on it. Outside, it appeared as if the sun was at its summer zenith—hot and in full force. But the frost on the trees surrounding the castle remained impenetrable.

She finally turned away from the window to make her way down to a sun room that Mr. Beethoven's nephew, Karl, had mentioned was at the end of the third floor corridor on the south side of the castle. She was to meet Mr. Beethoven and Karl for tea after the composer's early afternoon rehearsal with the musicians. Karl had privately expressed to her that this was the first time that his uncle had decided to break for tea during their stay at Heiligenberg castle. The boys suspected that his uncle wanted to be free to see the arrival of the gypsies.

When Greta had voiced the news that the Count-Palatine had invited gypsies for the entertainment to Lady Beswick, the older woman had merely shook her head and complained about the deviant pursuits of pleasure for the younger generation. Greta decided not to point out to her that the Count-Palatine was probably many, many years older than she. Instead, she had left the older woman in the library because Lady Beswick had decided to read on her own in the library.

“I am tired of listening today,” she had told Greta. “I will just read here until the Count-Palatine's secretary fetches me for one of his latest castle tour. Dreadful.”

“If you think they're so dreadful, my lady,” said Greta, “then why do you go?”

“A guest,” Lady Beswick had said in ringing tones as she looked down at Greta, “does not decline her host's hospitality.”

On the south wing of the castle, the corridor curved and Greta found herself facing a series of doors. Karl had said that it was the third on her right. So she pushed open the door. And found herself in what appeared to be a gilded pavilion.

The floor of the sun room was a polished marble, veined with gray granite that sparkled like silver threads in the light. The columns vaulting up to a domed ceiling that was painted with a false sky were also made of marble although vines of gold flowers curled upwards to terminate into lantern holders. But the most magnificent part of the room were the windows. They were wide and gleaming. She could imagine it during the summer—the light the windows let in would make the entire room shine like a golden jewel. But in the unnatural winter, the room's splendor was muted.

At the end of the room, close to a large hearth, a table was set up with tea implements. Karl and Mr. Beethoven were already seated as a maid poured drinks and served cakes. The Margrave was there too, although he was standing at the hearth with a teacup in hand. He did not appear aware of anyone around him. Mr. Beethoven caught sight of Greta first and waved her over.

“Miss Silber, how wonderful that you should join us,” said the composer. “Please sit. Let Helga here pour you some tea. Would you like one of these mint cakes or a sausage roll?”

“A mint cake would be wonderful. Thank you, Mr. Beethoven.”

Karl swallowed a bite of his sausage roll before saying, “Is Lady Beswick coming?”

Greta shook her head. “I'm afraid not, Karl. She said something about touring the castle with the Count-Palatine's secretary this afternoon.”

“My aunt has a mind of her own. I'm sure she finds touring the castle a much more invigorating exercise,” the Margrave had turned to them. He had been addressing Karl, but he was looking at Greta with a faint smile. “I'm glad you

found this place. It is a little confusing in the south wing.”

“Are you putting my sense of direction into question?” She raised an eyebrow at him as she took a sip of tea. When she put her cup back down to her saucer, she picked up her fork to take a bite of the cake that Mr. Beethoven had handed to her. “I did not know that you were also invited to this little gathering.”

“I thought it was appropriate that we were all here,” said Mr. Beethoven. “I had suggested this idea to the others, too. Mr. Wittlesbach and Mrs. Sonntag, however, declined since they had been planning an outing to the town for the past few days. Mr. Valebona and the Count-Palatine said they had other pressing matters to attend to.”

More likely, Greta thought, the Count-Palatine did not want to get fried to a crisp in the sun room. “And what about Mr. Wechsler?” she asked.

Before Mr. Beethoven could respond, the Margrave replied, “He is unavailable. He is running an errand for me.”

“That’s unfortunate,” she said. She took a bite of the cake. The pastry was smooth and slightly sweet on her tongue. And it left a refreshing aftertaste on her palate. “Mm. This is quite wonderful. I hope it wouldn’t be too much trouble to get the recipe from the cook.”

The maid Helga who was putting the last of the cakes on a platter before leaving, bobbed her head. “It wouldn’t be too much trouble at all. The cook who made these cakes is my sister. She will be quite pleased that you liked it.”

When the maid left, the Margrave took a seat and helped himself to a slice of cake as well. “I can’t quite picture you baking,” he remarked. “But then, I suppose I’m a little biased. I’ve only seen you before in your role as an apothecary.”

“I bake out of necessity,” she said cautiously. Then she turned to the composer. “You said that you heard that the gypsies were coming this afternoon?”

“Indeed.” The composer leaned over, animated as he forgot his earhorn sitting beside his plate. “I overheard the gardener and one of the cooks this morning again. Apparently, there had been a messenger last night at the castle. The gypsies had sent word of their arrival at the outskirts of the town last night. They will be here any minute now.”

“Why would they send word of their arrival to the Count-Palatine?” the Margrave said. “Gypsies don’t normally do that. They just show up.”

“You’re right, my lord. It doesn’t seem like what the gypsies would do. From what I know of them, they would not like to call attention to themselves.” The composer frowned as he took a sip of tea. “But although it is odd, it isn’t completely strange. The Count-Palatine could have, perhaps, requested that they inform him of their arrival.”

“That could be the case.” The Margrave turned toward the window as if he had heard something. “This has a perfect view of the path that leads up to the castle. I’d imagine that during times of warfare, this sun room was actually a watch room.”

“Hard to imagine,” the composer said as he looked around. “Unless you’ve stripped the place of all of this decoration.”

“I think the painting and the marble was probably installed quite recently,” said Greta. “The style is very modern.”

The Margrave turned back to them. “That’s true. Although I find it a little hard to imagine that the current Count-Palatine actually directed someone to decorate it this way. This is very, hm—what’s the word? French. I’ve seen paintings of the French court and it looks like this. The Count-Palatine grew up in the Balkan Peninsula, with German parents I should say, and I doubt that is the influence.”

“Or perhaps,” Greta suggested, “he left someone free reign to decorate this room because he was not going to be using it very often.”

Karl suddenly jumped up from his seat to race toward the window. He was looking down at the path to the castle. “Look! Uncle Ludwig, do you think those are the gypsies that the gardener was talking about?”

The three adults rose from their seats to head toward the window. Greta looked down to where Karl was pointing. A wagon painted in reds, greens, and blues, emerged from the surrounding dead forest like an ambling phoenix as it rolled up the pathway toward the front of the castle. Four horses, shaggy ponies, really, pulled the wagon and were driven by a figure hidden in a voluminous black cloak and a large brimmed hat topped with two green feathers.

“They certainly look similar to the gypsies we encountered just outside of Vienna,” said the composer. His eyes gleamed in excitement, like his nephew. “The style of their wagon is definitely of that of gypsies. I cannot wait to introduce them to my newest piece. They would be ideal performers. Of course, we’ll let them setting in for a bit before I introduce myself to them this evening.”

“Are they not here to perform for the Count-Palatine this evening?” inquired Greta.

The composer shook his head. “Not this evening, but a few days hence. I believe they were arriving early so that they could rehearse and have well rested break. The Count-Palatine is, after all, playing host. I have heard that he is planning another gathering this coming Friday where quite a few of his influential friends have been invited. That is when the musicians I have been rehearsing with will have to perform.”

“They will be here a few days, hm?” murmured the Margrave. “That is going to complicate things.”

“Complicate what?” asked the composer.

Greta and the Margrave exchanged a look before the Margrave replied, “It is a matter that I am looking into for the Count-Palatine. It has nothing to do with this.”

"Tell me," said Greta, shifting the conversation. "What made you look for those Eastern Bavarian folktales for inspiration for your latest composition in the first place? You had implied that the gypsies had something to do with it."

"Ah! It does." Mr. Beethoven walked back to the tea table and the others followed suit. "When Karl and I met the gypsies just outside of Vienna, we had the fortune of staying at a gypsy dinner. They have an intriguing style of music. But that was not what had my attention. They also had an old woman in their troop who told stories. This storyteller, that night, recounted the tale of some unfortunate gypsies who encountered a blood-sucking monster in the forests of Romania called a vampire. That, of course, had me intrigued."

"Romania," murmured the Margrave. "Is that why the gypsies are also called the Romany by some people?"

The composer finally picked up his earhorn. "Excuse me? Speak up, boy!"

The Margrave repeated his question in a louder tone.

Mr. Beethoven finally shrugged. "Possibly. I have not paid that much attention to that. But after hearing that story, I have searched for folktales about the monster. The vampire is an undead person. Someone can be turned into a vampire if another vampire turns him. Or there is some sort of magical spell cast upon a corpse. Whether or not the vampire is still like the living person before is still debatable."

"Debatable?" prompted Greta.

"Well, that's what all the folktales say. I don't believe anyone has had the patience to perform personality tests on the undead to compare to when they were alive. It's just not feasible."

Karl had taken his seat back at the tea table like the adults, but he was fidgeting. After a moment, when the others weren't looking, he got off his seat again to look out the window. This time, instead of the excited expression on his face, he was frowning. Suddenly, he exclaimed, "Look!"

"What is it Karl?" the composer said in exasperation. "We saw the gypsies. They are probably at the gate now to enter the castle courtyard. Is it the gypsies again?"

"No, there's something moving in the branches outside."

"Perhaps it's just the wind?" the Margrave suggested as he began eating one of the mint cakes.

Greta thought it odd that the normally staid boy was suddenly jumping up and down as if he had hot coals in his shoes. She pushed her chair back and walked over to where the boy was standing.

"Look, look! Miss Silber, don't you see the branches moving too?"

Yes, she did see the branches moving. And they weren't moving because of the wind. Something dark wound around the branches like oily black ribbon streaming up toward the sky. Greta discretely rubbed her eyes, hoping that she was only seeing shadows. No, they were still there.

"The branches are moving in a strange pattern," said the composer's nephew.

"Do you see the blackness?" she whispered.

"What blackness?"

She looked down at the boy, but he only looked puzzled by her comment. No, she was quite certain that the boy saw something—but it wasn't the same thing that she was seeing. Perhaps this thing outside had an appearance that varied according to the viewer.

"You're uneasy." The Margrave had gotten up to see what was the matter. His eyes were looking outward as well and he looked troubled. He took one of her hands which had balled into a fist and gently rubbed her knuckles with his thumb until her muscles slowly relaxed.

The boy saw them holding hands, but he did not seem unduly surprised by it.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"There's something in the branches. Blackness. I'm see what you're seeing, aren't I?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Greta was bundled up in a thick riding coat, a scarf, and a wide-brimmed riding hat that covered her ears. And yet, she still felt cold.

She and the Margrave had finished up tea with the composer and his nephew in the sun room. The boy had seen something outside, but not quite the same thing. The composer had claimed that he had seen nothing wrong about the trees outside and had declared that they were probably just seeing the result of winds. But he did not quite hide the uneasy flicker of his eyes. The composer felt something was wrong, but he was unable to articulate what he was feeling.

Afterwards, the composer had taken his nephew back to the practice rooms so that he could refine his latest composition. And without another word between them, Greta and the Margrave had mutually decided to meet up just outside the entrance of the castle to take a closer look at the unusual thing up in the trees.

So now they were standing beneath one of the trees closest to the entrance of the castle. The Margrave was wearing a black, high-collared coat with brass buttons. His dark hair was covered by a matching hat. The snow underneath his feet crunched as he moved forward so that he could get a closer look.

At this angle, Greta could now tell that the blackness in the branches weren't exactly ribbons. It did not have the

same sheen. In fact, the blackness had no sheen at all. It swallowed up all the light. It trailed like jagged threads along the treetops as if someone had run an enormous carding comb filled with black sheep wool over it. The air above them tingled with malevolent energy.

“Someone or something has been dabbling with the otherworld,” the Margrave finally said. As he spoke, the air puffed out of his mouth in white streams, a contrast to the blackness above. “And that someone has neglected to clean up after himself.”

“So do you think this is recent?” said Greta. “It wasn't here when we arrived at the castle. Otherwise, we would have noticed.”

“Yes, it's recent. I think it came just after the gypsies' arrival.”

“Do you think it's a coincidence?”

“We can't dismiss anything as coincidence.”

She hugged her arms to herself. “Is it going to cause problems?”

“Anything can cause problems if they aren't attended to.” He looked back at her. “It's a little disturbing to look at, but I believe these threads will dissipate before night falls.”

“What are they anyway?”

His mouth briefly edged upward in a cold smile. “Some people would call them life lines that had been cut to early. They are bits of energy left over after someone has opened a portal using dark magics to the otherworld to call on the dead. Someone trained in the art wouldn't be so careless. Anyone with talent could gather these up and perhaps do something with it. But no one's here now so I...”

Greta stood frozen as her gaze suddenly went to the spot behind the Margrave. “Matthias!”

A roar burst through the tree branches and something viscous erupted, scattering the area with bits of dead wood and bark. The blackness had gathered into itself to form a creature with a turgid body and legs—many of them—everywhere. Yellow eyes peppered the unnatural body and something yawned open revealing teeth. Saliva dripped down from the fangs and burned holes into the ground.

The Margrave whipped around and tried to shield Greta with his body as the creature tried to lash out. In the night, it would have been bad enough, but in the middle of the day, the creature's presence was irrefutable. It moved like a hungry spider in its web of tree branches. The creature screamed and the both of them stumbled back until they hit the outer wall of the castle.

“What is that thing?” Greta breathed. Her fingers automatically clutched at the cold stone behind her. There was nothing to be used as defense except perhaps pebbles and snow.

“I don't know. There are creatures from the otherworld that take advantage of...good God!” The Margrave grabbed Greta and rolled with her over toward the entrance of the castle as the creature leaped from the branches of the trees towards them.

She found herself flattened on the ground with the Margrave on top of her. She glanced over his shoulder and saw that the creature had immediately turned its attention to their whereabouts. “Move!” she shouted.

The creature scrambled to behind the entrance and the Margrave stumbled up to swing the iron gate closed. The thing stopped short of touching the iron but still screamed like squealing iron, only ten-fold louder. Greta almost tripped as she scooted back, her hands to her ears. The Margrave was still standing near the entrance and his lips were moving with a defensive spell.

A sharp cold wind rushed passed Greta as it hit the creature, sending it skittering a few paces backward.

“Do you think you could kill it?” she asked as the creature stilled and regarded them with a malevolent gaze, possibly thinking of ways to get at them.

He shook his head. “I've never encountered such a thing before. I could do a number of things, but I'm not sure anything would work.”

“Fire would probably work.”

They both turned to look at the person who spoke.

The gypsy man stood tall, almost as tall as the Margrave, and even in his brown leather vest over a particularly bright green shirt, Greta could tell that his shoulders were very broad. He was wearing a brimmed hat with two green feathers. He only had one eye. The other was ruined by an ugly scar that ran from the middle of his forehead to his left cheek. But despite the scar, there was something intense about them man. In one arm, he held a crossbow. In the other, an arrow, the tip wrapped in an oil soaked cloth that had been set on fire.

“Duck!” the man cried out.

The Margrave grabbed Greta's shoulders and forced her down again as the gypsy man raised his arms in a lightning fast movement and let the arrow fly.

The creature had attempted to leap the castle wall. But the arrow found its mark and the thing crashed onto the ground next to them and went up in flames, leaving nothing but melted snow and charred ground.

“One should be careful in enchanted cities,” the gypsy man said. “Who know what one might encounter. You'd best be prepared for everything.”

Greta and the Margrave finally stood up. “Thank you for that,” he said, looking at the gypsy man. “I owe you a favor.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The gypsy man walked up to them and held out his hand which the Margrave shook. “Please, I’m Yoska Spirosko.”

“Matthias Verona of Baden.” He kept a proprietary hand at her waist even as she slanted him an inquiring glance. “Miss Greta Silber.”

“Miss Silber, a pleasure to meet you.” The gypsy man held her hand and kissed her finger tips with a flourish. He gave her a roguish smile. “No wonder the Count-Palatine invited you to his castle.”

She was amused. “I am only an inadvertent guest, Mr. Spirosko. I am the lady’s companion of the Margrave’s aunt.”

“I see.” Spirosko then turned his attention to the Margrave. “I have heard about you, my lord. I did not think that you would be so careless about letting such things roam free,” he said, referring to the creature that he had just killed.

The Margrave gave the gypsy man a grim smile. “You mistake me. I came out to investigate. I had no idea that this was here. I believe someone else may be playing with the dead.”

“That does not surprise me.” The gypsy man walked over to the smoldering remains of the creature and reached in to pluck something out. It looked like a black gem—onyx or jet—a raw lump that had yet to be cut and polished. “I believe I will keep this as my payment.” He grinned as he pocketed it. “Now if you wouldn’t mind, let’s get out of this cold air and you can tell me all about what is happening here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The group of gypsies was a colorful, almost ragtag bunch gathered around one of the battered working tables in the kitchens. They laughed in good natured jibes and enticed the servants—normally glassy-eyed and dull—into joining the fun. They were playing some sort of gambling game with a pair of dice which they threw along the length of the table.

Spirosko introduced them to the rest of his troop and there were loud exclamations as they tried to entice them to join in their gambling fun. Greta just shook her head, adamant that she was only going to be a watcher. The Margrave declined politely which gave Greta pause.

“I thought you were a gambling man,” she said to him. “After all, my father lost everything to you.”

“Your father, I’m sorry to say, did not know when to stop.”

“And you do?”

The Margrave’s eyes tracked the dice which landed on a particularly bad combination. The kitchen servant who had tossed it gave a frustrated groan while the gypsies cheered. “I, at least, know when the advantage is not my own. Especially if a bespelled pair of dice are in play.”

“You think the gypsies are using magic to cheat?” whispered Greta.

A strange smile flickered on the Margrave’s mouth. “I wouldn’t say that they are actually using the magic. The magic just happens to be on their side.”

“Come, come, why are you standing on the sidelines?” Spirosko boomed as he waved them over. “Come take a closer look, even if you do not wish to play.”

“Oh darling, if they wish to stand all the way over here, just let them be.” The speaker had just entered the room and the rest of the gypsy men slapped their thighs and let out wolf-whistles. The woman was dressed in traditional gypsy dress which was not flashy in itself, but looked seductive nonetheless. Her brown skirt was long and flowing although it did not hide her slippers or the small bells at her ankles. Her blouse was of a peasant weave, but the blouse clung to her shoulders in a precarious fashion, emphasizing a generous bust. She wore a glittering chain against her neck and bangles at her wrists. Matching hoops dangled at her ears. Her dark hair was dark and riotous, framing an elfin shaped face and wide green eyes. Despite her exotic appearance, she somehow looked familiar.

“Jaelle, why don’t you run away with me?” hollered one of the gypsies.

The gypsy sauntered over to the gambling table and positioned herself daintily on Spirosko’s lap. “I’m already married, you oaf,” she retorted good-humored.

“You heard her,” said Spirosko. He gave the gypsy woman a passionate kiss, inciting the rest of the gypsies. “So Jaelle, how did your meeting go with your brother?”

She rolled her eyes. “As well as it could go with that stubborn fool.” She looked over her shoulder at them. “Who are you? You certainly don’t look like the kitchen help.”

“This is the Margrave of Baden,” said Spirosko. “And Miss Silber. They are also guests of the Count-Palatine. We had a little encounter with a dark creature just outside the castle walls.”

“A little encounter?”

“Your husband saved us from the attack,” the Margrave supplied.

“Ah.” She patted Spirosko's shoulder. “I see you've been showing off again.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“That's what you always say,” but the gypsy woman was smiling. “Pleased to meet you. I am Jaelle. I don't suppose you came to be part of the Count-Palatine's entertainment as well?”

The Margrave smiled back at the gypsy and Greta felt something dark curl in the base of her stomach. She knew he was simply being polite, but she could not help by compare her own pale self to the vibrant woman sitting with the driver of the gypsy wagon. She tried to push the jealousy away.

“I'm afraid no,” the Margrave said. “Although there are times when I think the Lord of Welf likes toying with us as well.”

“A pity.” Jaelle's mouth formed an enticing moue as she regarded Greta. “I think Miss Silber would make quite the dancer. I do have an extra costume.”

Spirosko gave a mock expression of pain. “Don't put ideas into her head, darling. I don't think most men could take two of you, let alone one.”

“Rogue!” Jaelle playfully slapped her husband's shoulder in mock punishment before she continued, “We do have the same coloring and build although your eyes are a different color.”

Greta shook her head. “I couldn't possibly. Besides, I am much too clumsy. I cannot dance the waltz without bumping into something. Or severely injuring someone.”

“That is too bad,” the gypsy woman seemed lost in thought. “Although if you happen to change your mind while you're here, you know where to find me.”

Greta doubted it. She had heard about gypsy dancing, mostly from the old biddies who were her neighbors. They had claimed that the gypsies were a rather free and uninhibited lot with no notion of propriety. If she was to keep any sense of her own propriety, she would avoid any gypsy dancing, even if the idea intrigued her.

“Tell me, Yoska, what sort of creature did you and the others encounter outside?” the gypsy woman asked when the rest of the people in the kitchen turned back to the gambling game in progress.

“Something from the otherworld,” Spirosko replied. “To my eyes, it looked like a gigantic black crab.” He took out the black stone that he had picked up earlier and handed it to his wife who seemed to take a great deal of interest in it.

His wife traced something on the stone. “Are these letters? It looks like a 'W' and an 'R'. How strange. Or maybe I'm seeing things. Maybe they're just cracks.”

“Or they could be marks from the person who had summoned the creature,” said the gypsy man meaningfully. He glanced at the Margrave. “Although the Margrave claims that he had nothing to do with summoning the creature.”

“I don't,” said the Margrave. “I have not tried any of my spells recently. There have been incidents happening here recently, though, so it could be that.”

“Incidents?” said Jaelle. “Please explain. We all knew that we were coming into an enchanted city and that there were dangers, but we had sensed that these castle walls were warded.”

The Margrave shook his head. “They may be warded, but it is not strong enough. There are weaknesses in parts of the castle. The incidents involved the infiltration of the undead. It happened here twice while we were here. From the Count-Palatine's comments, these have been happening frequently.”

“Ah.” Spirosko cracked his knuckles in glee. “We've had some experience with the undead.”

“It is nothing to make light of, Yoska.” The gypsy woman tapped a finger against her mouth as she thought. “My brother had told me something strange was happening up here in Heiligenberg Castle, but he had not been specific as he had not personally witnessed any of it.”

“Who is your brother, if I may ask?” said Greta.

She seemed surprised. “Did no one tell you? My brother is the gardener, Ferdinand. He still has a place with the rest of our troop, of course, but he prefers to stay in one place and nurture his talents with the crops.”

Chapter Thirty

“There is definitely some sort of connection,” the Margrave murmured as he pulled out a thin metal rod from the pocket of his black coat and slipped it into the lock of the greenhouse door. “There can't not be. It can't be a coincidence that the gardener is related to the gypsies.”

It was evening at about nine o'clock. Dinner was finished and no one seemed to miss the Margrave or her slipping outside. The Lady Beswick had claimed a headache after listening to the Count-Palatine's secretary drone on and on about

the history of the castle and had retired early. The Count-Palatine had decided he had other matters to attend to and had disappeared into his study with Valebona who was acting as his assistant. And the Count-Palatine's nephew and his mistress had decided to play a chess game in the hunting room. When Greta had slipped passed the room on her way outside, she heard Mrs. Sonntag ask yet another question on how the pieces move and her protector making suggestive comments.

Mr. Beethoven had presented the gypsies with his latest piece and they had seemed eager to rehearse it right away so that the composer and the newest guests were shut up in the rehearsal rooms in the south wing of the castle. Which left the servants, particularly the gardener.

Fortunately for them, Ferdinand the gardener was finished with his work for the day and had decided to enjoy the camaraderie of his sister and his fellow gypsies—even if he did not follow their customs any more. So he too was in the rehearsal rooms, far away from the site where Greta and the Margrave were breaking in.

“I think there is another connection, too,” said Greta as the Margrave turned the piece of metal and the lock snapped open. “The gardener seemed very familiar to me when I first met him. There's some sort of connection in that—perhaps I saw him somewhere else before?”

“Perhaps. In any case, maybe we will find a clue in here.”

She looked up at the sky. Earlier in the evening, the clouds had cleared out from the atmosphere, leaving a clearing overhead for the stars and the first quarter moon. The light from these celestial bodies lit the frozen gardens surrounding the castle in an eerie silver glow. A multitude of shadows also blanketed the land, making her uneasy. Was it just her tired eyes or did a shadow just move? Quickly, she slipped into the greenhouse after the Margrave and closed the door behind them.

The Margrave took something else from his coat pocket and there was a brief flare of a match before he lit a small black lantern. The lantern cast only enough light so that they could see their immediate surroundings. The rest of the greenhouse was sheathed in dark.

“Why didn't you use your gift to open the locks?” Greta said, whispering. Somehow, the atmosphere of the silent greenhouse seemed inappropriate for the normal voice. “It would have been simple.”

“Although anyone with the gift could do such a thing, I think it is better not to,” the Margrave replied. In the darkness, his expression looked grim, almost demonic. “If one knows what one is doing, perhaps. But it is all too easy to trace magic to its originator.”

“I take it that you've done that before?”

He nodded and then walked forth, moving into an aisle bracketed by what looked like potted tomato plants. “You said that you saw something here. Wolfsbane.”

“Yes. It's over here.” She motioned toward the side of the greenhouse. After a moment, she located the small potted plant that was hidden among to large trenches filled with soil. “It looks like no one has moved it since I had seen it last.”

“That would make sense. There has been no attempts of poisoning the Count-Palatine from the last incident,” said the Margrave. “His current food taster is still quite healthy. Although one does have to wonder how much of the last incident played into the current waiting game. Perhaps the poisoner was temporarily spooked at having his latest attempt be so obvious. So he his biding his time for a better opportunity.”

“That is a reasonable assumption.” Greta looked over the rest of the plants and remembered what she had spotted during the last visit in the greenhouse but did not have the chance to examine more closely. She pointed to a direction and had the Margrave follow her toward the next row of plants.

“In some ways, it is frustrating because the poisoner is not leaving any more clues for us to discover,” the Margrave continued. “Aside from knowing what sort of poison that he used last time, we are no closer to solving this riddle.”

“I'm not so sure of that,” she replied. She examined the latest specimen that she was looking at. Someone only glancing at the plant would have just assumed that it had just recently sprouted, but even in the darkness, she recognized the signs that someone had been hard at work harvesting. “There was the incident earlier today.”

“Don't remind me,” the Margrave said stonily. “That was a near thing.”

“But you had the frame of mind to try at least one spell against it,” she said. “I think you're just disgruntled because it wasn't you who destroyed the creature but someone else. I'm sure you would have thought of using fire if you were given the chance.”

“We would have probably been dead already by the time I thought of it.”

“Don't sound too depressed. We learned something from that too.”

“What did we learn?”

“That the creature was probably summoned rather than slipping out of the otherworld by chance,” she replied. She frowned at the decimated plant and then considered the pot next to it. “If you recall, Mr. Spirosko discovered something in th creature's body that was etched with letters.”

“And as Mr. Spirosko's wife said later, maybe it was just a coincidence.”

"You often say that there is nothing that is coincidence." She turned to look at him, but he was brooding, unseeing over the plants. "What exactly was that rock? Was it the creature's heart?"

"Creatures from the otherworld don't have hearts. Otherwise it would be much easier to get rid of them," he replied. "I think it was an anchor point for the creature to gain an existence in this world. Oftentimes, the anchor point is a random object in this world, usually the first thing the creature comes in contact with. It could be a piece of wood, someone's shoe, a spoon, anything."

"So this creature was anchored by the rock. But why would Mr. Spirosko want the rock as payment for his services?"

"Once an object has come in contact with such a creature, it can gain other properties of its own." The Margrave finally turned to look at her. "It is probably harmless enough in the gypsy's hands. But in this case, I think the anchor was created by someone, if those letters were true."

"And you think those letters point to the person who may have summoned the creature," she said, feeling the direction of his thoughts through their bond. "Would this also tell us who the poisoner was as well?"

"It certainly points towards that case, doesn't it?" He glanced at the pot with the decimated plant. "What was that?"

"Foxglove. This is probably where the poisoner got his." She pointed to the plant beside it that looked untouched. "In high enough doses, it can stop a man's heart. But it also looks very similar to figwort."

"What's figwort?"

"The only side affects is a narcotic effect on cats. Similar to catnip." She crossed her arms. It was somewhat chilly in the greenhouse during the night and growing colder as the night wore on. "Due to the similar appearance, it is quite easy for a non-expert to confuse them. Which means that the poisoner knew exactly what he was doing."

"Are you saying that the poisoner could be the gardener?"

"It would be the most likely conclusion. But what would be his motive?"

The Margrave shrugged. "Perhaps he has no motive. Perhaps the real poisoner used the gardener to gain knowledge of the plants in the greenhouse. Didn't my aunt have a tour of this greenhouse before? It would be easy to act the innocent and simply ask the man about which plant was what."

"That's true."

They moved down another aisle where they passed many small pots with tiny leafy plants. Greta ignored these as it was obvious to her that these were mainly harmless herbs that were only used in seasoning food. She was more interested in the far side of the greenhouse where a door led into a dark shed. There was a lock on it, but it dangled on a chain that hung loosely on one handle. She pushed open the door and peered inside as the Margrave raised his arm with the lantern to illuminate the interior. Gardening implements lined the walls, but something at a corner caught her eye.

"What is this doing here?" she exclaimed as the Margrave hung the lantern on a hook on the wall and closed the shed door so that any outside observers would not see the light. "This looks like a kettle."

"That is certainly odd."

"And look an entire distillation apparatus!" She frowned. "I wouldn't be surprised if the residue on the glass matched the residue on the vial stopper I found earlier. This certainly points towards the gardener as someone who might be involved."

"Yes, but I think things may be more complicated. If it was just one of the castle servants doing the poisoning, surely one of the other servants would have tattled if he was careless. And," he added, "there is now the complication that the gardener is related to the gypsies. I wonder how much they know."

"They only arrived earlier today."

"Yes, but..." the Margrave paused as he cocked his head. "I think I hear something." He pressed his finger to his lips when Greta opened her mouth to respond. "It is better to be careful," he whispered. He moved to the lantern to blow out the light.

They crept up to the shed door where the Margrave edged the door open. The greenhouse appeared as still and silent as a tomb. The only light filtering in from the glass came from the moon and stars above. They both breathed a sigh of relief when they realized that there was no one in the greenhouse with them. The Margrave shut the door and relit the lantern.

"I thought there was someone out there," he confessed. "Perhaps I am growing paranoid due to all the incidents that have happened so far."

"No, I think you're right to be cautious." She could still feel her heart pounding from the brief scare, but she was close enough to him that she patted him reassuringly. He caught her hand at his chest. "What are you doing?"

He gave her a dark smile. "What do you think?"

The Margrave pulled her close to give her a thorough kiss. She could taste the wine he had for dinner and his faintly musky scent. The hand that he had grasped was crushed between them. Her fingers curled against the lapel of his coat. After a long while, she forced herself away.

"We're in a shed!" she exclaimed.

Her comment had no effect on him. Instead his mouth moved to the edge of her jaw. "But we're out of that damned castle. His influence is much weaker out here. Can't you sense that?"

She looked into her mind and sensed that he was correct. The Count-Palatine's hold on them now was tenuous at best. Cautiously, her fingers played with the buttons on his coat. One of them came undone. "You didn't really want to come out here to see what sort of poisonous plants were being grown out here...oh!" The Margrave had somehow opened her coat, his hand cupping her breast, stroking.

"It was only part of the reason," he said, "but you are right, it was not my main reason. I suspected that the Count-Palatine's influence would wane with distance. And I did not wish for him to watch us. If he wants entertainment, he should go find it himself." He gave her a slow wicked smile. "It's feeling a little warm in here all of a sudden."

She swallowed as she boldly put her hand where his ardor was the most evident. She found the clasp that kept it hidden and flicked it open. "You want me to help you? Haven't we gone far enough?"

His hand slowly moved down her body. "Do you think we have?"

Her breath quickened on his cheek when he boldly pulled her skirts up. Through their bond, she sensed his sharp need which seemed to course through his veins to hers like molten glass. He had pushed her against the door of the shed. With his body as a hot, immovable support, she lifted her leg to twine it around his thigh to give him better access. A moan erupted from her when he gave her an intimate caress.

"Shh." He kissed her again. When he moved his head slightly and the stubble on his jaw rubbed against her mouth in an exquisite motion.

His touch sensitized her. She grabbed something blindly. The edges of his coat. She arched her back suddenly, but her pleased cry was silenced when he put her mouth on her.

"Beautiful. I can feel your pleasure," he murmured. "But I cannot wait."

His hands tightened on her. And he was abruptly inside her.

"Oh, that hurt." The euphoric haze blanketing her mind cleared a little as she realized what had happened. "I've heard about this from other women, but I had not realized..."

He gave her a dark, pained look. "And I had not realized that virgins were so talkative under these circumstances."

"Are virgins supposed to be talkative? Have you bedded many?"

"How should I know?" He moved his hand from her hip and reached down to touch her. She gasped, quivering. "I don't make it a habit to debauch innocent maidens."

"That's the problem, isn't it," she managed as he moved slowly, seducing her all over again. He bent his head to lick at the flickering pulse at her neck. She tried to wriggle out of his grasp but only succeeded in lodging him further inside her. "I'm not really an innocent maiden any more. How will you find another sacrifice for your rituals?"

"I already told you before, I don't need an innocent maiden for those summonings." He glared at her with an almost terrifying expression. "Damn it, Greta, stop moving."

"But isn't moving the whole point?" she taunted.

Something flashed in his eyes at her dare, and she found herself crushed against the door and thoroughly taken.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lady Beswick caught them just as they were walking out of the corridor leading to the north wing. "I see the both of you have been busy," the older woman sniffed.

Although they had done their best at straightening their clothes, Greta was aware that they still looked as if they had walked into a storm. The Margrave's hair was still disheveled. And Greta had not found all of the hair pins that she had lost in the shed. She felt herself color as Lady Beswick's gaze slid their intertwined hands and regarded them with a disapproving frown. The Margrave only tightened his hold on her.

"At least you could be more discrete about it," said his aunt.

"I thought you had turned in for the night," the Margrave said.

"I was having trouble sleeping so I decided to go down to the kitchens to find some tea." Lady Beswick gave an exasperated sigh as she looked in annoyance at the ceiling briefly. "The maid who was assigned to me, Inga, wasn't around so I decided to get it myself. So what have you two been up to? Fighting the undead again?"

The Margrave uncleared his throat uncomfortably. "Must we tell you, aunt?"

"Ah, it's that, isn't it?" Instead of looking scandalized, she looked sage. She glanced at Greta. "Do you remember when I asked you if you were in love with the girl?"

Greta half expected the Margrave to drop her hand like a hot coal. She could feel him through their bond, struggling with his aunt's bald statement. But instead, he replied with, "What of it?"

"You would only argue with me anyway." Lady Beswick waved him away as if he were nothing but an annoying fly. "Just do the sensible thing. You do remember your cousin, don't you? The man got himself killed before he had an heir of his own blood to pass the title on to. Don't make the same mistake."

"Aunt..."

"I'm going to get my tea," she said, turning her back to him. "I didn't see either of you tonight. Although, Miss Silber, I expect you at the library early tomorrow morning."

Greta gave a small shudder as the older woman walked away and the Margrave steered her toward the stairs. "I'm pretty sure what sort of text she will want me to read tomorrow."

"What?"

"She will make me read an English history, particularly on all of those wives of Henry VIII. And how they were all killed to make way for the next one."

"Don't worry about my aunt. She is probably only toying with you. She likes getting people flustered. She has no real interest in English history. Or any history for that matter. She thinks it's rather dull."

"Well, I suppose you're right," she said. "Most of the time when I read to her, she is sleeping."

"Don't tell her that though," said the Margrave, amused. "She dislikes having her weaknesses put on display."

"I will keep that in mind."

They had reached the third floor and they were standing in front of Greta's bedchamber door. They stopped for a moment and the Margrave turned to her with a serious expression on his face. His hand came up to cup her cheek and she could feel the scars on it from where he had cut himself with the knife to get blood for his summonings.

"My aunt is right on one account, though. I should be thinking about an heir."

She felt her blood run cold. She knew that she was not an acceptable candidate for a titled gentleman's wife. She was, after all, a lady's companion. And if not that, an apothecary. Whoever heard of a Margrave marrying an apothecary? It was unheard of. Unthinkable.

Feeling the direction of her thoughts, his hand tightened on hers. "It's not as if I have anyone else in mind," he said. "And it's not as if anyone else in my family can argue with me."

"I can't be your broodmare," she said.

He frowned. "Is that what you think that I think about you?"

Before she could say anything else, she felt a shadow darken the hallway. She looked over her shoulder and cringed when she saw the presence of the Count-Palatine. The Margrave's expression darkened even more, heading towards anger.

"Am I interrupting something again?" said the Count-Palatine in a faux-sweet tone. "I seem to have a habit of it, don't I?" Their host stepped closer to them. His mouth turned downward as he got a good look at them in the light. "Or maybe," he said in a low hiss, "I haven't interrupted anything at all."

"Go away, Welf," said the Margrave, "I thought you were busy with something with your friend, Valebona."

"I've been finished with him for a while." The Count-Palatine tilted his head and leaned against the wall with one shoulder as he regarded them with cold glittering eyes. "I can sense it now. You two were naughty. Without *me*."

"You don't have anything to do with what's between Miss Silber and me," said the Margrave.

The Count-Palatine's eyes slitted. "Maybe not, but you're under my roof."

"That doesn't give you permission to insinuate yourself into everyone else's private lives. You're not God."

"But I'm close to it. Or maybe is it the devil?" The Count-Palatine suddenly reached out and grabbed the Margrave by his cravat. The Margrave grabbed his wrist and tried to twist it, but the Count-Palatine seemed oblivious to his struggles. Instead, he bent his head and breathed in.

Greta thought that the vampire would kiss him again, but instead, the Count-Palatine suddenly flung him away. She grabbed the Margrave's arm to steady him before he tripped backward into the wall.

"You smell like her," he sulked. "Which wouldn't be a problem in of itself, but it is a reminder that *I*..."

"Why does everything have to be about you?" Greta interrupted.

"Why not?" the Count-Palatine glared at her. The sheen on his eyes became strange and she began to feel an ache at the back of her head. "Besides, I think you talk to much. Maybe I should reinforce my control over you."

She pushed the headache aside. "No," she said with a little difficulty. "That isn't right."

"Invite me in," he said silkily.

Something in her head was telling her to say yes, but she forcibly shook her head. "No. We can't invite you in."

The Margrave had taken the opportunity afforded with the Count-Palatine's distraction with her to open her bedchamber door and to step inside. He looped his arm around her waist and dragged her inside. Once she was over the threshold, it seemed as if the pressure in her head lessened considerably.

"Now that isn't playing fair," the Count-Palatine complained. He redoubled his efforts and she could feel the urge to step forward, but the physical barrier of the door threshold prevented her from letting her body involuntarily control her. "Come out, come out."

"No." The Margrave said it forcibly behind her. Fortunately for him, he was shielded from most of the Count-

Palatine's hypnotic suggestion with Greta's body. He kicked the door closed. On the other side, they heard the Count-Palatine hiss in disappointment.

Greta slumped in his arms. "He doesn't like taking no for an answer, does he?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

June 15, 1815

The lamp on the small table at Greta's right side flickered as if it had sensed a draft. She kept reading aloud the history that Lady Beswick had picked out for her. However, Greta had been wrong when she had guessed that Lady Beswick would pick a history on Henry VIII of England. Instead, the older woman had picked a Germanic history, particularly of the tenth century when the dukes of the German states elected a Frank called Conrad I to the Carolingian crown to help govern the Holy Roman Empire which still existed at the time.

She wondered, as she read, whether or not the Conrad I in the histories was related to the Count-Palatine who was also named Conrad. Or even more chillingly if he was one and the same. She could hardly comprehend living so many centuries. After a while, she assumed, one would have seen practically everything and life—or whatever life the undead lived—would become boring after a while.

The drapes to the library window had been pulled away from the panes to make way for the afternoon sunlight. Lady Beswick was sitting across from her in a padded chair next to the fireplace. Her eyes were closed, which might have fooled an observer to make the initial assessment that she was asleep, but Greta noticed that one of her fingers were tapping on the armrest to a rhythm that only she could hear. So Greta kept reading.

The door to the library burst open just as Greta got to the part in the history where the author began to digress into a complaint about how idiotic Heinrich the Fowler, Conrad I's successor, was in his policies and paved the way to the ruin and fracturing of the German states.

"My lady and Miss Silber!" Valebona exclaimed at the doorway threshold. "Good afternoon to both of you!" The Count-Palatine's friend from the Balkan peninsula was wearing a bright green suit today, accented by a dark yellow waistcoat and boots shined so well that even the dim lights of the library reflected it like some dark jewel. He looked like a garish imitation of the gypsies and Greta wondered if he hadn't been inspired by the recent arrival of the Count-Palatine's entertainment.

"Good afternoon, pah!" The Lady Beswick cracked an eye open and turned her rheumy gaze to their recent intruder. "That was a ruination of a perfectly good nap."

"My apologies, madam," Valebona said with an exaggerated bow. Then he walked over to the library window and began to drag the drapes closed. Soon after him, several footmen arrived in the library carrying a few extra chairs and a maid stepped in to place a tea tray on the wider library table. "But I believe the Count-Palatine is going to be commandeering this room for the time being."

"My lady," said Greta. "Perhaps we should leave since the Count-Palatine is planning on holding a meeting here."

"Oh no, please stay," said Valebona with a smile. "The Lord of Welf wishes that everyone be present for this meeting."

"I thought," said Lady Beswick as she straightened up in her chair with a disdainful brush of her skirts, "that the Count-Palatine did not deign to show his face before seven in the evening. This is highly irregular of him."

"He believes that this is important."

Greta did not hear any steps from outside the library, but the tug at the bond that was started on her knife-slashed hand told her the arrival of another. Studiously, she closed the history book and concentrated on putting it back on the shelves.

"You sent a note, Valebona?" It was the Margrave. She could feel his gaze immediately on her as he walked into the room. But he did not go to her. When she turned around to go back to her seat, she saw that instead, he took one of the new seats next to his aunt that the footmen had installed. This afternoon, he was wearing a very dark blue coat that seemed black in the dim library. His expression was enigmatic as he glanced at her. "You mentioned a meeting. Good afternoon, aunt. I take it that you are invited to this meeting as well?"

"Apparently," the older woman grumped. "Although I have no idea what pertinent information the Count-Palatine has for me. Isn't he throwing another party tomorrow evening? Does his social life never end?"

"There is, indeed, a party," said Valebona. "I have heard that a majority of the guests that the Count-Palatine had invited for it are arriving tonight. He wishes to tie up a few loose ends in this meeting so we can all be free to enjoy tomorrow."

"Loose ends? I wasn't aware of any loose ends," said Lady Beswick. "Unless you count those recent incidents

with the undead. I assume the Count-Palatine took care of that problem?"

"We shall see," replied Valebona.

"This is ridiculous," Greta heard a familiar voice out in the hallway. She could hear the clack of heels and another set of footsteps. The Margrave must have been very careful with his own steps when he entered the library. "If your uncle wanted to meet with you, why did he have to send a note through his friend, Valebona? He could have asked you directly."

"My uncle is a very strange fellow, sweet roll." The Count-Palatine's nephew, Rudolf Wittlesbach and his mistress Brigitte Sonntag strolled into the library. Wittlesbach's bulk barely fit onto the high backed chair that he chose to occupy. "He, after all, grew up on the Balkan Peninsula. Who knows what sorts of manners he learned down there. No offense to you, Mr. Valebona."

"None taken," Valebona replied cheerfully as he took out a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. "You are right, the customs of the Balkan Peninsula are quite different from Heiligenberg. One could say that in some respects that it is much more civilized here. The natives do not automatically leap to the worst conclusion."

"The worst conclusion, Mr. Valebona?" queried Brigitte as she swept up her skirts and took the small settee next to the Count-Palatine's nephew. She glanced at everyone in the room and pointedly ignored Greta. Which was just as well. Greta didn't want the attention of Mrs. Sonntag.

"Why burning at the stake, of course," Valebona said as he puffed a few smoke rings contentedly as he leaned against the wall. "The natives down there still believe in a lot of things, like witches and vampires. You should see the houses down there. They even have evil eyes painted on their houses as gigantic warding talismans."

"How barbaric," said Brigitte. "Although I suppose some people might find it charming."

"The Balkan Peninsula, unfortunately, does not appeal to me at all. I wish to visit Greece with all of its ancient splendor," said Wittlesbach. "How about, dearest?" He pinched his mistress's thigh, but she grimaced rather than looked delighted about it.

"It depends on how you define ancient splendor," the Margrave drawled in a bored tone. "There are rather a lot of ruins down there. Much of the authentic sculpture is already partially destroyed. If you see a pristine one, it is probably a forgery that has been made within the last fifty years."

"You've been down to Greece?" Brigitte inquired as she batted her eyes at the Margrave.

"For a little while," he said. But he did not elaborate why he was down there. Greta guessed that perhaps he was down there as an agent, gathering information. But Lady Beswick shattered that impression.

"The Margrave," said the older woman with a sour grin. "Was in Greece on vacation with his parents when he was a boy. His parents were antiquities fanatics. Their fascination completely escaped me. I mean, what can you do with a bunch of cold stone?"

"There is the artistic aspect," said the Margrave.

"That's what they said," said Lady Beswick. "But whatever the case, if there's one good thing about it, the current Margrave doesn't share their obsession."

"Well," said Wittlesbach's mistress solicitously, "even if you do not share your parents' obsession, surely you have a passion of your own?"

The Margrave looked at the woman, but it seemed cold. "You assume I have one, madam?"

Greta felt something in their bond, as hot as scalding water, but she did not change her expression or move from her seat to prevent anyone from noticing her.

"Well, I see everyone's here, as requested." The Count-Palatine had arrived at the entrance of the library. Unlike the rest of the occupants, he was dressed very strangely. Remarkably, considering his wardrobe from the previous days. While the Lord of Welf had donned a very rich brown velvet suit jacket with matching trousers and waistcoat, he was also wearing a hat indoors—a wide-brimmed one with a prominent buckle in the front that gleamed like old brass. Before, his cravats had been loose and low, but this time, he had had his valet tie the white linen up to his chin.

He was also wearing a wig of some sort of long chestnut curls that were reminiscent of the styles from the previous century. And he had white face makeup. But most remarkably of all, he was wearing tinted spectacles. He swung the silver capped can he was holding once and pointed toward Valebona who puffed another smoke ring as if he had no care in the world.

"We shall begin," the Count-Palatine announced. He shut the library door behind him. "We have solved the mystery of the food poisonings."

No one moved at his pronouncement.

The Count-Palatine then dropped down to the couch next to the library table with a sigh. "None of you are impressed."

"Uncle Conrad," said Wittlesbach, "it is a very serious pronouncement. We're all in shock, I'd imagine."

Greta briefly glanced at the Margrave and he shook his head ever so slightly. He had not shared their suspicions with the Count-Palatine yet so that this was a surprise to him as well. Something was up.

Lady Beswick flicked her hand. "Please pour me some tea, Miss Silber," she said. "I feel I may need some fortification before I hear Lord Welf's conclusions."

Greta leaned forward to do as the Lady Beswick requested and took the small teapot off from the table next to the fireplace to refill the older woman's teacup. She handed the cup to her and then briefly asked if anyone in the room wished to have tea. Everyone else declined.

"Tell us, then, what conclusions have you reached?" the Margrave said.

"Ah, my dear Lord Baden. I am sure that you have reached these conclusions as well," said the Count-Palatine. "But as the man you are, you are probably waiting until you have irrefutable evidence to those conclusions. Well, I cannot wait. I was never good at waiting."

"You're impulsive," supplied Valebona from his position near the shelf at the library window.

"Quite correct, Apollo." The Count-Palatine swept his glance at all of them. "The poisoner is one of you!"

Brigitte Sonntag gasped.

Lady Beswick took a slow sip of her tea. "Oh really, my lord? Then how can you explain the fact that none of us were here at the castle when your first food poisoners were killed?"

"Easily," said the Count-Palatine. "The poisoner had a connection to the staff of the castle. You do remember the cook's assistant who was killed? Well, I have word from some other servants who had observed his movements that he frequently went out to town for some inexplicable meetings. He had always explained it away as going to see his family, but my secretary has informed me that the cook's assistant did not have any family in the town below. So he was meeting someone else."

"It could be a lover," said Brigitte Sonntag.

The Count-Palatine grinned carefully, not revealing his fangs. "You would say that, Mrs. Sonntag. But no, it was not a lover. The cook's assistant was being paid by someone on the outside to slip poison into my food. And when the instigator of all of this finally came up to the castle and observed the cook's assistant's incompetence, the unfortunate servant was killed and hung to make it look like a suicide."

"That's quite the conspiracy theory you have there," said Lady Beswick. "Who are you proposing is the one to mastermind this idea?"

"Why, my own dear nephew of course," said the Count-Palatine.

Brigitte Sonntag gasped again, although to everyone's ears, it sounded false. Rudolf Wittlesbach suddenly lumbered to his feet, face red, finger pointing.

"You can't possibly accuse me of doing this!" he roared. "I only arrived in Heiligenberg last week!"

"It all makes sense, of course," said the Count-Palatine, ignoring his nephew's outburst. "You, Rudolf, are the only one who would really profit from my death. I mean, why would anyone else in this room want me dead?"

"They could hold some sort of secret grudge against you," said Rudolf desperately. "What about the Margrave, Lord Baden? Surely, he's been lurking about this place in a rather suspicious fashion."

"Unfortunately for the Margrave," said the Count-Palatine, fully revealing his fangs now which made his nephew step back in horror, "I know his whereabouts. And I *know* him. Perhaps in a way he wishes I don't. But I am quite sure he is not a possible suspect at all. You, however, have no excuses."

"You can't prove anything. All you have are speculations."

"Oh, I do have proof." The Count-Palatine pulled out a sheaf of papers from his pocket.

His nephew eyed the papers warily. "What is that?"

"Proof. These are receipts from a solicitor in town who I had my secretary inquire into. These indicate transactions of certain sums from your account to the account of the deceased cook's assistant. You were paying him, Rudolf, to kill me."

"No!" Rudolf Wittlesbach suddenly leaped forth, brandishing a dagger.

The rest of the occupants in the library was stunned, motionless, but the Count-Palatine rushed into motion, gripping his nephew's wrist tightly until, with a cry, Rudolf released the dagger where it clattered onto the stone floor below. A moment later, Valebona opened the library doors to call the footmen to bring Rudolf to custody.

As the man was dragged away, ranting, Brigitte Sonntag dropped to the Count-Palatine's feet in a somewhat awkward show of dramatics.

"My lord! Please show mercy on your nephew. He was simply misguided. And I love him!" Tears flowed from her eyes, ruining the kohl that she had put on to enhance her appearance.

"Love is a relative thing, isn't it?" remarked the Count-Palatine as he stepped over her. "Love can be paid for."

When Brigitte Sonntag turned to glare at the Count-Palatine's back as he left after his protesting nephew, Greta saw her knuckles grow white as she grasped her tear-stained handkerchief.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"If the Count-Palatine didn't have an enemy before, he has one now," the Margrave remarked when everyone else, except for himself, Greta and his aunt, had filed out of the library after the dramatic unveiling.

"Oh, I don't believe Mrs. Sonntag will do anything about this," Lady Beswick replied as she sipped her tea contemplatively. "She has no power to do so. It is the Count-Palatine, after all, who holds the title and these lands. While his lands and title are entailed, it won't go to his closest successor—if the said successor is found guilty of a crime in the eyes of the Prince-electoral. I'm quite sure that the Count-Palatine can easily prove this to the Prince-electoral."

"I'm sure the Count-Palatine can prove it," said the Margrave, "but Mrs. Sonntag's source of income has all but vanished now. I believe she was counting on her protector to inherit the title so that she could possibly become the Countess-Palatine."

Lady Beswick shook her head. "Impossible. Mrs. Sonntag may have her looks and other talents going for her, but I've met men like Rudolf Wittlesbach before. With a title, he could look far higher in prospects for marriage. What is the saying? Marry for your connections. And keep a mistress on the side."

At Lady Beswick's comment, Greta griped her own teacup. She was not going to be anyone's mistress. She would rather die than subject herself to selling her body.

The Margrave's mouth curved downward. "I suppose you could say that, if your chief aim in life is power," he replied. "But at any rate, Mrs. Sonntag is now without a protector. I am quite sure she is not pleased with this turn of events. The most reasonable course of action for her to take now is to leave this place."

Greta thought about that. "I'm not so sure that she will do that, my lord."

The Margrave and his aunt turned to her. "What makes you say that?" Lady Beswick asked.

"She doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who would give up," Greta looked down at her cup, away from their eyes. "I sort of admire that about her, even if she isn't an easy person to be around. I'm assuming that she already has another patron lined up."

"If she's not leaving and she already has a protector lined up," said the Margrave, "it must be someone already here."

"Humph, that figures," said Lady Beswick. "I hope it is not you, Matthias. I cannot stand that woman."

"I've hardly even greeted her," he protested.

Greta shook her head. "I think the most likely person may be Mr. Valebona."

"And not the Count-Palatine himself?" said the older woman.

She glanced at the Margrave. "No, not the Count-Palatine. For some reason, I think I would know if that was the case. I believe it is Mr. Valebona because, well, he is the easier target. And obviously, he has wealth of some sort if he is the Count-Palatine's friend and is able to keep up with the fashion. Or what there is of it."

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Miss Silber," said the Margrave. "Although I must admit, I haven't paid that much attention to Valebona. I had Mr. Wechsler do some other kind of investigating in the town, but he had not come across any information on Valebona other than that he had lived in the Balkan Peninsula as the younger son of some titled noble. He may have some money, but he has no influence."

"In other words, one of the Count-Palatine's hangers-on," Lady Beswick concluded. "Well, we'll see about that, won't we, tomorrow?"

Restless, Greta stood up and went to the library windows to pull back the drapes again. Outside, snow was falling heavily onto the courtyard, blanketing anything that had since melted with a fresh cover of white. She briefly touched the pane and it was cold under her fingertips. She looked up at the north tower in view. Most of the falling snow obscured her vision of the tower, but she thought she saw something flickering at the tower's narrow windows.

"That was rather strange of the Count-Palatine to have Mr. Valebona cover the windows," Lady Beswick remarked.

"Perhaps," the Margrave murmured, "the Count-Palatine has a bit of an allergy to the sun. After all, have you ever seen the Count-Palatine outside? Or even up around during the day in a sunlit room?"

"Now that you point that out..."

"Something is up at the tower," said Greta abruptly. She was sure now that something was moving in the north tower. She saw something obvious and black trickling from the gray skies towards the opening at the top of the tower where lightning had hit the structure a while ago.

The Margrave stopped beside her to peer out. "Strange." He pushed one of the drapes further back to get a better view. "Do we know anything about the tower other than what we've been told?"

She shook her head.

"It appears that whoever had set up a ritual up there is back again," the Margrave mused. "The most reasonable thing to do would be to go investigate it. But I'm not sure it's the practical thing to do. Who knows what things are being summoned?"

"Summoned?" It was the Margrave's aunt. She had turned in her seat and was looking at them. "Don't tell me that you suspect that there may be undead wandering about this place at this moment. Those things have spoiled enough already!"

"My lady," said Greta, "we're not sure what's happening. But something is happening."

"That's a really specific answer," she sniffed. "Well, if you two are just standing around gawking at things because you're afraid of doing anything, then I suggest you bring someone to back you up. Perhaps you should ask those gypsies who have arrived yesterday. Those layabouts aren't doing anything now. And I'm sure they can be of some sort of help. I've heard that gypsies know some things that even you, Matthias, have not come across in your studies of the dead."

"Well, my aunt is right, you know," said the Margrave to Greta with a slight smile. "You don't suppose we should take her suggestion?"

"Of course we should take her suggestion!" said Greta, remembering Mr. Spirosko's crossbow and the creature that had attacked them the day before. "We shouldn't turn away any opportunity for help if the sort of ritual going up in the tower is in any way the same sort of ritual we suspected was happening there earlier."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The sky was a dark lavender which reminded Greta of bruised skin. The snow kept falling, soft cold cotton flicking about her face. She pulled up the collar of her coat and watched the Margrave take hold of the handle to the north tower and twist. The door did nothing.

"I've got a set of lock picks if you like," said one of the gypsies behind her. She turned around to see that it was a short man with a colorful red and white handkerchief tied to his head and a thick coat one size too big. He was wearing a scuffed boot on his right leg. A wooden peg took the place of his left leg. He was pulling something out of one of his coat pockets. A black box. He opened it, revealing iron instruments.

Greta opened her mouth to say that the Margrave had his own set, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw him shake his head. Outside, he was wearing his hat and coat. The falling snow was slowly making a pile on the brim of his hat, but with his head movements, the snow fell away in a small white shower, dusting the shoulders of his coat. She moved closer to him and could not help but brush the rest of the snow away.

"Thank you, Luca, but I don't think those will be necessary," said Mr. Spirosko. Today, the head gypsy had donned back his long black coat and hat with two green feathers. He looked ominous as he glared at the closed door with one good eye. "This door, I think, is spelled shut."

"Then we need a spell to get it open!" exclaimed Luca impatiently as he tapped his peg leg. The wooden leg clunked dully on the cobblestone path that they were standing on.

"It's not so simple." Jaelle stood beside her husband wrapped in a thick black shawl that came to her knees. The fringe was decorated with bells which tinkled whenever she moved. "If it was a simple door spell, anyone could get in. But I have the feeling that this is more complicated."

Greta and the Margrave had taken Lady Beswick's suggestion to enlist the gypsies for help. They had initially only asked Yoska Spirosko, but he had not been alone. First, his wife had insisted on lending her expertise. And then the rest of the gypsies had jumped in, claiming that they had no idea what was hidden in the tower. One of the more excitable gypsies, Luca, had even put forth the extravagant claim that there might be an entire supernatural army hidden in there. And that the two of them would need as much help as they could get if it were that.

Greta put her hand on the cold wood of the door. She usually had affinity with the elements that an apothecary worked with and usually she could detect nothing from something as ordinary as a door. But this time, she sought to examine the wood as if it were an ingredient that she was using in a tincture. "Mahogany," she whispered, so that only the Margrave would hear. It was not hard. The snow seemed to muffle sound as well as sight. "Imported from a far away place. Jaelle is right. There is something overlaying the door. Some kind of spell." She took her hand off the door and shoved it back into the warmth of her coat pocket. "I cannot tell what kind. I am not an expert in that kind of thing."

"I am," said Jaelle. The gypsy woman stepped forth, the bells on her shawl ringing slowly with her approach. She touched the door. Greta could sense something happening, but could not see. Apparently, it was very powerful because Jaelle immediately jumped back as if she was stung. "Oh! It is powerful indeed. We have to be careful."

"What sort of spell is it?" her husband asked.

"Some sort of an avoidance spell. I think." Jaelle wrinkled her brow. "It feels somewhat like it, but it's not exactly like it in some respects as well." She sighed. "I know, I'm not making very much sense. It's just that the spell seems familiar, but not quite so."

The Margrave looked up as if he heard something. "I can see movement in the upper windows. It looks like smoke from a fire."

Greta glanced in the direction he indicated and saw the spiral of gray vapor drifting from the window above them. It looked like claws twisting among the glimmer of falling snow.

"If someone's in there," said Spirosko, "we could always do the sensible thing and knock."

Since the Margrave was the closest one to the door, he knocked. His knock seemed to echo within the interior like the banging of a wooden spoon on an iron kettle.

No one answered.

"Of course the obvious thing would not work," grumbled Luca. He jangled the box with the lock picks. "Let's try something else."

"Perhaps brute force is called for," said another gypsy named Tomas. Tomas was a large burly man with a gleaming bald head and even shinier gold teeth. He hefted something in his beefy hands as he grinned.

"Tomas!" exclaimed Spirosko. "Where did you get that?"

"Well, the Count-Palatine had them stashed all over this castle of his," said Tomas with a shrug. "I'm sure he won't miss one among a hundred. Although one has to wonder what sort of man would arm his castle like this. Is he afraid that his home will be overrun by vampires?"

The Count-Palatine *was* a vampire, but Greta bit her tongue.

"Does it matter what sort of neurosis our host has?" said Spirosko. "I doubt he would be very happy with the fact that we've chopped down the door to his north tower."

"Lock picks?" Luca said helpfully.

Everyone else ignored him. "This will be the most expedient solution to our problem," argued Tomas. "Besides, don't you remember that maid, what's her name, saying that the north tower hasn't been repaired since the time it was struck by lightning? I doubt the Count-Palatine will care if more stuff was destroyed."

"But it will be more things to repair," said Jaelle.

"Aw, Jaelle. And I thought I was going to have some fun."

The Margrave subtly guided Greta backward as he stepped back. "Actually, I think Tomas' suggestion does have merit. As far as I know, the Count-Palatine has not been out here at all. If he's going to get around to repairing the tower, he will probably replace the door anyway. It looks rather old."

"See?" said Tomas grinning. "Lord Baden agrees with me."

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Greta whispered to him as they watched Tomas walk toward the tower door and brace his feet as he took a couple of practice swings.

The Margrave shrugged. "Who knows? But I suppose it's worth a chance."

Tomas swung the ax and it seemed to strike something hard, ringing the door like an enormous church bell. But then the blade slid away and the large gypsy was left standing in the snow with the ax in his hands, looking confused.

"It did not catch into the door, and the door is wood!" the gypsy said. He struck again. But the same thing happened. The door looked as impenetrable as ever.

"I think it's time to try the lock picks," declared Luca. The gypsy with the peg leg clunked his way over, selecting one of his lock picks. He fiddled around with the lock, but they heard nothing but Luca's mumbled curses as his lock picks kept slipping out of his hands.

"It's the spell," said Jaelle.

"Now wait just a minute," said Luca as he put his lock pick into his case and selected another one. "I haven't tried everything yet!"

But as Luca placed his second lock pick into the lock, the small group heard a low groan coming from the other side of the tower. The cracking of rock could be heard.

"What the hell was that?" Spirosko exclaimed.

The cobblestone at their feet suddenly exploded upward and a gray hand, flesh peeling reached upward, grasping. Something pushed upward from the ground and it reached, nearly touching the gypsy woman's skirts. Jaelle screamed as her husband pushed her back to aim his crossbow at the undead creature coming from the ground. Luca cursed again and abandoned his efforts at opening the door. He grabbed a knife from his boot and held it, ready to slash and stab. Tomas did not pause. He swung his ax and the hand fell from its arm to wriggle in the snow.

Greta gasped, reflexively putting her hand to her mouth. The tea that she had drunk earlier in the afternoon did not sit well in her stomach. She looked up and saw something rotting stumbling towards them from behind the tower. It was closing in on Spirosko. "Behind you!" she cried.

The Margrave swiftly took something from a pocket of his coat and stretched his arm out once he took it out. A loud rapping could be heard, even in the falling snow, the sudden noise causing Greta to cover her ears after the fact. The head of the undead behind Spirosko exploded into bits of flesh, bone, and brain. It was a pistol, silver and gleaming. She had only seen that sort of weapon once or twice and the owners had always said that it wasn't very useful because the shooter could only use it once before being forced to reload.

Spirosko saluted the Margrave. "Excellent shot, my lord."

The Margrave briefly nodded his head in acknowledgment.

The undead thing that had climbed out of the ground at their feet started to push out until the stones on the walkway rained on the snow. The rest of the arms emerged. And then the head. Which Tomas promptly decapitated. The rest of the undead's body twitched, but it soon grew still in the cold.

Jaelle shivered as her husband put his arm around her. "Well, that solves that problem of what sort of spell the door had."

"It does?" said Greta in confusion.

The gypsy woman nodded. "It was an avoidance spell because Tomas and Luca could not open the door with their methods. But it was also tied to an awakening spell. I suppose since we were too persistent, guardians of the tower would appear to warn us."

Greta stared at the unmoving corpses. "These two were warnings?"

"Of course," the gypsy woman replied. "If we redouble our efforts, I have no doubt worse things will greet us."

Chapter Thirty-Five

June 16, 1815

The evening dress of dark, dark blue arrived in her room after tea.

She had opened the box because she could not resist her curiosity. She had had too much curiosity that day. The Count-Palatine's guests had started trickling in the previous night, but it was only this morning that they began to arrive in earnest. The guests rode fine carriages and rich fur-lined coats as they entered the cold snow-glittering courtyard of Heiligenberg Castle. Since the Count-Palatine was not available to personally greet all of his guests, his elderly secretary and footmen did the job. The maids had been bustling all over the castle, preparing the rooms.

She had been curious as to who all of these people were, but no one seemed to want to tell her. Or if they were willing to say, they had no idea. During the afternoon, she had been closeted with Lady Beswick reading another history tome, this time on the extravagances of the Roman emperor Nero and how the idiotic emperor caused the city of Rome to burn to the ground.

"Just you wait," said Lady Beswick in annoyed tones as she had finished that particular chapter. "That French nobody who calls himself emperor will have his comeuppance, just like Nero."

"But my lady," Greta said, "I've heard that Napoleon has conquered so much land already. The English general Wellington and the Prussian army can hardly keep him in check as it is. He seems very single-minded. He doesn't seem as frivolous as Nero..."

"Pride and complacency," Lady Beswick had replied. "I've heard rumors that little French man is already putting on airs because of his military might. If he is not careful, he will fall. Hard."

The fabric of the dress was a rich velvet overlaid with a silvery transparent muslin. The design was simple and classical, like that of Grecian statues, but also very elegant. Ladies' dresses were usually of a pastel color, like pink, lavender, yellow, or light blue. But dark colors were bold and daring. Although she loved the dress, she was immediately afraid of what it implied.

A note had come with the box. Even if it had not been signed, she would have recognized the scrawl.

A gift, the note said. Because I hold you in high esteem. M.

She ran her fingers along the fabric, feeling its cool, smooth contours. She could wear it tonight at dinner, for him. No one would have to know that it was his gift if she didn't tell anyone. Perhaps Lady Beswick would suspect. And even Brigitte Sonntag if she remained. But she doubted they would say anything.

She wanted to go down the hidden passage between their rooms to thank him, even if the gift was highly improper. But something in her hesitated.

The clock on her desk showed that it was six o'clock. One of the servants had hastily informed her earlier that the dinner in the dining hall was going to be served at seven. And that there would be dancing afterwards. She hoped that Lady Beswick would soon retire after the dinner so she would be able to find an excuse, particularly to claim that she would have to get up early the next morning to accompany the older woman in the library or a walk about the grounds, to leave. She did not lie earlier when she told the gypsies that she did not dance.

Because, frankly, no one had showed her how.

Greta carefully took out the dress and laid it on her bed. The black cat had appeared again and the animal was sniffing cautiously at her new clothes. Finding nothing of interest, the cat made himself comfortable on the bedspread and tucked his nose in his tail to sleep.

"Well, I see the boy has some taste after all," Lady Beswick declared as she exited her bedchamber and examined Greta in her new gown. "You look almost fetching, Miss Silber."

That was a high complement from the older woman. But she said instead, "It is only appropriate since there will be so many guests at the Count-Palatine's dinner party."

“Appropriate, hah!” Lady Beswick pursed her lips in a sour expression and then said in a lower voice. “I assume Matthias doesn't want to lose you in the crowd. When he was a boy, he had the habit of scrawling his name on whatever was his because he did not like any of his cousins touching his things. Of course, as he's grown older, he has gotten more subtle.”

“Not as subtle as you, my lady, I'm sure.”

Lady Beswick did not catch her faint sarcasm. “Of course not. Men can be as blunt as bricks sometimes.”

When they reached the landing to the second floor, the Margrave was already waiting for them. “Aunt. Miss Silber.” He addressed both of them, but he was only looking at Greta. His dark eyes, normally cold, seemed to blaze a fiery trail along her collarbone where the neckline of the dress stopped.

Lady Beswick took her nephew's arm as Greta trailed behind, as customary for a lady's companion. “I wonder what the Count-Palatine has up his sleeve tonight?” the older woman said in a disapproving voice. “I hope he does not have the servants serve that dreadful stew again.”

“Which dreadful stew, aunt?”

“Oxtail soup,” she replied. “I hope he did not have them serve it for my sake. I detest it. It was terrible the first time I had it in England and it is terrible now. No matter who is making it. Oxtail shouldn't be made into soup. It's not even fit for pig slop.”

“I did not realize that you felt so strongly about that particular dish,” her nephew admitted. “Although, I suppose I would have never found out about it since I would have never thought to serve you that English dish.”

“Of course not, Matthias. You don't have the head for cuisine. You never paid much attention to what was put in front of you at the dinner table unless it was something obviously undercooked. Your future wife would need to know this little fact about me, however, since she would be in charge of the menu in your household.”

The Margrave frowned. “If I even have a future wife, you are not going to bully her.”

“How can I?” his aunt replied. “I'm not the type to bully anyone!”

Her nephew grumbled something under his breath. Greta caught his annoyance from the bond between them and briefly grinned behind their backs as they descended the stairs to the first floor.

“What? Matthias, speak up! Good God, I think I'm becoming as deaf as that composer,” Lady Beswick declared in ringing tones. “I can't stand the thought of carrying around anything as hideous as an ear trumpet!”

The murmuring of voices became louder as they neared the entrance of the dining room. The fragile looking secretary to the Count-Palatine, Eichel, was standing grumpily next to a suit of armor, but when he spied Lady Beswick, he immediately perked up.

“My lady!” the old man exclaimed. “Please, let me escort you inside. There are quite a few acquaintances of mine whom I would like to introduce you to.”

“If you insist, Mr. Eichel,” said Lady Beswick with a long-suffering sigh. “You're an improvement over my nephew. Unless he speaks up!”

Lady Beswick and the Margrave glared at each other for a moment before it was the older woman who broke the détente. Her mouth curved, almost to a smile, and she patted her nephew's cheek with a gloved hand.

“You know, Matthias,” she said in a low voice that was out of Eichel's hearing range but still loud enough for Greta to hear. “I do not fault you your choices. You know you have my blessing in whatever you choose to do. Because I know you will do it because you will follow your heart.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Greta found herself dancing. And she wasn't sure that she liked it.

Mr. Beethoven and his musicians were playing a lively waltz. The ballroom next to the dining room was crowded with the Count-Palatine's guests. Briefly, she caught glimpses of him as he weaved among the people like a gilded predator, searching, perhaps, for an easy victim for his real dinner. She also caught glimpses of Brigitte Sonntag with Valebona. Apparently, her initial thought was correct. She had already latched onto another patron.

“You see lost in thought,” murmured the Margrave as he took her on another turn of the ballroom.

It seemed that no one else was paying them any attention as there were other guests who were dressed in far more eye catching clothes. The Margrave had dressed in simple black—elegantly tailored—but in the midst of more garish, dandy fashion, he merely faded into the background. Greta's dress was also very simple compared to the frilly lace and ribbon in sight, but she did not care to compare her self with the other lady guests. She did not want to catch anyone's eye. Except for, perhaps, one person.

“I was just thinking that we were right in our speculation of Mrs. Sonntag. She has been on Mr. Valebona's arm all

evening.”

“Hm.”

He turned her again and at this vantage point, she saw Mr. Beethoven waving his baton a little to quickly for the musician's current tempo. Perhaps, the composer was off because of his poor hearing. His nephew, Karl, stood to the side with a slightly bored expression on his face as he helped his uncle turn the pages on his score.

“This is the fourth dance I've had with you,” said Greta. She fixed her eye on his cravat. It was tied elegantly up his throat, but it did not disguise all of the skin on his throat. “I do not move in your circles and my father had no patience for teaching all the rules and etiquette to me since there would be little possibility of me for being in this kind of situation. But isn't that too many?”

“What's too many?”

“Dances. Isn't it improper for a gentleman to dance with a lady more than three times in a night?”

“Does it look like anyone here cares about how many times I've danced with you?”

She glanced around. Although she could feel the Count-Palatine's presence in her head, it had faded into a mere pinprick since the night that he had bitten them. And even if she could not sense his presence in her head, she was aware that his attention was not on them. At the moment, he had found something much more to his interest at the edge of the room. She turned back to the Margrave who was looking amused. “Well, no.”

“Then what's the harm in another dance?”

As the waltz music drew to a close, Greta said, “I suppose there isn't any harm if I did not care about my social standing. I don't know any of these people. But what if I meet any of them again?”

“When you meet any of them again, they won't have cause to question you,” the Margrave said, certain of his statement.

She slanted him a questioning glance as the Count-Palatine emerged from the crowd during the break in the music. He clapped his hands loudly.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I wish to thank you all for coming here tonight. I know, under normal circumstances this would have been quite easy, but with the current weather, well, you know how it all is.” He shook his head as the audience politely laughed. “But I have a treat for all of you. Mr. Beethoven, my composer in residence, has a new composition he wishes to debut to the public tonight!”

There was quite a bit of murmuring in the crowd. From what Greta could catch in snippets of conversation, the guests had all heard of Mr. Beethoven. Apparently, he was quite famous and revered in Vienna—the city of sophistication and glamor. The guests were very excited to be the first to hear of a new composition.

Mr. Beethoven nodded toward the audience. “Thank you, my lord. I present to you my latest composition accompanied by Mrs. Jaelle Spirosko and her troop.” With the mention of the gypsies, Greta realized that they had blended in quite well with the traditional musicians because they were sitting behind them. Now, they had moved to sit on the floor in front of the musicians with their shining instruments—a drum, a violin, a tambourine, a guitar, and something large and gleaming that looked like a trapezoidal box with strings across it.

“It's a cimbalom,” said the Margrave as he read her curiosity. “It's a traditional gypsy instrument. It adds an interesting timbre to their music.”

“It looks fascinating. I'm not quite sure any kind of music can be made on that thing.”

The composer waved his hand, introducing the gypsy performers. “This is Mr. Spirosko on the violin. And his colleagues, Luca on drum, Bo on drum, Harmon on guitar, Milosh on cimbalom, and last, but not least, Tomas on tambourine. And here is Mrs. Jaelle Spirosko!”

The gypsy woman seemed to appear out of nowhere from a puff of blue smoke. The audience gasped. Jaelle was wearing her costume, a gauzy pair of red harem pants, a matching top trimmed with gold, and pink veils that draped over her face, arms, and belly. Bells were everywhere and tinkled whenever she moved. Her feet were bare. She was a living enticement to anything male in the vicinity.

“My latest composition is called String Quartet and Gypsy Band in A minor,” the composer announced. “Also known as *Death of the Vampire*.”

The audience clapped, but Greta could see the Count-Palatine at the edge of the ballroom floor tensing his shoulders. Someone beside him said something and he turned his attention from the composer to his companion to laugh as if he had no other care in the world.

Mr. Beethoven tapped his baton on the stand in front of him and began waving his arms in a vigorous motion. The musicians began to play and the gypsy woman began to dance in sinuous movements, her arms and her torso twisting like hypnotic smoke. Greta blinked her eyes several times in an attempt to catch all of Jaelle's movements, but sometimes, they were deceptively slow. Sometimes there was a flick of an eyelid or a wrist that she almost missed. She tried to shake her head to clear it. The audience seemed similarly captivated.

She heard the Margrave beside her, breathing almost as if he had his cravat to his nose. “It's a spell,” he murmured.

“What spell?” She tried to shake her head again, but it felt as fuzzy as if she had consumed an entire barrel of beer

rather than the small glass of white wine she had with her dinner.

“The gypsy woman is weaving a spell,” the Margrave repeated. “Look.”

Jaelle had danced across the floor, her eyes rimmed with kohl making her seem mysterious and intense. Her arms moved outward as if she were drawing in something with a rope. The part of the audience nearest to her stirred. Greta saw that Valebona and two other men nearby were drawn to the gypsy woman's movements. Mrs. Sonntag seemed ready to faint as if she was choking on air. The men stepped forward and then Jaelle whirled away toward another part of the dance floor, leaving them suddenly confused.

The gypsy woman's next target was the knot of people gathered around the Count-Palatine. Jaelle suddenly twirled, letting one of the veils on her arms fly above her head. At the same time, something concentrated was released in the air. It wasn't like any kind of magic that Greta had ever encountered before. It was almost like a drug—as if someone had grabbed a stash of sedative powder and flung it into the air. As Brigitte Sonntag and several ladies finally dropped to the floor in a swoon, Greta fought the headache raging at her temple and grasped the Margrave's hand as she noticed his eyes glazing over. “Come on. We have to get out of here.”

He made no move to deter her as she dragged them through the crowd of people standing still and slack-jawed at the performance. As they wove past the people, the musicians under Mr. Beethoven's command began picking up the tempo as if something had suddenly possessed them. Another burst of dizziness struck Greta and she stumbled out into the hallway past the dining hall, sucking in clear air into her lungs.

“Remind me never to cross those gypsies,” said the Margrave hoarsely as he clutched his head and tried to shake the lingering traces of the spell out. “I've never seen something so powerful. I think it was being wielded by Jaelle Spirosko, but with so much of it, I'm not quite sure. It could be any. Or all of them.”

“The music, I think, acted like an amplifier.” Greta spotted a passing maid clearing out the dining table and requested a bottle of wine. “I wonder what they were trying to accomplish in there?”

“I have no idea,” he replied. “It is not as if they held any grudges against anyone in that room, did they?”

The maid hurried back with a bottle of wine. She glanced at the label. “Lapin eukon lemmejuoma? What language is this? All I can make out is that it was made in 1715.”

“It's blueberry wine, miss,” the maid said. “It's very popular with the guests.”

“Let me look at that,” the Margrave said, taking the bottle out of her hands. “This is Finnish.” His eyes narrowed. “It's Lappish Hag's love potion!”

The maid seemed oblivious to the Margrave's annoyed tone. “As I said, it's very popular with the guests. Particularly with the ladies. I recommend you give it a try, my lord.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The Margrave sniffed suspiciously at the bottle of “medicinal merlot” that the maid had given them as an alternative. “I'm not convinced that this is what the label says.”

He had opened the bottle and poured it out onto two glasses that he had snagged from the dining hall. They had retreated to Greta's bedchamber to recover from the headaches that the gypsies and Mr. Beethoven had given them with their performance. They had moved a small table next to the fireplace and had pulled up chairs to sit next to the warmth. A snow storm seemed to be battering the windows from the outside. Not even with most staunch of the undead would dare to venture out in this sort of weather. The black cat, it seemed, had disappeared from her bedchamber once more.

With the Margrave's suspicion, Greta poured a little wine onto a dish and then took a white candle off of the candelabra on the table to set the wine on fire. The Margrave watched her small ritual, sprawled in his chair under hooded eyes. The wine on the saucer went up in a yellow flame. Greta closely observed the resulting smoke which appeared clear and gray.

“It isn't poisoned, if that's what you're worried about,” she finally said as she put the candle back into the holder. “It's just fermented grape.”

“Thank God.” The Margrave grabbed his glass of wine and downed a long swallow as he pulled his cravat loose. “I was not feeling well at all in that room.”

“I don't anyone else was either,” she said. “But I think we were perhaps the only ones who realized that it was a spell. Everyone else stayed in there. Including the Count-Palatine.”

He put his wineglass down. “That is interesting. What, do you suppose, was different about us compared to the other guests?”

“Well, there's this,” she said, holding up her hand. The knife wound had mostly healed so that she had removed the bandage, but the scar was still readily visible, if she showed her palm. “But I didn't feel anything even more unusual about it. Perhaps the spell was specifically targeted. Or more accurately, specifically cast so that mostly passed over us.”

“But why? I did notice that not everyone in the ballroom were affected equally, even if we were able to leave.”

Greta thought about a few of the men who seemed physically drawn to the gypsy spell. And some of the women fainted. “Yes, you’re right about that.” She shook her head. “Who were they trying to target?”

“I recognized many of the guests. They are all local barons and counts. If the gypsies wanted to target them, it would have been much easier and convenient to go to one of their homes. Except for Valebona and Brigitte Sonntag since they are not from around here, but I think they were just caught up on everything like everyone else.”

“Do you think they were aiming for the Count-Palatine?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Ah. I see where you are going with this. The composer did, after all, title his composition Death of the Vampire.”

They both looked into the fireplace, contemplating that particular thought. Greta took her wineglass and sipped the merlot. It tasted almost sweet and full. She took another gulp of it to fortify herself. They were leaning close to the fireplace, side by side. Her left hand, the knife hand, had somehow found it self on the Margrave's thigh. He was stroking her fingers, almost absently.

“Your aunt cares about you, you know,” she blurted out.

“Yes, I know.”

“She has your best interest at heart. I’m not,” she swallowed and decided to put the wineglass back on the table before she dropped it. She tried again. “I’m not appropriate for you.”

He leaned closer to her so that now they were face to face. “What makes you think that you know what is or what is not appropriate for me?”

“I can’t be anyone’s mistress,” she said her hands curling into fists. His fingers continued to stroke, coaxing, but she refused to be convinced. “I’m not that sort of person.”

“I’m not asking you to be my mistress,” he replied.

“Then what’s this?” she asked, indicating her dress. In the firelight, the velvet gleamed, almost alive.

“A gift. I don’t ask for anything in return. You could refuse me and I will leave, no questions asked. But you already know everything about me.” He opened her hand and pressed his own knife-scarred hand against hers. “I’m an open book to you.”

“Matthias,” she said slowly, “you know it’s not as simple as you say.”

“Then make it simple.” Before she could reply, he moved and his mouth was on hers, deceptively languorous, but definitely insistent.

She opened her mouth and she felt heat pouring through her, from their inadvertent bond, from something more primitive—skin to skin. He was right in a way, this was making it very, very simple. But it was action and feeling, not words. But did she really need words? Some people said things easily but did another.

The Margrave moved his mouth down the line of her neck. She felt his hands on her bodice. The black velvet parted easily under his hands, pooling to her waist, and she saw his dark gaze glimmer in approval when he saw her.

“What about you?” she murmured as her fingers found the ends of his cravat. She pulled it from his neck.

“What about me?” His hands moved on her body as she struggled to concentrate on all the buttons on his waistcoat.

“All of this is far more complicated than I expected,” she complained as she finally undid the final button. She involuntarily made a disappointed sound at the back of her throat when she discovered that there was still a shirt underneath.

“Please, let me help you.” He tugged her to her feet, only to push her down again, on her bed. He smiled and she felt herself shiver. It was not a particularly nice smile. “You seem nervous all of a sudden.”

“I know I shouldn’t be particularly nervous, but...” she gasped as his mouth found a breast. His hands moved lower, pulling off the rest of her dress. She grabbed at his hair, but he did not seem to notice his actions. “Matthias!”

“Hm?”

She suddenly twisted, surprising him. Her hands moved, catching on something. She heard fabric rip. She looked down at her hands and found his shirt on her fingers, in tatters. “Oh! I didn’t mean to! This must have been quite expensive...”

“Greta.” He was still smiling, but it was an amused one. “Don’t worry about it. I have a dozen more like it.” He then laughed and shook his head. “And they say that men are barbaric, ripping bodices in the gripes of their passion.”

She found herself laughing as well as she tossed the ruined shirt aside. “I suppose so. Does that make me barbaric?”

“No, just eager. I like that.”

“Do you?” She scooted closer to him and tentatively touched his bare chest. This was the first time that she had seen a naked man up close before. The last time they were together like this, it had been in a dark shed. And they were still mostly clothed. His skin felt warm, almost hot. Experimentally, she tugged at his chest hair. He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her to pull her closer. She was glad that he let her explore a bit before throwing her down onto the bed to have his way with her.

“Very curious, aren’t you?”

“Hm.” Her hands roamed over his shoulders. Her fingers stopped as it hit damaged flesh. His sudden intake of breath told her that she had found something very important. “Matthias, what happened to you?”

“It was a long time ago. When I had started practicing my art.”

She moved her hands again to trace the scars criss-crossing his back. “What were they from?”

“Mistakes,” he said curtly. “Mistakes because I was too young and too proud. I thought I could do everything. I didn't know that some spells have a price.”

She pressed a gentle kiss on his shoulder as she felt the pain leaking from him to her through their bond. “Shh. It's over now. You've learned. That's what counts, doesn't it?”

He moved again, and she found herself astride him. One of his hands was on her hip, moving slowly. The other held the back of her head, fingering her hair. Hair pins scattered around them and Greta found herself brushing them away, not caring that they were falling haphazardly onto the floor. His eyes were still dark, but now they were hungry, too. “Yes, I suppose so. But as I think of it, if I had not experienced those things, I would not have met you.”

He pulled her head down to kiss her again. She moved her hand and found the opening of his trousers. She pulled down, urgently, and almost as suddenly found him insistent between her thighs. She gasped his his mouth as she moved, pushing him into her. His grip tightened.

“No Greta, you're not ready.” He tried to move, but she tightened her thighs around him. “Greta,” he said hoarsely. “The last time could have been dismissed. But this time is for real. We will be bound together, you and I. There will be consequences. I'm ready for those consequences, but are you?”

She looked down at him and was somewhat surprised that she was smiling. “Matthias, you've told me that you should be the one who is to decide what is or what isn't appropriate. And now, I'm telling you, I will be the one who will know whether or not I'm ready.”

She slowly opened her eyes when she felt him move. She watched him put on his trousers in the firelight as she pulled the bed covers closer to her. The light gleamed on his skin, highlighting the definition of his chest, the musculature of his shoulders and arms. She caught a glimpse of his ruined back and felt sorrow rather than horror at the healed over welts.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“It's two in the morning.”

“You can stay,” she whispered. “No one will be the wiser.”

He turned to her, a half-smile on his face. He bent down to kiss her lips. “I will. But I have to go down to my room to fetch something. I will be right back.”

She watched as he opened the passage from the fireplace and disappeared down into the dark stair. She laid back in her bed, drowsily listening for his return, but heard nothing. A long moment later, something abrupt shot down the link she had with the Margrave as if someone had slapped her hand hard. She jerked upward in bed. “Matthias!”

No one answered her cry.

She shoved the bedcovers aside and hastily grabbed a robe to cover herself. She ran down the passage stairs, barefoot. The passage to his bedchamber was still open.

The room seemed empty and untouched. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. But the door to the bedchamber was cracked open. And there was a scattering of ash along the threshold. Greta crouched down and sniffed. It was a unique blend of tobacco, made for cigars.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

June 17, 1815

“I heard something out here.”

Greta paused in her steps and stopped in the middle of the hall to turn around. “My lady. It is nothing. Please go back to bed.” She had quickly changed back into one of her old day dresses and had thrown on her coat. She tried to pull her collar toward her neck so that she would blend in more with the shadows, but the older woman was still sharp-eyed.

“Miss Silber, it is not nothing if you are wandering about at this hour. Do you know what time it is? It is two o'clock in the morning. It is not the undead again, is it?”

“I'm not sure,” she said honestly. “But please, my lady, you must not concern yourself with this...”

“Humph. And I thought my nephew was around to take care of these things. Where is the boy anyway?”

She briefly shut her eyes, trying to quell the panic rising in her throat. Her heart beat faster at the mention of the Margrave. She had tested sending herself through their bond numerous times since she had discovered his disappearance,

but she had still felt nothing. It was as if he had fallen asleep, permanently. And that frightened her to no end.

"I don't know where he is, my lady. He disappeared."

"Disappeared? I suppose he went looking for the dead himself without consulting anyone."

"No, it isn't that." She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "Someone took him."

"Someone took him?" Lady Beswick eyed her sharply and then turned on her heel to go back to her bedchamber.

"Stay right there, Miss Silber. I will come with you."

"But, my lady..."

"No buts!"

A moment afterwards, Lady Beswick emerged from her bedchamber in a coat. While Greta had only seen her in the rich fur-lined one that would get noticed right away, this coat was black and slightly worn. It wasn't something that she associated with the Margrave's fashion-conscious aunt, but it suited her too. It made her look hard and mean—an attitude that reminded her so much of him. So that's where he got it, she thought. He and his aunt are two peas in a pod. But she doubted that either of them would appreciate her comparison if she voiced it aloud.

"Well, Miss Silber, what are you doing there, gawking? We need to find my nephew!"

"Yes, my lady."

"Do you suppose it is that damnable Count-Palatine who's behind it?" mused the older woman. "He is a bit strange. And of course, he has been taking an unnatural interest in Matthias, don't you think?"

"He has an interest in the Margrave, yes," said Greta. "But whether or not he is indeed behind his disappearance remains to be seen."

"There's something funny about the Count-Palatine. But enough about that. We need some muscle with us."

"Muscle?"

"Do you think that the two of us could take on whoever it was that took my nephew?" Lady Beswick demanded.

"You have an apothecary's senses, Miss Silber. And I am merely an old woman. Whoever overpowered my nephew will certainly be more powerful than us."

She could not refute Lady Beswick's logic. "Yes. You're correct. I wasn't thinking."

Instead of making a snide remark about brainless lady's companions, the older woman surprised her by patting her shoulder as they descended the stair towards the first floor of the castle. "That is understandable, Miss Silber. After all, any woman would get distraught if something happened to her beloved."

Greta's heart seemed to skip a beat at her words. "My lady, I think you're mistaken. It's natural that anyone be worried about someone who has been one's acquaintance for a while."

"You're mistaking yourself if you think that is true, Miss Silber." The older woman slanted her a knowing glance. "I know about the bond you have with my nephew. I have gathered that it was probably an accidental bond when he dragged you into one of his ridiculous rituals trying to raise the dead, but it's a bond nonetheless. You have feelings for my nephew, no?"

Instead of answering the very direct question, Greta said, "The bond makes things both easy and impossible. I can't possibly be what he wishes me to be."

"Now that isn't impossible," Lady Beswick replied. "Everything can be learned. Matthias never expected to be a Margrave, you know. That's why he's developed such deplorable manners. But the title did come to him and he did learn. Eventually. Even when he's too stubborn to apply his lessons properly."

They had reached the first floor corridor and Greta naturally took the lead, heading toward where she knew the gypsies were staying—perfectly serviceable guest rooms, but not the extravagant ones that were reserved for the titled guests.

"Who are we looking for?" inquired Lady Beswick.

"Mr. Spirosko and his troop," she replied as she knocked on a door.

After a moment, the door opened, revealing a large, sleepy face. Tomas. "Yes?" He blinked his eyes and took in Greta and Lady Beswick. "I'm sorry. Perhaps you've had the wrong room."

Greta held out a hand at the door to prevent him from closing it. "Tomas, we need your help. All of your help. I know that it's late at night, but..."

"Oh no, Miss Silber." The gypsy seemed more awake now. He narrowed his eyes as he peeked out of the darkened corridor. "I believe we've been expecting something like this. Yoska and Jaille told us that something strange was brewing in this castle."

It took a remarkably short time for the gypsies to be organized in the castle corridor. They were dressed for the cold and armed with an impressive selection of blades. Greta was reminded of certain things that she had found in the Margrave's room which now lay cool against her skin. She hoped that he didn't mind that she was borrowing them.

"How barbaric!" Lady Beswick had muttered, but the older woman had admired the long swords that were buckled to the gypsies' belts and even the ax that Tomas had commandeered from the Count-Palatine's collection.

"Something is different tonight," murmured Jaille as they hurried through the castle corridors, following Greta as she concentrated on her bond with the Margrave. With every step that they took, she felt him nearer, but he was still

somehow blocked to her. “The winter's grip is lessening. Whoever is responsible for it may be getting desperate.”

The gypsy woman did not wear any visible weapons, but Greta was sure that the woman did not need anything aside from her spell casting abilities. Her powerful gifts were visibly demonstrated during the evening at the ballroom—and no one, besides the Margrave and Greta, had realized that she was working magic to entice the audience into a stupor. After all, the normal person would have attributed the fainting and unusual behavior to excessive drinking which had certainly been in abundance that night.

Greta shivered as they neared the northern end of the castle. They were inevitably going outside. She was afraid at what she would find, but her steps quickened as she reached the end of the northern corridor, past the unicorn tapestries, and pulled open the door.

She had expected the winter wind. But its fierceness surprised her. The cold snow whipped at her face like a hundred knives. Between the darkness and the driving snow, she could see nothing. But the thread between her and the Margrave pulled her forward, and her footsteps skidding on the courtyard snow did not falter.

“What are you all doing out here in this weather?” someone shouted.

Greta turned and observed someone else following them. He was wearing a dark coat and hat, one hand holding a torch, the other with what looked like a garden hoe. The man looked up at them, revealing that it was the gardener, Ferdinand.

“Brother!” Jaelle admonished. “Shouldn't you be asleep?”

“One of the servants had heard all the commotion inside,” he nodded his head toward the castle. “And he told me that all of you were coming out here. Naturally, I thought you and the troop were going to be causing a disturbance so I came out here to stop you.”

“We aren't causing a disturbance,” Spirosko told his brother-in-law. “We're trying to figure out who really is.”

Ferdinand looked skeptical, but he fell in with them as they walked further on in the courtyard.

The gypsies had also lit several torches to bring light to their surroundings. They soon stood at the foot of the north tower. Greta looked upward, but the snow obscured her vision despite the light from the torches. She could not see if the upper windows were occupied.

“This is going to be difficult,” Greta shouted to her followers. “I have to get inside. None of this is your problem...”

“You can't dissuade us,” said Spirosko with a cutting motion with his hand. The other held a torch. His crossbow was strapped to his back. “The Margrave is an all right fellow. Besides, I owe him for last time.”

“And he's my nephew,” Lady Beswick cut in. “If he goes, the title goes to some distant cousin in Hamburg. I've met him, and believe me, he's not fit to be a Margrave, let alone a mere Baron!”

Jaelle had moved so that she touched the door to the tower. She frowned. “The spell on the tower is gone tonight. I wonder if this storm is in any way responsible? If it is, then we know the answer. No one can hold onto a weather spell and a tower protection spell at the same time. It would take too much drain. One would have to be sacrificed to the other.”

Greta tested the handle of the tower. “But it's still locked.”

“Lock picks!” exclaimed Luca.

“No, allow me, ladies,” said Tomas. The large man shooed Greta and Jaelle away from the door and rammed his shoulder into the door. Nothing happened on his first two tries, but on the third time, they could hear wood splinter and the door burst open. Tomas yelled as he charged forward, ax in hand. The others rushed in after him.

The first floor of the tower had been transformed. What had once been a derelict and dusty hall, it was now white marble. But the place felt cold. As cold as ice, even as candles lit the perimeter and a fire burned in the fireplace at the far end of the room. Near the fireplace was a long table. A figure was tied on it. It was thrashing about, screaming. Something dark loomed over the figure, obscuring both faces. The looming figure finally straightened at their entrance. It was the Count-Palatine. His mouth was red with blood. He smiled.

“Ah! We have visitors, my sweet.”

The figure on the table did not answer. Greta realized that the woman in a nightgown was none other than Brigitte Sonntag. A little blood trickled at the side of her neck, but her chest moved indicating that she was still alive. But her eyes were closed. She had fainted.

“Please, join me for dinner!”

“Vampire!” cried Tomas as he rushed forward.

But the Count-Palatine was quicker. He whirled away just as he tripped the man. The ax fell out of his hands and the gypsy hit his head on the table, rendering him unconscious. This had an instantaneous effect on the rest of the gypsies. As one, they roared their outrage and swarmed over the suddenly confused Count-Palatine. But it was Ferdinand who got to him first. He whacked the back of the vampire's head with his hoe and the Count-Palatine fell.

“No, don't stake him!” Surprisingly, the cry came from Jaelle. A wave of her arm kept the rest of them a pace away although her husband was still nearby, keeping his crossbow trained on him.

Ferdinand dragged a nearby chair forward and hauled the Count-Palatine's prone body onto the piece of furniture. He took out silver chains from his coat pocket and bound the vampire with it.

“We should just kill him,” said Luca. “There's no point in keeping a blood sucker around.”

The Count-Palatine was a tough creature. He was already coming around as he moaned and rolled his head on his shoulders. He squinted up at them as he tested his bonds. The silver bit into his skin and the vampire hissed.

“No, we can't just kill him,” Jaelle said mournfully. “Can't you see the resemblance?”

And Greta could. With Jaelle and the gardener standing next to the Count-Palatine, she could see the resemblance quite clearly even though the Count-Palatine was blond and Jaelle and the gardener were dark haired.

“How can you two be related to him?” said Lady Beswick in amazement. “You're gypsies and he's the Count-Palatine.”

“Didn't your parents tell you to respect your elders?” the Count-Palatine said, annoyed.

Ferdinand hit his hoe on the chair leg, which silenced the vampire. “He's our grandfather. Unfortunately.”

Jaelle nodded. “I don't think he knew at first. Before he had turned, he had seduced a gypsy woman in our clan. Our grandmother. Of course, she kept the fact of her son secret once she divined that his father was no longer human. Our grandmother told us the truth right before she passed away. And Ferdinand and I have been tracking him down ever since.”

“We decided that splitting up would give us chance to cover more territory,” Ferdinand added. “I found him first and took the position as a gardener. Jaelle would come up later.”

“What are you going to do to me now?” the Count-Palatine said. “Kill me?”

“That would be far too kind,” said Jaelle. “No, grandfather, we're going to rehabilitate you.”

“No! I'm not going to be some mindless de-fanged thing!” The vampire struggled again.

As interesting as this family reunion was, Greta finally felt a tug at the bond between the Margrave and herself. It was a weak tug, but it was a tug nonetheless, indicating that he was also still alive. Greta broke away from the group, feeling her heart speed up. Something in her gut told her that she had to hurry.

The vampire briefly stopped his struggles to watch her movement. “You won't save him, Miss Silber,” he called out. “There are forces out there that are far greater than you can comprehend.”

“Be quiet, grandfather,” said Ferdinand.

“Boy, you need to learn manners!”

Greta hiked her skirts to her knees and ran up the stairs, past the second floor without looking. She knew that wherever the Margrave was, he was at the top, surrounded by magic that made the air thicker and harder to breathe. At the third floor landing, she shoved open the door and a powerful wave of incense greeted her. This room, too, was covered with the illusion of white, cold marble. A circle, marked in black charcoal, encompassed the majority of the room. In the center of the circle was a table where the Margrave was strapped down. His eyes were closed, but through her bond with him, she could sense that he was slowly becoming aware of his surroundings.

Apollo Valebona stood next to the room's fireplace, puffing on a cigar. He gave Greta a low bow as she entered the room cautiously. “Good evening, Miss Silber,” he said. “I see you're just in time to witness my latest achievement.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Valebona took another puff of his cigar before he threw it into the fireplace. It disintegrated in a puff of sickly green smoke.

“Let him go,” she said.

“Don't you even want to know first what I'm going to do with him?” said Valebona. He walked through the circle. He had not yet activated the wards on it to prevent anything from going inside. “Don't you even know why I'm going to be using him as a sacrifice?”

The Margrave finally raised his head from the table. His muscles flexed as he tried to tear himself from his bonds. “Greta?” His voice sounded slightly slurred. The spell that Valebona had hit him with to incapacitate him had not completely worn off yet.

“Matthias!” She rushed toward the circle, but Valebona had waved an arm, erecting some sort of shield. She pounded the air, but it felt as thick as cake batter. She remembered something that the Margrave had told her a few days ago. And that Jaelle had mentioned just before they had entered the tower. Sorcerers could maintain one spell very well, but more than one spell would take their attention and power. Exactly how much energy was Valebona expending keeping up the storm outside, the illusion inside the tower, and his shielding spell? Or was he a greater sorcerer than any of them could have imagined?

But she had to try. She wrenched her hands into the thick air, pushing with all of her strength. It was hard to breathe.

Valebona seemed to watch her efforts in amusement. “You're rather persistent, aren't you Miss Silber?” But he did not move his hands again to blast her. Perhaps he was at his limit. “By the time you reach us, I will be finished with

this little ritual.”

“And what ritual would that be?” said the Margrave.

“Well, isn't it obvious?” said Valebona. “I need to renew a weather spell. It's clear days for my Corsican leader. Unfortunately, it has the side effect of bringing winter on the location where I originally cast the spell. Which would be here in Heiligenberg.” He shrugged. “But no matter. It's not as if anyone really cares about this small town, do they?”

“You're Napoleon's agent.” The Margrave had stopped struggling now, but his eyes were watchful. He flicked a glance at Greta who was still trying to get through the shield.

Valebona patted his heart. “I am and always will be. He's a charismatic leader, Lord Baden. I served with him during the Corsican Revolution. After that, I pledged myself to him. None of his victories can be left to chance.”

“So you're a weather mage who makes sure that the weather always favors him.” The Margrave snorted. “You're nothing but his pet sorcerer.”

“I am not!” Valebona walked closer to him to grip the table. He seemed quite annoyed by the Margrave's term 'pet sorcerer'. Perhaps he had been called that during his career many times. “I am a weather mage. I am far more powerful than necromancers like you. You only call the dead. I call a force of nature!”

“There is always a price to pay,” the Margrave murmured. “The more powerful the spell, the more steep the price.”

Valebona grinned at that comment. His expression was genial, but something ugly moved behind his eyes. “You're right about that, Lord Baden. But more's the pity. Because this time, the price will be you. You're going to be my sacrifice.”

Recalling her sense that in the previous ritual in this room, the sacrifice had been terrible, she cried out, “No! Take me instead.”

“That's rather generous of you, Miss Silber, but I'm afraid the Margrave has rather compromised your value. Besides, a necromancer himself would be a much more valuable sacrifice, don't you think?”

The tips of Greta's fingers touched free, cold air. With another burst of effort, she broke through the shield and collapsed on the other side of the circle, breathing hard.

“If you're looking for a powerful sacrifice, why don't you try a weather mage?” the Margrave suggested. “You said yourself that you're more powerful than me.”

“Unfortunately, the only weather mage I know works in Russia. And he doesn't particularly like me considering that time that...never mind. And I am definitely not sacrificing myself. I'm not like you, branding my skin so that everyone can see what I am and shun me.”

Greta looked up from her position on the floor and slowly sat up. “But at least Lord Baden is honest about his work. Others might shun him, but at least they know that he's willing to put himself up first.”

“Are you calling me selfish?” said Valebona. “I am the most unselfish person there is. I'm doing all of this for the cause!” He pulled out a knife from his coat. “But enough of this. It's time to finish this!”

Greta launched herself towards Valebona. She was still feeling someone dizzy from breaking out of the mage's shield, but her momentum propelled her forward, knocking out the knife from his hand. He had not expected a woman, particularly a mousy lady's companion, to do anything bold.

“You bitch!” Valebona struck at her with a fist.

Greta reeled back, feeling numb at the side of her face. Her skin was going to bruise. But she hardly gave it a thought as her fingers grasped the hilt of something on the floor and she staggered back, slicing at the rope on the Margrave. She placed Valebona's knife in the Margrave's palm as he sat up.

Valebona got up from the floor and unsheathed a sword that she had not noticed was buckled to his hip. The man sneered. “Mine's bigger than yours. Give up. I'm going through with this no matter what.”

“My lord! Catch!”

Luca and some of the other gypsies had finally followed her up to the top of the tower. Luca had tossed the Margrave a scabbard. He caught the weapon in midair and unsheathed another sword as he swung his legs off the table.

“Get back, Greta,” he said, not looking back. “You don't want to be caught between us.”

She did not need another warning as she hurried out of the circle, not caring if she smeared the charcoal on her way out. Valebona did not notice her transgression as his attention was focused on his most dangerous adversary. The weather mage decided to take the offensive as the Margrave circled him in what seemed like endless patience. Metal clashed just as thunder crashed outside.

Greta looked out of a nearby narrow window. The snow had turned into rain. Valebona had lost control of his weather spell as his concentration was divided among so many different things. As lightning flashed, she realized that the illusion of a marble room was flickering as well.

“This is ridiculous!” said the Lady Beswick as she finally arrived up on the third floor. She glanced at the gypsies who were yelling at the Margrave as if he was their champion at a boxing match. Then she looked at the two dueling men. The Margrave had managed to back Valebona into a corner. The weather mage was beginning to slash his sword in desperation. “Well, I see Matthias didn't let his lessons go to waste.”

"Lady Beswick," said Greta as she moved towards the older woman. "You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous."

"Pah, I can be where I like, young lady."

Valebona's sword clattered to the ground with a particularly quick maneuver from the Margrave. The gypsies cheered. "You see that?" said Luca. "That's my lucky sword he's got!"

The Margrave placed his blade at the weather mage's neck. "Do you yield?"

"I am not going to yield to some idiotic necromancer!" Valebona moved his hands sending some sort of last ditch offensive spell at the Margrave, sending his opponent stumbling backward. Valebona reached down to grab his sword.

"Now that's just cheating," said Lady Beswick in a cold voice. In surprise, Greta turned her attention from her lover to the older woman. She had pulled out a pistol from her coat pocket. She aimed it at Valebona and pulled the trigger just as particularly loud thunder rumbled nearby.

The pistol had been aimed at Valebona's head. But something happened to the bullet as it neared the man. It slowed down as if it had suddenly encountered a wall of gelatin. Valebona twisted his body in a deceptively slow movement and the bullet passed his shield, only to explode into the mortar behind him. Valebona grinned, cocky, as he charged forward with his sword.

The Margrave danced backward, barely avoiding a slash to his heart.

"Damn it. He's got some sort of shield around him. And I've already wasted my shot." At Lady Beswick's words, the illusion around them flickered and died, leaving the ruined room in its wake. Apparently Valebona had stopped all of his other spells in order to protect himself.

Greta hastily unbuttoned her coat and pulled out the Margrave's weapon that she had strapped to her waist with a sash. The pistol that the Margrave had used earlier on the undead outside of the tower had been stashed under the pillow in his bedchamber. When Valebona had taken him, he had not checked the rest of the bedchamber at all. She handed the pistol to the surprised Lady Beswick.

"It's your nephew's," she quickly explained. "I've never handled one of these before, so I'm sure you're a better shot than I am. This, I think, is a newer model. There are two bullets in there."

Something glimmered in the older woman's eyes. "Thank you, Miss Silber. I knew there was some reason my nephew chose you." She turned to shoot the pistol. The first bullet did the same thing as the other, although Greta sensed that it was somehow going faster through the shield.

Valebona managed to duck, this time barely get hit in the forehead.

"Save your last bullet, my lady. I have him." The rest of the gypsies had arrived. It had been Jelle who spoke. She moved her hands in a strange, almost seductive movement over her head. Valebona audibly made a choking noise and dropped his sword. Seeing that another spell was in progress, the Margrave stepped aside and sheathed Luca's sword to watch.

"Matthias." Greta rushed over to him. He opened his arms to crush her in a hug. "He didn't...?"

He shook his head. "His sword didn't touch me."

Jelle weaved her way toward the center of the room. She danced around Valebona as she moved her arms and hips in a seductive movement. The bells sewn to the fringe of her dress tinkled in a rhythmic pattern. The weather mage struggled to sit up from where he had collapsed.

"Witch!"

"I could say the same for you," she replied as she suddenly stomped her feet and reeled her arms in as if she was pulling a rope. "Although I believe you were a little careless earlier in the evening. Never let a gypsy seduce you. Her mark can run deep."

Valebona choked, the skin on his face purpling.

The gypsy woman pulled the invisible rope tighter and the weather mage finally fell. His body was still.

Jelle sauntered back toward them. "He was a rather poor weather mage, don't you think? He didn't even think to shield himself properly when we performed Mr. Beethoven's composition."

Spirosko drew her in to drop a kiss on her forehead. "Indeed, darling."

Greta stared at Valebona's dead form. Something prickled at the back of her neck as she felt the atmosphere in the room change. She grabbed the Margrave's arm and pulled him towards the door. "We have to move!" she said.

Through the ruined roof, lightning struck the center of the room where the weather mage's body lay. Stone cracked and momentarily, everyone was blinded and deafened. Heat erupted around them.

"We have to get out!" Luca's voice seemed to sound from a distance.

But Greta did not question it as she and the others managed to rush out of the room and down the stairs. On the first floor, she saw that the gardener had hefted up his vampire grandfather onto his shoulder, chair and all. One of the other gypsies carried the unconscious Brigitte Sonntag as another opened the front door for them. Without another word, they ran out of the tower as bits of stone began to rain down the stairs.

It stormed outside. In moments, Greta's clothes were completely wet. But the rain was warm.

The top of the north tower was in flames, as if it was a torch burning brightly in the night.

"Let it burn to the ground." She turned at the voice. Ferdinand had set the Count-Palatine down as they watched

the tower's destruction. The vampire's eyes glinted in annoyance. "Valebona was a fool. And I was a fool for listening to him."

"You're only saying that because you lost, grandfather," Jelle replied.

Chapter Forty

June 18, 1815

Greta unlatched the window and pushed it outward. The air was balmy.

Sunlight streamed into the room. And for the first time in too many months, she heard songbirds. Although Heiligenberg was still covered in snow and the dripping trees surrounding the castle still looked dead, summer had finally come back to a city that had been gripped by an unnatural winter.

She took off her morning robe and just stood next to the window in only her night gown, feeling the warm breeze ruffling through her hair. The strange black cat sat on the window sill batting at an imaginary fly in the air.

It had rained the previous day. Everyone, except the Count-Palatine who was confined to his quarters which the gypsies had decided to ward with a multitude of crosses and garlic, had met up in the sun room to watch the rain. It had entertained everyone greatly, especially after a long winter. But after a while, the rain had moved off too towards the north and the sun had come out. It was also the first time in many months that Greta saw the clear blue waters of the bordering Neckar River from the ramparts of the castle.

While everyone had stayed in the sun room, it was Jelle who had recounted all that had happened—especially to the fascinated composer, Mr. Beethoven, and his nephew—during the night. After piecing together the events and what Valebona had told Greta and the Margrave, they realized what had occurred.

Valebona had been a weather mage and agent under the employ of Napoleon. How far up the ranks he was, they could only speculate. But they had no doubt that he had been quite a powerful mage since the consequences of his actions had rendered Heiligenberg in an almost perpetual winter. Valebona had visited the Count-Palatine just when he had come back to Heiligenberg to reside in his castle. It was then that he had convinced the Count-Palatine to let him use the north tower as his own personal work room. He had used some unfortunate souls to initially fuel his spell which slightly backfired when Heiligenberg was plunged into winter. Seeing the results of the spell, the Count-Palatine had temporarily banned Valebona from visiting until he had a solution to his unintended consequences. Angry at his banishment, Valebona started things in progress to get back at the Count-Palatine—not enough to destroy the Count-Palatine, but to send a warning. Thus the poisonings orchestrated with the Count-Palatine's nephew Rudolf.

Impatient with Valebona's progress and perplexed with the sudden appearance of the poisoning incidents, the Count-Palatine had invited the Margrave. It was then that Valebona arrived with his solution. However, the Margrave posed a problem. He knew that Lord Baden was a fairly experienced necromancer who would sense his work in the north tower. In order to divert the attention from himself, he threw Rudolf to the wolves and gave Rudolf's mistress to the vampire to appease him. Then he told the Count-Palatine that this time, he had a solution to the weather problem. The only thing now he needed was a sacrifice. And the Margrave was an awfully convenient one.

Except the Count-Palatine was reluctant to simply give up the Margrave. So Valebona decided to take matters into his own hands. That's when everything fell apart.

"But I don't understand," Greta had said after the story was told. "How did you end up destroying Valebona? You said something about already putting your mark on him when you had performed that night."

Jelle had given her a secret smile. "Men, oftentimes, do not realize when they've been caught. Visit me tomorrow, Miss Silber, and I will teach you the steps to that dance."

Greta turned from the window to head to her wardrobe to find a day dress. Quickly, she dressed and then went out of her room. Lady Beswick's door was closed. The older woman was probably still sleeping after all the excitement. She headed down to the next floor and boldly knocked on the Margrave's bedroom door.

"Come in."

She twisted the knob and peeked in. The Margrave was already dressed and he was sitting at his desk, writing. His pen scratched against the paper in even strokes.

"Are you coming for breakfast, my lord?"

He did not look up. "In a moment, Greta."

She stepped inside to peek at the document on his desk. It appeared to be a letter to the Prince-elector. The Margrave did not pause in his writing. "Matthias? What is this?"

He did not seem disturbed that she was reading his correspondence. "It's a report to the Prince-elector about the events here, especially the fact that we've neutralized one of Napoleon's agents."

“The Prince-electoral will be pleased with your progress then.”

“One would hope so.” He finished a sentence and put his pen down. He turned to look at her. “Why don't we go for a ride out to the countryside today?”

She bent down to give him a lingering kiss on his hard mouth. She smiled mysteriously. “Why don't we do that tomorrow? I have a meeting with Jaelle later today.”

Epilogue

June 21, 1815

Greta glanced up from flipping through the etiquette book that Lady Beswick had found somewhere to see the Margrave glaring at his aunt as she lectured him.

“When Father Heinrich arrives later this evening, you must pay strict attention to him,” said Lady Beswick. She held an empty teacup which she clinked on the saucer for emphasis. “You've been breaking rules long enough. You have to do this correctly.”

“Of course, aunt.”

“His lecture will be far more severe than mine,” she continued. “He will be demanding an explanation for your hasty decision. Many people do not rush into these things. A year is the customary waiting period.”

The Margrave scowled. “Do you remember me ever waiting for anything?”

“Scone?” Sophie Ritter asked Greta.

“Yes, please.” She took the plate with the pastry from the older woman. And was tempted to poke it to see if it felt as hard as it looked. “Did you say that these were all the way from England?”

Soon after their visit at Heiligenberg Castle, Lady Beswick had insisted on leaving and visiting the Ritters where she claimed she felt much more comfortable because she knew she was among friends. The Count-Palatine, she had sniffed disapprovingly, was a cold blood-sucker who had already outlived his usefulness.

What the Count-Palatine thought about Lady Beswick's comment, who knew. Because soon after that, the gypsies and the gardener Ferdinand had strong armed the Count-Palatine into an iron coffin—with the vampire protesting all the way—to take him back the Balkan Peninsula to be “rehabilitated”. It made sense, the gypsies explained, because that was the land where he had been turned. Greta did not question their logic. The very existence of an undead creature which sucked blood somewhat boggled her mind in the first place.

Back in the tea room of the Ritter House, Sophie laughed. “No, of course not, Miss Silber! If these had been shipped all the way from England, they would be as hard as rocks. Instead, our cook obtained a recipe for scones recently. We all knew that Lady Beswick would be homesick for her adopted land after so many days here. So we wished to make her favorite foods while she is here.”

“That's very kind of you,” Greta replied.

Lady Beswick turned to them. “Ha! Just wait until dinner, Miss Silber, and you will see the true depths of their kindness.”

Greta felt herself smile. “You had planned oxtail soup for tonight's menu, Mrs. Ritter?”

Sophie grinned. “Of course!”

Lady Beswick groaned. “I knew it! Sophie, you're trying to kill me.”

“But aunt,” said her nephew mischievously. “You don't have to torture yourself by actually eating it if you dislike it that much.”

“Matthias,” she said sternly. “You know that it is impolite to refuse food from your hostess.” She glanced at the etiquette book in Greta's hands. “I suggest you take a good close look after Miss Silber is finished with it. Perhaps you need to refresh your lessons.”

A knock came at the entrance to the tea room. The butler, in stark black livery, gave them a short bow. “Ladies. My lord. A messenger has arrived. He is to see the Margrave.”

Sophie waved a hand. “Well, show the man in, then.”

The butler beckoned to someone in the hallway and there were footsteps as a messenger in a floppy hat and worn military coat approached. His face was wide and earnest, like that of a farm boy. The messenger swept them a low, almost clumsy bow. “Ladies. My lord.” He seemed to pause as he faced the combined disapproving glares from Lady Beswick and the Margrave.

“Please, what is your name?” asked Sophie kindly.

The messenger fixed his gaze on the older woman gratefully. “It is Franz, ma'am. I've just arrived from

Hamburg.”

“Hamburg!” exclaimed Lady Beswick. “That is where your cousin is currently residing, isn't he?”

The Margrave leaned over to take a tea cup and sipped contemplatively before answering. “Do you mean cousin Barnabas?”

“Yes, him.” She turned her gaze back to the messenger. “I hope it is not him again inquiring into the health of the Margrave. He did the same thing when the previous Margrave was still alive. It's downright suspicious if you ask me.”

The Margrave gave his aunt a lazy smile. “Oh, I don't know about that. I put a stop to that when I took the title.”

His aunt narrowed her eyes at him. “What did you do, Matthias?”

He ignored her question. Instead he said to Greta, “You will like Barnabas. He has developed quite an interest in the arts of the apothecary, especially after I've shown him a bit about the otherworld.”

“I see. I suppose I should look forward to an imminent visit from him?” said Greta with raised eyebrows. She decided to put a fork into the scone. The tines sank easily into the pastry. She put a bit into her mouth and chewed carefully. It was good. But English pastries had nothing on their German counterparts.

The messenger shook his head. “No. The message is from the front lines at Waterloo. The original messenger passed it to me to inform you. Wellington and the Prussian army has finally defeated Napoleon!”

“What?” The Margrave abruptly put his tea down. “When did this happen?”

“On the eighteenth, my lord. They made him sign a treaty that evening. For some reason, there was a strange rain storm the previous night which delayed his army from moving. It gave our allies enough time to move in position. The Prince-elector wishes to thank you for your part in our defense.”

“Well, Matthias, that is news indeed,” said Lady Beswick.

The messenger pulled a rich gold lined envelope from a coat pocket and handed it to the Margrave. “This is an invitation from the Prince-elector himself, my lord. He is holding a celebratory ball at the palace in St. Georgsberg. He wishes to see you and your new Margravine to personally express his gratitude.”

At the word 'Margravine', Greta felt the scone turn to sawdust in her mouth. She forced herself to swallow the pastry. She put down the plate and found herself clutching the etiquette book. “That so sudden,” she said. “I had hoped that I would have at least a few weeks...”

The Margrave fingered the envelope, but he did not open it. He looked at her. His eyes were dark and unfathomable as always. But the bond, which they had decided not to break, seemed to warm under his regard. He was faintly smiling. “You'll learn.” He leaned towards her.

Vaguely, she heard Lady Beswick's outraged gasp as the etiquette book slipped from her fingers. At the moment, other things were more important than rules and regulations.