

*1st day, Month of Harvest*

*1422 A.F.L.E.*

*The palace training rooms, Donia City*

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The sound of sword hitting fabric and wood drew Armel Maior, prince of Caeledon, and his friend, Knight Guardsman Edwin Everret, to the training rooms deep within the palace. Inside, Crispan Bonheur, Another Knight Guardsman, and Armel's official bodyguard savagely attacked a training dummy, doing his best to hack the unfortunate object to pieces. Edwin frowned and wandered over.

"Cris. Cris? CRIS! Whoa!" Edwin jumped back as Crispan wheeled to face him, sword leveled at his chest.

"What?!" Crispan snapped, "I'm training."

"Yeeessss, I see that." Edwin raised his hands in a placating manner. "But you rarely try to destroy every training dummy in the room." He gestured down the row of stuffed opponents. Three hung half off their supports, straw and stuffing spilling from deep slashes in their canvas chests. "Care to tell us what's wrong?"

Crispan grunted. "Bad news from home."

Edwin winced. He looked at Armel as if to say, *I'm going to regret the next words out of my mouth*. Armel shrugged, his face the same polite court mask he always wore. In the snake pit of noble politics, he avoided showing his thoughts until he absolutely had to. Too often, that extended to his private quarters as well.

Edwin turned back to Crispan, rubbing the back of his neck. Armel smirked. Edwin didn't hide his emotions well, which made him a perfect decoy in Armel's spy network. When the guardsman rubbed his neck, he was nervous. "Would you like a more... active target to spar against?" Edwin asked Crispan. "You could tell us about the news, too."

Crispan nodded towards the rack of practice weapons. "Be my guest."

Edwin quickly stripped down to his shirtsleeves and breeches. He tied his light brown hair back with a strip of fabric, leaving only the framing braids dangling on either side of his face. Crispan's shirt already clung damply to his chest, the ties long since ripped open, leaving his chest exposed. Edwin took a sword from the rack on the wall and strode out into the middle of the room. He stepped into the sparring circle painted on the floor. Arnel leaned on an unmutated practice dummy nearby to watch the bout.

"So," Edwin said as he and Crispan crossed swords, "what's this news you got from home?"

Quick as lightning, Crispan lashed out, swinging his weapon around and down towards Edwin's left side. The other man yelped and rushed to block the blow.

"My brother, Lorrin, is trying to arrange a marriage contract for our sister, Marguerite." Crispan growled, following up his attack with a feint towards Edwin's shoulder.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Edwin asked as he danced out of the way. "Most girls are quite happy to be married."

"Not Maggie. And not with a Hoffnovite contract." Crispan said, pressing his advantage over Edwin's retreat.

Arnel felt an icy fist of apprehension grip his chest. His own sister, Henrietta, had become betrothed to the Hoffnovite prince via a trade treaty over a decade prior. Now that she was reaching her majority, Arnel spent long hours with his uncle, Lord Bertram, going over the contracts, trying to balance Caelish and Hoffnovite customs. He knew the Hoffnovite contracts did not favor brides. And Marguerite Bonheur, a feisty, brilliant woman he had long since fallen for, faced down one of these nefarious schemes.

"What's so bad about a Hoffnovite contract?" Edwin panted, desperately defending himself as Crispan's blows became more and more forceful. "And why do the Hoffnovites even use them?"

Crispan grunted with effort as he bore down on his friend. "It's practically a slave sentence. She's being sold off and the man doing it is my. Own. Brother!" He swung his sword up, aiming for the

top of Edwin's head.

Edwin yelped and threw himself to the side, rolling across the floor as Crispan's sword clanged against the floorboards. "By the Saint, man!" He cried, getting to his knees. "Try to not to actually injure me!"

Crispan whirled to face him again, chest heaving and sword at the ready. He looked as if he would charge the man on the ground. Edwin struggled to rise as Crispan took a step forward.

"Hold." Armel spoke in a voice barely above a whisper, but both guardsmen knew to answer to that voice. Crispan froze. Edwin breathed a sigh of relief, clambering to his feet.

Armel looked at Crispan, a stern glare in his eyes. "I think you've had enough practice, Bonheur. Let's get you some water, and we'll discuss the situation like civilized men."

"Yes, my lord." Crispan bowed low, sweat dripping off his forehead. He turned and offered a hand to Edwin. Both men staggered to a bench along the wall while Armel fetched three cups from the cabinet next to the weapons rack. He filled them with water from the barrel below the cabinet, which the servants refilled daily. After handing out the cups to Crispan and Edwin, Armel fetched a sturdy wooden chair and placed it in front of the bench. He sat and took a sip of his own drink.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" he asked Crispan, pinning the guardsman with the striking purple stare of the Maior bloodline.

Crispan sighed. He set aside the cup and leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees. "A letter from Maggie arrived this morning. She told me that our brother, Lorrin, brought a merchant colleague to dinner at our father's house, a man named Ruslan Novikov. Novikov threw a packet of engagement ribbons in her lap as a token gesture to our culture while Lorrin pressed Father to sign a marriage contract between the two. He said if Maggie and Novikov married, it would help his business." Crispan pounded a fist on his knee. "Our brother tried to sell Maggie off to gain a few trade deals."

"Your father didn't agree?" Edwin asked, his voice tinged with horror. "No self-respecting

Caelish father would just sell his daughter off to the highest bidder. Did your brother at least ask for your sister's opinion?"

Crispan shook his head. "Lorrin's more Hoffnovite than Caelish now. All three of us were born in Temov and raised with a mixture of the two cultures. Maggie and I stuck to the Caelish side of things. Lorrin didn't."

"So..."

"Father didn't sign the contract. But Maggie said he looked conflicted. Lorrin brought up the point that Father has done little to secure her future and if he dies, Maggie will be Lorrin's responsibility. The biggest difference in the Caelish and Hoffnovite attitudes to marriage revolves around the girl's age. In Hoffnovik, they consider Maggie too old for the marriage market at twenty-four, whereas she would still have a few good years here. Father knows time is running out for Maggie, but he wouldn't want to saddle a woman with her intelligence with the mundane life of a wife and mother. Not unless Maggie wanted it, and she doesn't."

Armel cleared his throat. "Did your sister mention how they resolved the matter?" He held his breath as he waited for Crispan's answer, hoping Marguerite Bonheur had escaped the chains her eldest brother had set out for her.

"Not really." Crispan said. "Grandmama suggested Maggie should come here to Caeledon. Grandmama wants her to attend Prosper's Academy for Young Ladies. You both know the potential the school offers to its students."

"Not to mention, it would bring her under your uncle Horatio's watchful eye." Edwin nodded to Armel. "As clever as you say she is, Cris, Master Thorne wouldn't hesitate to recruit her for our network."

Crispan sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. "I can only hope Grandmama and Maggie convince Father of this plan. Father is so protective of my sister, especially after what happened to Mother. Worse than me, if you can believe it."

Edwin patted his shoulder. “It sounds like your father and grandmother have your sister’s best interests at heart. I’m sure it will work out. Now, I’m hungry and you must be famished. What say you and I head to the mess hall and grab something to eat?”

Crispan shrugged. “Might as well.” He looked at Armel. “Care to join us, my lord?”

Armel shook his head. “You two go ahead. I have some papers to review. Come find me in my study when you’ve eaten and cleaned up.”

As the two guardsmen exited the training room, Armel stayed in his chair, thoughts swirling through his head. He felt certain Marguerite wouldn’t end up in a marriage contract with this man, Novikov. If everything Crispan had told him about the woman was true, she would fight until her last breath against that path. But if she came to Caeledon? He felt his heart speed up at the thought. If Marguerite Bonheur came to Caeledon, could he control his longings enough to fulfill his duties to the network and the crown?

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