

**The Lady General**  
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*The Birth of Tatjana Novikov*

It started when I was asked for my name and realized I had none. I had done so well until that point, adopting the guise of a noblewoman from distant Krone City and lying my way past the guards at the gate in a stolen dress. I had walked like a lady through the hallway, past the servants at the door and all the way to the ballroom. I stood frozen at the top of the long staircase and could see the noblemen and women dancing far below. The butler asked me again, "Your name, milady?"

I had no time to think as I opened my mouth to speak. Minding my voice, opening crimson lips, I spoke the first name which came to mind. It was one I always held in reverence, and its meaning held a particular edge. "Tatjyana." I remembered it was customary to speak it in full, and plucked another beautiful name to accompany it. "Lady Tatjyana Asya Novikov." Only the title 'Lady' felt like a lie, the rest felt as if it had always been true. I did not have time to savour the moment, within a moment I was announced to the crowd below and their eyes were on me. A visiting noblewoman was not new, but my name was. Confidence, poise, I took my first steps down those steps into the ballroom as the crowd studied me. I knew how to walk like a young noblewoman, I had practiced it. Grace, with a hint of vulnerability. Taking every step as easily as the last but with a blink of hesitation. I was nervous, I had to ensure I did not look away from the crowd, chin up and with a soft smile on my crimson lips. With my right I held the banister as if I had taken my lover's hand, my left held my peach dress (not my first choice, but beggars cannot be choosers).

It felt as if I had descended for an eternity when my heels clicked upon the marble floor and I stood in the round ballroom at the foot of the crowd. If there was ever a moment of truth it came then. A sharply dressed man approached me with his wife hanging on his arm. I recognized him from the papers and introduced myself. Extending a remarkably steady gloved hand to him, he took it and placed a kiss on the back of my hand as I curtsied low and with head bowed. "Sir Korsakov." I made a similar curtsy to Lady Korsakov, minus the head bow.

He was being polite, but it felt akin to interrogation. "Lady Novikov... I do not believe I've had the pleasure. What has brought you from so far away?"

Fortunately this I had foreseen. "While I might be born across the sea, my blood ached to visit my home. I hope I am not intruding."

When Sir Korsakov smiled, so did I. It was true to an extent, while I had not been born away from Norden continent it was my home. Three particular features of myself proved this, all three of which were studied in greater detail. He looked to my long bloody red hair, at my soft alabaster skin and finally to my eyes, bloody red just like my hair and his. All of these features Sir and Lady Korsakov shared, and so did the vast majority of the crowd. I was born of Norden parents, both of whom pure blooded. The Norden trait was easily bred out, becoming lost whenever a child was not of two pure bloods.

I had known exactly what to say, and I was welcomed to my home. Norden blood was the closest thing to a nation in the world at that time. A Norden noblewoman living across the ocean was an oddity to Sir Korsakov, and he asked me question after question about Krone and Tsentr continent. Neither of which I had ever seen, aside from my dreams.

"Is it true that the entire city is built upon the mountain? From base to peak?"

"Yes, and you have not seen the world until you have witnessed it while sitting on a boat offshore at dusk. Watching the electricity flow and make it a pillar of light."

"So electricity runs along entire streets?" He asked, as the crowd returned to their dance.

"Most, though I have not been to any place without it." I knew this because I had read it. All of my life I had read the stories, comics, and it was even mentioned from time to time in the chapbooks. I am sure that if the practice was more widespread Sir Korsakov would not have asked, but it allowed me to establish my story. Growing more confident I looked above us to the chandelier lit also in electric light, a rare sight in Norden and a symbol of wealth. When my vision returned to eye level with Sir Korsakov, a young Norden man in a white suit stood beside him.

He was relaxed, with a warm smile on his face. He rested his arm upon Sir Korsakov's shoulder in a way that he must have been family. He was young, early twenties like myself if I had to guess. I liked him. He dressed like no other, most of the men staying to safer brown suits or black hat and tails. He bowed, took my hand and kissed it. Norden blood rushed to my alabaster cheeks and turned them a familiar red. Sir Korsakov watched my reaction and his, and it became obvious that this was his son. For a moment, I felt like I was on the opposite side of the ball my father once brought me to years before.

Now my hand began to shake in his, he noticed. He took a step towards me, it was the first in some time that I had to look up at a man. "You are nervous?" His eyes became sly but friendly. "Do they not have balls in Krone?"

"None with such fine blooded young noblemen." Had I not been pure blooded myself, his parents would have surely cast me out instead of leaving us to talk.

He smirked, laughed softly. "You are good."

"Obviously, I caught the eye of the host's son..." I was becoming more comfortable. "Though I do not know his name."

"Juri, Sir Juri Vladko Korsakov. Charmed to make the acquaintance of the Lady Tatjana Asya Novikov of Krone." He kissed my shaking hand once more before letting me take it back. "Now, I must ask. Why is it that you are truly here?"

My heart skipped a beat, did he know? "To visit my homeland, of course..." As more guests began to arrive we began to walk around the ballroom. It was of a familiar style, circular with pillars separating the central dance floor and the tables while holding up the balcony. His suit matched the white marble floors, pillars, even walls. All shimmering in the reflected electric lights.

The tables were littered with wine bottles, all red and of Norden vintages. Despite trade being so uncommon, and Tsentr wines being expensive there was still Norden pride on display. As he poured me a glass, he rejected my answer. "I haven't known a young lady to visit all on her own. Not many see the world, especially the young."

I wondered if I should say it or not before replying, "I am certainly not your average young lady." For one I lived in a destitute farmhouse hours outside of the city, but did not feel particularly compelled to go into detail. Juri looked to the crowds, not many were watching us. He stood toe to toe with me and noted my height.

"Five foot..."

"Six. Exactly." I corrected him.

"I always liked tall women."

I acted offended and did an awful job. "Bold, Sir Korsakov. Very bold..." We smiled at each other. I had not expected this. Juri was a gentlemen surely, he did not touch me aside from leading me and he kept his eyes in the proper places. Still he wanted to have fun and made it clear to me in his tone of voice.

"Juri. Call me Juri, Lady Novikov."

"Tatjana." I corrected him once more. He had the manners to address me formally even when I did not have to.

"Tatjana." He repeated. "Why do you smile like that?" I hadn't realized how much I was smiling when he said that word, my name. I had a tear in my eye that caused him to offer me his handkerchief. I took it, quickly dabbed my eye clean and hastily gave it back to him. My composure was all I had, I could not make a mistake. "I would ask if I have done something wrong, but it seems the opposite..."

I turned my back to the crowd and looked to him. "I... It is nice to be feel at home." A loaded statement.

"Have you truly never been home, Tatjana? Did you not feel at home where you were?"

"Truly, never before now..."

Juri poured himself a glass and raised it to me. "To Tatjana Novikov, a Lady of Norden now and forever." He toasted me, we both drank. Juri drank his wine quickly, placing an empty glass immediately down on the table. "To celebrate, might I have this dance?"

I was not to be outdone, but gulped and nearly stained my dress when he asked me. I

barely saved myself from coughing. He took the empty glass from me and I wonder if he thought I was about to faint. I swallowed every drop and caught my breath. "Yes... Yes." I had never been on the receiving end of that question before.

He teased, "And here I was thinking you were a creature of grace."

I took that challenge, "You should know, Krone has considered dance an endurance sport." That is true, occasionally a Krone dance will gradually increase in speed until only one couple remain. Though at the time I hoped I had not bought into fiction. I took his lead, even that brought a smile to my face. He was a handsome young nobleman with young noblewoman on his arm. He walked me to the center of the floor with such confidence others couldn't help but watch. Every step in my heels was deliberate, my chin held high, wrapping my arms around his. I did this perfectly, all the while going over every Norden dance in my head.

He whispered to me, "Hopefully this will not bore you, I know Krone dances are more... physical." Krone dances often clap to the beat, and require changing of partners while Norden dances are more intimate. Truthfully, I had only practiced Norden dances.

"I know I will enjoy myself, Juri." We were all smiles. He motioned to the musicians to begin another tune, a waltz. Taking my hands in his, Juri and I began.

When I took my first step, I felt as if I had stepped back into my cozy little room at home practising to a tune in my head. On my second step, I felt as if I were in the city streets in the evening, dancing to a tune which drifted from the fine shops my family could no longer afford. On my third step, I wondered if it was real. The dance flowed naturally, every step taken with delicate purpose and drawing me steadily closer to the body of the young nobleman. I do not believe he minded. Not a single noble did, there was nothing to mind. The two of us danced, sparks lit the air between us and there was a smile on my painted lips for the first time that I could remember.

There was wine, conversation, more dancing into the early hours of the morning. I weaved stories about my life in Krone, admittedly adaptations of my life before things changed. I asked the right questions, spoke the right words, and even got a laugh out of a few of them. All the while Juri and I carried on as if we were a couple, and truthfully I felt as if the nobles wished it to be so. It was like the stories. The handsome nobleman, the beautiful noblewoman, dancing in a fine ball and drinking only the best wine. It was the life I had only read and dreamed of.

It was like the stories, and while the lives of the nobles within truly was romantic, they was not without their conflicts. I dreaded knowing the conflict would come, pushed it from my mind as long as possible but as the night wore on and the dance wound down. I knew it was time. In some the noblewoman is a spy, in some she is secretly part of a rival family, in others an assassin. In no story is the noblewoman like me. I do not say that as if no story included a poor girl who disguises herself as the nobility, that certainly has been done. I speak of the reason why what happened next should have been my right, but it would have meant my death.

The crowds began to thin, and I was busy committing names to memory as if it mattered. Juri's hand was with mine, standing together as he gave his farewells to each guest. The sun would rise in an hour and it was time for many to stumble home, sober up and return to keeping up appearances. Sir and Lady Korsakov stood opposite us, all of them gracious hosts. The last of the guests had departed the ballroom and the servants had begun to sweep and clean. Sir Korsakov turned to us, smiling and entirely sober. "Lady Novikov, I won't have you staying in a hotel. I will have a guest ro-" He paused and was looking to Juri. Though I didn't see the expression on Juri's face, Sir and Lady Korsakov turned to one another and silently decided. "Lady Novikov, I hope you will join us for breakfast." As they made their exit I curtsied, bowing my head to Sir Korsakov.

Juri and I were alone, and like the creeping truth that came the lights dimmed and the black became suffocating. Juri leaned in behind me and whispered to my ear, "I remember how you like it when I am bold." I felt his lips on my neck, his tongue cracing across my

alabaster skin, his hands on my shoulders and I wanted to give in.

'Only a moment... Just once...' I fought myself, and brought one hand up to run my slender fingers through his hair and invite him in deeper. In my mind, I would scream at myself for doing so. 'You have no right!' His hands were so warm, his body pressed against me. He was a gentleman, I was not being taken despite knowing he had ability to do so. He advanced because I was inviting him, my body was aching for his touch and the feeling of his arms reach across me was intoxicating. I was losing my composure and my mind screamed to me that I was about to lose far more than that. He could not see my face, struck with the realization that the dream was over and a nightmare was about to begin.

My moans at his lips suckling on my neck, my back pressing against his chest, the rising heat of us together, all of it was my doing and all of it had to stop. Juri placed his hands on my hips, holding me in place and pushing against my skirt to bring us closer. When he took one hand, hesitated for me to say something, before starting to dexterously unlace my corset, the other pressed and reached down between my legs. 'No...' My mind began to repeat, 'No. No...'

I began screaming. "No, please no!" I spun around, tearing a corset string from his fingers and held my corset in place with one hand. Juri's face was in shock, mine was in tears and neither of us knew what to say. I do not remember exactly what I said but I know I nearly screamed it, "Please, I cannot. It's..." I studied the look on his face, my mind screamed that it was so obvious now. I lost my composure, I lost my confidence and my speech. I needed to run, I needed to run far away.

Awakening from that state of shock and confusion, Juri followed me. "Tatjana?!" I was in the hallway when he reached the top of the stairs. He could run far faster than me, as I had to hold my skirt and loosened corset up. It was a straight line: out of the ballroom, down the hall, through the doors and onto the long driveway. "Tatjana?!" He was catching up. I did not believe he would take me, but I knew any explanation would lead to the same conclusion. My feet ached, my dress was heavy but I would soon be gone. Throwing open the doors, slamming them shut behind me, I headed for the shadows at the end of the driveway and wanted desperately to disappear into the night. The last time I saw Juri he was standing at the doorway, our eyes caught for a moment when I looked back, before I rounded the stone fence and returned to reality.

I am not a thief. I never took more than I earn. As the sun began to rise, the gentle click of a lock picked echoed through an alleyway occupied by only one. I knew the dress shop would not open for another hour or so, I had time. I was not fast, I was not graceful, I slogged through untying my corset. I pushed the dress down, and I swept hair wet from tears and sweat from my brow. I did not look in the mirror like I had at the start of the evening, and I admit that the dress was returned askew. Before returning to the brown wool dress I had placed in a corner, I stood and looked around the shop. I remembered that as a child I used to marvel at the pieces, I remembered that two years prior I could have afforded them. When my eyes graced across my reflection in the mirror I remembered why that was. It hung between my legs, still begging for Juri's touch like a whining dog. Strips of flesh, marking me forever as undesirable, insane and a fake; a *Fiela*. Old tongue name no one cared to investigate, but a name I had heard yelled to me until the drugs helped me. A name which marked me and would have to be declared. No matter how far I would come. No matter how many injections of the drug *Fiela-Marin* would flow through me. No matter how strong or beautiful. My phallus would mark me now and forever always, *Fiela*.

Our hotel was narrowly placed between two shops and close to the market where my sister and I sold what we could. It was cheap, but the owner's heart was in the business so it was cleaner and friendlier than most. Certainly safer. Before it had been me, our father and several hands in far better accommodations. No one would have bothered us then. Now it was two women alone and that changed things. I do not know what I expected when I opened the door to our room, it was past dawn and my sister Nadedja would be and was

awake. Worried, angry, but smart and with no need to ask me where I had been, she knew.

Tossing the paper from the day before with the article announcing the party in front of her, she sat with legs crossed on the bed and scolded. "You could have gotten yourself killed! What would you have done if they found out? I never believed you would have actually followed through with this..."

Despite her frustration, the memories of the night had left me smiling. In my defense, "I did." My body was tired, my feet ached but I couldn't deny that I had lived my dream for a night. "I did, Nadejda... I borrowed a dress, lied past the guards, told them my name and spent the evening in the arms of Sir Juri Korsakov." I missed him already.

Nothing gets past my older sister. "You have a name? You've chosen a name?" She had been patient, I went through lists of them but could never pick the one which felt like me. Only when my back was pressed against the wall did it become so clear. I told her, and she sat considering it. Turning it over in her head, and I know she weighed the fury of my actions with the fact that I had not been arrested for impersonating a noble. She's smart, she knew that if I had not been suspected that night, it was unlikely that they would figure it out in the morning. We were not famous, they would not know of my true stature. When I looked to Nadejda, I could see the lines under her eyes and knew she had been up all night worrying. The fury subsided, and the worry was pushed away and my big sister got to her feet and walked to and embraced me. "Tatjana..."

I held her close, "Yes?"

Pulling back and with a movement so fast that to this day I cannot match it, I was delivered a stinging slap straight across my left cheek. "Never again." She turned so quickly that brown curls flew in my face and went to pack. Neither of us wanted to stay in Kust City longer than needed, our two youngest sisters were hours away at home in the care of our mother; who had not been the same since father left. This did not mean the lecture was over. As we packed trowels, axes, spades to replace the broken beyond repair at home. Nadejda spoke of how she could have lost me, along with the family. She told me that suspicions were now raised, that I had been lucky not to be found out. When I told her about Juri, that he wanted to bed me and how I had won his parents over; she did not believe me.

When she lectured, she spoke from worry and not anger. It was always worry for my life and for losing me. There was worry that I could not blend in, that my impression on Juri was fleeting and lucky. I grew frustrated, I chose to misinterpret her words and ask why she did not believe I could be attractive. It was my dream and she did not understand. I thought she would. After buying milk, cheese and spending precious money on sweets to gift our young sisters; we passed the hole in the wall bookshop where I spent my allowance. When we took what we had to market, most of the profits were spent on restoring equipment, and necessities we could no longer produce. When you looked at what was left, not much, we put a crown away to save. What was left, half went to my sister and half to me. We barely scratched by saving a pound, but Nadedja insisted on doing so every trip. Moreso as this was one of our last for the growing season. We made one trip in the winter to sell spare preserves, but for the most part this would be our income for the year. Nadedja never wanted anything, she always tucked it into a purse under her woolen dress and cloak then waited for me to spend mine. We always made a trip to an unnamed bookshop, so small you had to be searching for it. With three shillings in hand I browsed the books no one would acknowledge. Cheap paper but filled with wonderful tales of nobles, adventure, duels and incredible sex. In honour of the night before, I decided on a novel based around a woman trained to be the finest of courtesans and all the noblemen she would encounter.

Nadejda studied the cover drawing of the woman with a handsome nobleman. Surprising choice considering my history. "She's with a man." The worry returned to her. "You're not looking for a repeat of last night?"

I paid quickly, it was three shilling exactly and walked out of the shop with my sister.

Defeated, "Only in text." A single horse drawn cart exposed entirely to the elements awaited us. I tried to convince her, "But this is more than fiction, much of what I read proved useful." She did not want to hear it, silently wrapping a scratchy blanket around me to keep me warm in the cold northern air sweeping through the streets.

The trains did not service our tiny village to the south, but it would only be three hours ride. Nadejda insisted on steering, and was adamant that I stay wrapped in the blanket. Perhaps she feared I would run off to find Juri, I could not tell for certain but she certainly wanted me safe and quiet. The first snowfall of the winter was gently falling, bringing a sense of peace to a long morning. Looking back, I know that my letters must have frightened her beyond what she admitted. I know what happened next convinced her in small part that this was the life I was born to lead. Kust City was surrounded by simple but impressive stone walls, in a state of decay for the last thousand years; and all roads led out through them. Usually passing through the stone was uneventful, the private guards of nobles would only stand watch if they had been stolen recently. That day we saw a private guard of a noble standing in the cold, but without a sword and without support. He simply held a piece of paper. The man wearing a crest depicting the mountain ash tree waved to us and requested, not demanded, that we stop.

I did not see much, instead resigning myself to the warmth of the blanket and knew Nadejda would speak anyways. I heard the man's footsteps approach us and a scratchy voice ask, "Pardons miss, but do you know this woman?" I heard the paper rustle as it was presented to her.

I knew whose picture adorned it when Nadejda asked nervously, "What is she wanted for?"

I didn't dare show myself now. The guard explained, "Don't worry, nothing like that. It seems Sir Korsakov's son fancied a woman who ran out on him, so much so that he had her picture drawn up and been lookin' for her since." Impersonating a noble is a serious crime, and knowing the influence of the Korsakovs it would have meant death. I kept my head down, and did not say a word. "Wouldn't expect you to know her, she's from Krone probably headed back there now but... Well the belle of the ball who ran is all the Lords and Ladies are talking of this morning and some of us boys are gettin' a reward to findin' her... So-

Nadejda spoke cold, "I'm sorry, sir. I don't run across many noblewomen from Krone."

The guard took a step back and I assume waved us through. "Didn't think so, but if you do run across her... I think she might like to know the Korsakovs want her back. Good day."

For a time there was only the horses' hooves on the dirt path to break the silence. Nadejda needed some time to think and I would not interrupt her. Warm in my cocoon, I could not watch the morning sun climb into the sky, I could not tell how much time passed. Nadejda's voice was calm but filled with more worry. "Why did you do it?"

I opened my cocoon and felt the cool breeze on my face. "I needed to indulge in a bit of fantasy."

Nadejda steered the horses down a gentle incline, towards the valley our village rested in. "You haven't given me a straight answer. You don't need to put yourself at risk like that."

I could not find the words to answer her, but I tried. "I needed to know what it was like. I lived on one side and longed to know what it felt like." I motioned to imply that I was trying to answer her as best I could. "I was the young man of the family, father took me to meet eligible young ladies. I would do what was scripted, court them and build a name for myself under his watchful eye. The women were beautiful, but I could not go on knowing I needed to be one of them instead of their suitor."

Nadejda had not heard the whole story. "Is that when he broke your nose?" It had healed completely, but when the weather became cold it still ached. I realized I had been rubbing my finger along the bridge of my nose the entire time. "You were at one of those, weren't you?"

"My first suit, my first ball. All of the farm owners around Kust came, to network and for the fathers to pair their children up. Would you believe it was his fault? He made a joke earlier as I was being fitted for it!" The memory was crystal clear. "He joked, 'Cheer up, why the down face? You're like a damn *Fiel*.' as the tailor worked on me and I could only stare into the mirror and wonder if my reflection would be my life." Like a ghost, he still haunts me, haunts Nadedja and our family. "I asked him, what a *Fiel* was, and he told me they were the perverts, the insane men who would dress like little girls. Who wanted to be and lived as one." It hadn't been explained until that day. The name *Fiel* comes up here and there, but it was never discussed. "And I was reminded of those nights you asked me why I wept, those days confused as to what made us so different. I worked the fields, I sold with him, and with every trip he left you behind and took me to find a wife." Some people believe in ghosts, spirits which linger behind, a memory which cannot be put to rest. I believe a ghost to be the uncertainty, the confusion, which stalked me every day whether I acknowledged it or not. It was not until it had a name where I turned and first saw it, and I swear it had the face of me. The face of who I should be. It was not haunting me, it tried to help, as the mask I wore suffocated me. "That night at the ball I drowned myself in beer and the first indisputable truth was clear, I could not live wearing that mask anymore."

"How did you tell him?"

"Father," I could not see the dirt road, only his face. "I cannot be your son, would you please let me be your daughter?" And after the silence, "I am a *Fiel*, I am your daughter! I cannot live wearing a mask any longer." The mask shattered, the light came through as pain and blood. The mask shattered to his fist, of a man who had far too many daughters and a worthless son to use. I did not hear the screams, I did not watch him leave, I held my face on the floor as blood dripped down and took a breath.

Nadedja spoke after a few more moments of silence. "That isn't the only reason. You were a noblewoman from Krone last night." I was holding my nose as if I could feel the blood run down my alabaster face. "It was as if you played out your stories." I nearly did.

"Some paint, some cook, and I love the thrill of the dance." I knew she wanted a definite answer. "I do not know, it is how I am, how I dream to be. To be Lady Novikov, or even *Mellissare* Novikov." I spoke the title *Mellissare*, a title given to the few women said to have been born with the masculine traits of ambition, intellect and courage. "To indulge in such fantasy."

"You don't want to be *Mellissare*, most are courtesans." I did.

"I could. I was belle of the ball, I had the eye of a handsome young nobleman and am a quick study. Tradition, etiquette, speech, dance and touch." Almost arguing now, "They are my gifts, I proved it!" I ignored Nadedja's gradual indifference to what I had to say. "And we would not be under control anymore! To be a *Mellissare* is to make your own way, even as a courtesan they make good money. To be in control, not at the mercy of a man who sells our home acre by acre from who knows where!"

"You would be a whore."

"I would make you proud. *Mellissare* Novikov, tall Norden beauty bedding the finest Lords and Ladies to put food on her family's table! I would be of use."

Nadedja shrugged it off. "You are of use, here."

I told her. "I am the reason he left." I felt cold, and my words echoed in front of me. "I am the reason for this." Nadedja shook her head, she not once made me feel guilty.

"It isn't your fault, and we don't need him. He wasn't good for us." What I really wished was for Nadedja to tell me it was my fault, to acknowledge that I was the reason father left. I told her of my fault, I told her of my gifts. Despite never growing up doing so, she took to farming better than me. While I could only plow a field and spent my days reading and practicing noble arts she sewed, fertilized and managed the fields. I wanted to help, but it was not my gift. Perhaps being forced into it since I was young, my mind saw it as a sign of my slavery to the life he had decided.

When we pulled along the isolated road, past the fields which used to be ours and to the farmhouse at the end of the line. A ghost haunted us in the form of a old balding man we knew all too well. Nadejda did not say a word, she leapt off the cart and left me to attend to our horse. I took the reigns but stood to watch. My sister ran along the overgrown grass, passed the worn porch and to a fence where the man stood. He was from the bank, father had sold one of the last pieces of our home.

Nadejda spoke with him like she greeted me that morning. "What do we have left?! We need this! Do you expect me to feed this family from a tiny backyard?!" The fence had been marked as sold, with a new one being constructed straight through our tiny garden. It ran from right beside our home, down to the cliff side with the ocean roaring just beyond. I took our horse to the tiny stable beside the farmhouse, walking farther into earshot of the exchange.

The man from the bank looked back at the workers finishing the fence and motioned to our tiny stretch remaining. "Be thankful he left you the house. It's his land after all. If he wants it sold, it's sold."

"At least tell me where he is. Where is this money being sent?"

The man shook his head. "You know we don't give out that information, sweetheart." He was looking at a clipboard, casually brushing my sister off while he confirmed the measurements. "You've got the house."

"Is that all? You know how we live! How are we going to make it through the winter?"

I believe the man from the bank enjoyed this. It took a particular kind to casually take a destitute home. "You're not the only girl to have this problem, and they work out just fine." His hand brushed against my sister's dark curls, lingering far too long. I knew that look in his eyes, he had waited months for this opportunity. It was ignored.

Nadejda pointed to the crops which had been split with us being left with a fraction of the bounty. "At least let me and my sister harvest."

The man laughed, at me as his hand still lingered. "Miss... I'd save yourself some money and put the *Fiel*a in a loony bin. Hot meals two times a day I hear, and all the drugs that are necessary." And Nadejda hit him, clean in the jaw. I dropped the reins and ran towards them. The man from the bank countered, but Nadejda was fast. She dodged but soon his hands were on her he pressed his weight down on her against the wire fence. I reached him as Nadejda was struggling. I pulled on his shoulder and heard him taunt. "Now, I ain't ever hit a lady, son." His elbow nearly cracked my rib as I stumbled back. He threw Nadejda into the fence and came for me. Aged and slow but I could not put up a fight. He bruised my shoulder and pushed me to the ground. "Now that's assault. Maybe I'll call the men in white myself, tell them the *Fiel*a attacked me. Wouldn't take much of a story."

Nadejda's voice behind him. "The story of how a farm girl took you down?" The next thing I heard was the man yelp as Nadejda dealt a blow to his leg from behind, and circled over to put herself between us. He came at her, but Nadejda was far more prepared than last time. She grabbed his wrist, forced him down, he stumbled and she dealt a swift uppercut to his belly. She jabbed his ear, knocking him to the ground and finally lifted her skirt to bring her foot down on his chest. "Now the way I see it, my sister didn't throw a punch and you got taken down by a farm girl. Go and tell the asylum, lie, they can come back here and learn first hand who your assailant was. Unless you bein' beaten by me is a little too embarrassing. In which case I say you have your land, take it, and get off of mine."

The man stumbled to his feet and took short, shallow breaths. "You'll whore. They always do. You got nothing left." Nadejda stood shorter than him, but held her ground and didn't flinch when he motioned that he would try to strike her again. The men who built the fence were watching us from a carriage down the road which the man stumbled to.

I felt Nadejda's hand on my back, guiding me into our home. "Are you hurt? I'll make you some coffee... Tatjyana." I felt so useless, my name could not bring a smile to my face.

It was quiet until nightfall. Our mother kept to her bed upstairs, saying very little and still

mourning the loss of a man whom she believed loved her. I reassuringly patted the bloody red hair of our sisters Julija and Uljana who would soon be asleep in their tiny room. I went and sat by the kitchen table, reading in the flickering lantern light and listening to the last crackling embers of the fire lighting the living room behind me. Nearly everyone was as they had been nearly every night since father left, except Nadejda. She usually spent her nights laying on the couch behind me, resting after a long day. I kept looking over my shoulder to see the couch laying bare. The guilt stayed with me, a companion I could not grow to ignore. It was when I heard the stairs creek, and familiar footsteps gradually come towards me that I knew she had taken time to think long and alone. I did not want to seem indifferent, gently folding the page to mark my place and setting the novel down onto the table as Nadejda came into the light. She quietly pulled out a chair and sat so that I could see her.

She looked to me, brown eyes peering through the black. There was gravity, but I could not tell what she was feeling. Still, I took a guess. "I would go, if you decided." I started before she could speak. "It is true, two hot meals, doctors to fix me..." I picked up the novel and showed it to her. "They would allow reading material, as long as I told them I wished to be the ma-"

As it was that morning, she slapped me across my right cheek moving faster than I could respond. I placed the novel down, sitting confused and silent. When Nadejda spoke, she told me plainly and tried to hide the hint of a smile on her face. "If you're going to fight like this afternoon, and if you're going to let me strike you like that, then you aren't going to make it as a courtesan." Those words stunned me more than the strike. "Despite what you think Tatjyana, life as a courtesan can be dangerous. Even more so for a *Fiel*a. Besides you're not the only *Fiel*a to try and become one and you're just not going to be as prized as other women. So it's time for me and you to figure this out."

Even if she refused to smile, I did. "You wish for me to whore?"

"I wish for you to be *Mellissare* Novikov of Krone. I thought it was a dream my sister had."

I did not know what to say other than, "It is!"

Nadejda tapped her finger on my novel. "It's like this, only dangerous. They won't respect you as a person, so you are to make them respect you as a Goddess. You know what that is?" Of course I knew what a Goddess was, I read the fairy tales. "You were probably different when you lied your way past the guards, more confident. You'll need that." I nodded to her. When I lied my way into the noble's ball, it all came together. I was in my element, brimming with a confidence I had not felt before. "Tatjyana, you have a gift. It's a gift that might give you the life you deserve, even if I know it will have its share of heartbreak. It's a gift you are going to refine. While you caught the eye of the nobility last night you're not going to hold it without help." Nadejda looked about the kitchen for a moment, considering her options while I sat and watched. Truly, I did not know quite what to say. Nadejda continued in the meantime, "You know how to dance, you know how to make yourself appealing but you need something to make them remember you by, something you can offer that others might not." She looked to me. "And you know what that is."

I raised an eyebrow and wondered, "I do?"

Nadejda reached out and took my hand, examining it before feeling up my arm. "You lost a bit of muscle when you started injecting *Fiel*a-Marin, but we can get it back." I let her, admittedly still in shock from her change of mind. "You will start that tomorrow. It would work, both as defense and for domination."

"I am to become a mistress?"

"Don't pretend you weren't thinking it. Tatjyana, I've seen your collection of books. I've seen you have a taste for things far more taboo than merely sex." My big sister knew me well. It was not something I held proudly, but I was drawn to what was only referred to as 'dark sensuality'. I had been since I was young. I had a love of those stories which offered me something deeper. I felt connected, I felt loving, I felt powerful, losing myself in the

fantasies of the noblewoman with tastes she dared not say to another. It was something that I had never told a soul, but Nadejda knew and I suspected she had always known. She continued to speak as she rose from her chair and walked to the counter. "I know exactly what you'll do." She slid the finest knife from its block and returned to the table with it, placing it down beside the novel in the light. "This is how you'll leave your mark."

I ran slender fingers over the blade, a common kitchen knife but my mind raced at the possibilities. In an odd way, seeing it in this light caused myself to latch onto it as a very possible reality. I think Nadejda watched me curiously as I stroked the instrument, casually at first but with an odd sense of respect. It was new to me, but it felt as if it was somehow meant to be. "You've always known..." I remembered the story of the courtesan who used such a thing, nicer than a kitchen knife but to make her clients loose themselves in the agony. The blood, I wanted to see the blood.

I felt Nadejda's hand on my alabaster cheek, her thumb stroking under my eye. "You are a true Norden girl, you know?" I tried to swoop my hand under the hilt, carry the blade up in a graceful fashion but failed. Though I wondered why I tried to show off a skill I did not have yet. "It might save us."

Taking the knife from the table this time, I held and felt its weight in my hand. I wondered if Norden blood aches for this. Nordens build their ballrooms of white marble, the highest among us dress in white. We drink bloody red wine and turn our bodies into perfect dolls who bleed bloody red hair. No one knew why, no one cared. It was simply how we were. It was as if we tried to indulge in a primal desire that had long been deemed unacceptable. However this is not spoken of in polite society, or any level of society for that matter. The thought of drawing that blade as a courtesan of Krone excited me, enough that I was forced to hide the growing bulge in my skirt which Nadejda pretended not to notice. To watch a client bend to me, to shudder at the sight of and ache for my blade. It was to indulge in a longing, a perfect bit of fantasy.

She spoke, "There it is. There's Tatjyana Novikov..." She later told me that she had watched the look on my face as I held the knife, how a lifetime of repressed desire began to shine through. She thought it to be the glimmers of her younger sister becoming a woman. I always considered it was indulgence in being a child. Perhaps a strange mix of both. "How much do you know about using one of those?"

"Only from what I have read." Though seeing how successful I had been already, I had confidence that this I would make a reality. Still, there was the question. "Why did you change your mind?"

She only spoke half the truth, "A *Mellissare* can make a fine living, even I suspect if she was *Fielä*. We need the money."

I might not have been as intelligent as her, but I knew there was more to that. "You speak enthusiastically, I dare say you delivered this knife with a smile."

Nadejda went to light a fire for the stove and filled a kettle of water for tea. Waiting for it to boil she came back to me and spoke, "It's probably time, isn't it? You deserve to know why father adopted me."

I was ten years old when father brought a fifteen year old girl home to live with us. This was years before the first of our two youngest sisters were born. I did not ask many questions and only asked them for the first few days. Wondering where Nadejda had come from, why she didn't have any parents and if she wanted to have a little sister. The answer to all three were short. 'The city, dead and yes.' Over the years as we grew together it was as sisters and building that relationship was our only concern. Nadejda was a gift. A soul whom I might have still been ashamed to discuss my confusion with, but a kind soul who helped me feel less alone. I did not question it, and she seemed to have no desire to explain her past until that night.

Nadejda started from the beginning. "My family was poor and like so many other children when my parents became sick, they could not afford to get well. First my father, when I was three. I barely remember that. Then my mother when I was seven. I don't want to

remember that. Neither were Norden blood, neither had ties anywhere else. It was the exhaustion from the factories and the rats, I don't remember what happened only that one day they got sick. A few days later, they just stopped moving. A sad story but one that wasn't new." I was about to learn Nadejda's hesitations, and why she was so quick to caution me against the life of a courtesan. "I was seven years old. Your father adopted me when I was fifteen. I didn't live in an orphanage, Kust City didn't have room and no money to provide more. Alone, I needed to survive. I got work at the same factory my parents worked for, slaved there for years but children are paid with promises of work once they can 'pull their weight'. Even as I turned eleven the factory offered me nothing but a couple meals a day, with the promise of paid work once I was large enough to demand it. It was food, but I didn't have shelter. The apartment I had lived in was eventually rented to a family which could pay. With no money I practically slept beside the factory." At times, Nadejda would pause and look off with eyes unfocused before picking up a few moments later. "One night after my shift, my boss followed me out and around, to a space between the brick walls where I slept. He took out ten pence and tossed it to my lap, kneeling down beside me. It was enough for some real food, I couldn't believe it. Then he asked me, what I would do to deserve it." She paused, as her hand reached out and flipped through the pages of the novel. She opened her eyes and as the kettle started to scream she took time to listen to it, before insisting on going to make tea.

I sat, wondering why she did not let me do so. The story bothered her, I could see it in her unfocused eyes. I did not want her to continue, so I simply asked, "Is that how you survived?"

"Yes." She put a teabag into each cup, and brought them to the table. I realized why she hated the idea of me becoming even a courtesan, and how she knew so much without sharing my taste in literature.

"Why did you change your mind? And what happened with father?" I became so curious, and thought it would be a happier change of pace.

Nadejda held the hot cup in her hand, nearly gripping it. "I changed my mind when I knew it was not my right to deny you this. I was not going to bring another into this life, regardless if you would service wealthy clients instead of poor though they are all the same. But, I decided that you have gifts. That maybe if I taught you how to defend yourself, helped you become a *Mellissare* if that is even possible... I'd be able to put that nightmare to use, and help you live happier. Though, Tatjyana... I will say that a large part of this is knowing that we do not have any more options left to us."

I appreciated her honesty, even if meant she still did not completely embrace this idea. With those cards on the table, I asked her how she met father and she was happier to speak on that. I was not expecting her preface however. "Guilt and fear are powerful forces. It was a cold spring and I was then living along a poor side street which was known for prostitutes. Kust City allows it, but in the same fashion we all treat that's taboo; pretending it does not exist. Then men who walked that street inspected every one of us. Some had the courage and gall to gawk openly, others just buried themselves in their coats. Your father was walking down the middle of the road seeming to mind his own business." Another pause, but this time Nadejda only seemed at a loss for words. "I- I don't know why he came over to me. Obviously I was fifteen and clearly so, the other women I lived beside were older. Some by a few times. When he walked up to me I was cold, taking time to rest against a stone wall and huddled with a thin blanket around me. He didn't know how to speak to me, his voice quivered and his eyes seemed confused as to what to do." Nadejda was finding the words. "He was guilt stricken."

"About what-" I paused, I knew. "He had been married for years..." I realized what Nadejda said. "He did not... You said guilt and fear, did he take you in for that?"

Nadejda shrugged. "I never asked. I didn't care at the time. I don't believe it was his intent at first. Mostly he just spoke of how I was so young, and asked what I was doing there. He didn't get a reply. Whether he truly wanted to know or whether he was acting innocent I couldn't tell. He was nice. He insisted that I come with him and that he would

buy me a sandwich." Nadejda was tiny when she first came home, I remember that clearly. "I did not have anything to lose, I didn't care anymore. I went with him, and was surprised that he did give me food. He bought soup too, and I sat down on nearby steps slurping it up. He acted strangely, I believe you were right. I know that was not his first time looking for one of us, and I know he feared it catching up with him. He ate beside me, asking about my family and I was more willing to oblige. I would have been afraid for my life if I simply did not care anymore, when he asked me to come to his farm. Girls had disappeared so often, Tatjyana. Murdered by nearly the same offer, I know, I heard their John convince them to follow as they stood beside me." There was that look in her eyes again, and I reached out and placed my hand on hers. She gripped my fingers, steadied herself. "I thought that was how it was, that's how they kept the streets clean of us and that my number was up. I went with him, with his stories of a small family and a big farm. How he and his wife had a son and now wanted a daughter. I knew there was fear and guilt in his voice. I did not know it was because he was there looking for sex and not a girl to clean from the streets. He packed up a lunch to go and we rode down the same dirt road home, I sat as a shell for hours." Her hand was shaking, she held onto mine and she looked to my eyes. "But when we arrived, I found you. Smiling, wondering... wanting to meet hi- her new big sister." A teary smile.

It was a random act of kindness, born from fear and guilt. Writing this now, I wish that it always worked that way. Now that I have witnessed how instead it twists a man into something far the opposite. Father was the first, abandoning us out of fear of a loss of prestige, a wife he did not love and a *Fiel*a for a son. Maybe even a whore for a daughter, lingering in his mind, though of that I cannot be certain.

She pulled me up and embraced me, as I warpped my arms around her. She told me, "I learned how to defend myself, I learned how they think and if we are going to do this then you will know it too. I need to know Tatjyana, that you will promise me to pour your heart into the coming months. Physical strength, technique with a blade, crop and whip from the stable. And I want you to read everything, take it with a grain of salt but you did so well last night. I did not say it then, but you risked everything to live your dream. I was never prouder of you, even if I could not show it." Nadejda kissed my cheek. "But I need to know, is this who you wish to be?"

*Mellissare* Tatjyana Novikov of Krone, the first *Fiel*a to earn the title. Courtesan to nobility in one of Kolybel' largest cities, revered for her pleasurable blade. I liked that, I wanted and would take it. Whispered, indulging in the fantasy. "Absolutely."

Nadejda took a step back, taking the knife and clearing my cup. "Off to bed. We might not have a garden anymore but you're to be awake at dawn so that we can begin. We don't have enough money to draw this out, I'll have you on a boat in three months."

I could see that her hand still shook. I did not understand then the extent of the adrenaline which still flowed through her. I asked her, "Will you be coming?"

Nadejda took a seat back down at the table, and thumbed down the pages of the novel. "I- I need some time... Good night, Tatjyana Asya Novikov." I love my sister.

The reason I was headed to Krone was two-fold. To make it as a courtesan, even one of dark sensuality, would mean that I would be servicing clients. If I stayed in Kust or even around Norden my status as a *Fiel*a and of being destitute would become known, and I would still be put to death for my crimes that first night. The second is because of the *Mellissare*. The title was traditionally given by the city councils to women who rose through the social ranks by force, publicly as a way to honour them for their masculine qualities. Privately, it was to isolate them and claim that they were not truly women. The public explanation was accepted across Kolybel, rejected by a single woman who built a movement in Krone. I did not know that this woman pioneered the belief that all women were just as if not more capable than men, only that she had organized the *Mellissare* in Krone. *Mellissare* Lorelei Maier of Krone was granted by the Krone City Council the privilege to appoint

*Mellissare* at her discretion. As a *Fiel*, I had no hope to become one by a city council's decision, they would never see me as a woman. Our hopes rested on the faith that Lorelei Maier would. As a *Mellissare* of Krone, I would have some measure of protection. More so the title was needed to elevate myself to service the nobility. Without it I would never hope to raise enough to support the five of us. Nor would there be any money to buy back our land from those it was sold to. Nor would my dream become reality. It was a long shot, at times I would lose faith, but Nadejda wanted nothing but for me to be happy; and truly we had no options left. After the night we spoke of her past, I resolved never to allow Nadejda return to it. Better me in her stead.

Neither of us were expecting the coming months to be filled with hope. Our meals were still meager, money scarce and the days increasingly cold, but we took the first steps to being in control. We struggled to survive, but with a purpose in mind greater than simply that. Nadejda focused on our young sisters, and our mother. She took care of the household, and allowed me to work and study. I loved the time we had together. I plowed half of our small field over and over again while she tended to the garden in the second half. I felt that there was nothing we could not share, we were close before but she had laid herself bare. It reminded me of the day I told her I was a *Fiel*. The *Fiel-Marin* in my blood made gaining muscle slow, and I knew once it was on I would have to work consistently to keep it. Accomplished easily enough during the days, when I would work the field. Easier still when the last of the harvest had been taken in and I had the entirety of our now small property to train.

Every morning I would wake, eat a small breakfast of oats and head immediately outside. Plowing the field, push ups, logs used as weights. I did everything I could think of to add a lovely muscle tone to my body. We had worked out when I would stop and simply maintain, after all overly muscular and I would not be thought a lady. In two months time I had reached a balance. Anyone who saw me would know I was physically conditioned, it gave an air of dominance but still a far cry from the body builders I would see at the shows in Kust City.

In the afternoon, I practiced technique. Nadejda would teach me what she had learned in her youth. How to throw a proper punch, how to kick, how to dodge. She was not well versed in holds, but we practiced how to grab someone and force them to the ground. How to properly hold them once there. She even at times allowed me to practice my knots and restraints. In the evening I sat reading. The newspaper if we were in town that day, but mostly my novels. Fantasies of every kind, and stories of powerful feminine women were divine inspiration. After dinner came the darker arts. I knew how to walk, how to speak, I practiced and learned how to command. For these we isolated ourselves in father's old study. Often Nadejda watched patiently as I splashed the kitchen knife in alcohol and used it to torture my flesh. I needed to know what it felt like and I needed to know where I would poke, where I would flick the blade and where I could send a faint streak of blood across a client's body. It was difficult at first, I found no pleasure in it but Nadejda insisted a tolerance for pain would be advantageous. Admittedly it was remarkable. The first time I pierced my skin with the blade's tip and watched a drop of blood run down my leg, I sat stunned. I had seen blood before but this was different. This was intentional, this was good and it was hope. Nadejda sat and watched, she smiled so much those days. She told me that a spark in my eyes returned every night.

I began to feel powerful, I began to feel in control. I had felt similarly, when I first injected myself with *Fiel-Marin*. The aches in my muscles, the increase in strength, the knowledge I gained and the dream to be achieved; I felt connected to both body and mind. The knowledge that I was *Fiel* would still haunt me. The feeling of my phallus shift between my legs an ever present weight. I could not ignore it, I could not run from it, but I felt that I could at least do something about it. I tried to consider my phallus an asset, for all the problems it would cause it would still make me exotic. It was relief that every month we

would travel to Kust City, and purchase another injection of *Fiel-Marin* to keep the beast in check. *Marin* itself was prescribed to women for a multitude of reasons, most notably to turn a masculine woman into a lady. Or to treat aging. Or to increase fertility. Regardless it was legal. However it was well known that it was not designed for a woman such as myself. It was not designed to keep my testicles from having power over my body. For that, it needed to be altered and mixed with another drug, and that made it illegal.

When I decided to change my body years before Nadejda and I visited an asylum, the only place with a *Fiel* program. I would be prescribed *Fiel-Marin*, but only under the condition I gave myself up to study. To spend days of every week in a cage with other *Fiel* as doctors looked on in curiosity and disdain. There would be alternate drugs, new ones which 'eased' the mind and forced us to spend those days in a haze. Those drugs were not entirely effective, and barely tested. Still they feel they can cure it. At the time I nearly believed them. When it came time to make a decision about it, Nadejda silently took my hand and walked me out of the building.

We then spent hours in the streets of Kust City searching alleyways and shops Nadejda had known in her youth. Finally we found someone who could help us. At the cost of a quid, he produced a silver syringe filled with a golden liquid. *Fiel-Marin*, black market and expensive. A whole quid, and I needed to inject once a month. Nadejda insisted. I started to believe I was an addict, we sacrificed so many luxuries to cover the expense. No new blankets, paint or tools. Everything in our home became refurbished, old and vital. Nadejda still kept her share, month after month and never spending a penny on herself.

I remember sitting in the kitchen with the first injection in hand, knowing it was my fault. Everything for a drug. Like a good addict the injections lessened the weight on my mind and kept the beast at bay. Month after month I would inject, and gradually I began to experience the effects. I was young when I first started, my body did not have time to complete my transformation into manhood and I stopped it dead in its tracks. I remember when Nadejda gave me a hug, only to watch me yelp in pain and clutch my chest when my breasts began to grow. Combined with pure Nordens being mostly hairless aside from the tops of our heads, and with soft alabaster skin the process was good to me. But it was more than physical. The world became vibrant, it was if every sense was amplified. Likewise for my emotions. Where before I felt happy, I felt elated. Where before I could suppress wanting to cry, I wept uncontrollably. Anger became fury. I began when I was seventeen years old, it took me until twenty to assert control over my amplified senses, and even then they were occasionally a torrent. I was twenty-one when my training began, and still every day I would gaze into the mirror and revel in the sight of myself. I still do. I remember how I felt somewhat at peace for the first time in my life.

Despite where I was headed, I never wanted my training to end. It did on a cold day in February, Eighteen-Sixty Five. I woke to the sound of a kettle boiling, and an empty bed beside me. I walked through our chilly home at dawn, to see Nadejda had prepared both of our breakfasts. On the kitchen table lay a bundle wrapped in brown paper, tied loosely with string. I had not been keeping track of the dates, but it made me remember that my time at home was nearly over. Nadejda poured tea, rationed out oats and sat at the table with a soft smile on her face. "Well aren't you going to open it?" She held the kitchen knife for me and I dexterously took it from her hand, severing the string one fluid motion. Carefully I opened it, and dropped the knife on the floor when I realized what was it was. A finely crafted white leather outfit, each individual piece adorned with ivory buttons and silk laces. Nadejda knew my measurements, she had told me it was for a suitable outfit but I never imagined this. The outfit consisted of an over-bust corset, designed for durability. A long skirt, thin (without a bustle, none of Krone's *Mellissare* wore one) and designed with a slit up the front and back. It would fall and be complete standing still, but so I could move more freely should I need to run or jump. Boots, heeled and laced up the front. All white, all leather, aside from a crimson fingerless glove to be worn on my right and dominant hand. Examining the corset and skirt I discovered hidden pockets and sheathes for two knives.

Nadejda told me, "The finest Nordens dress in white, the finest mistresses dress in leather, the finest ladies dress with a corset and skirt but none of them have dressed like this."

I refused to accept it. I could not accept it. The outfit was real leather, ivory and lace. It had been custom designed and tailored by a skilled craftsman. I knew Nadejda could not have afforded it. "I- It is beautiful, but Nadejda, please- You could not have bought this without-" I stopped, and I knew how she afforded it. Nadejda never spent money on herself, I did not know what she did with it only that over the years she must have saved enough. "No, it is not right..." I picked up the knife and placed it beside the outfit, falling into my chair. "It is not right. You must have spent every penny you had!" I remember sitting there, feeling the spoiled addict whose fault it was that my sister lived in poverty. I placed my face in my hands and shook my head. "What have I ever given you?"

Nadejda knelt beside me. "Hope." I opened my eyes and felt her pull one hand away from my face. "Hope that I could have a future."

"My father did that, he brought you home."

"And when we arrived you were the one who threw her arms around me. Who made me feel that I could do more than survive, I could become someone."

I could not see it. "And look at you now..."

She could. "I'm a big sister." She took my other hand away. "I'm helping a lost *Fiel*a find her way." I would not be the woman I am today, if it had not been for her.

"You sacrifice everything for me."

"And you give me hope." She cupped my cheek in her hand. "And you taught me that a dream can come true."

"Dream of a home, being a big sister and carrying a family's weight on your shoulders?"

"Yes. It's also the dream of being a courtesan, or the dream of taking control over one's destiny. Perhaps even the dream of blossoming into womanhood."

I looked to her, she looked to me, and it was quiet save for the crackling of the wood stove. "Perhaps in that case, if I am deserving... I should tell you that the red glove does not go with the outfit. Is this the style of pirates? Why would y-" In an instant, Nadejda's open palm and spread fingers were stopped by my hand on her wrist.

My sister chuckled, I followed suit and ate our last breakfast together closer than we had ever been.

Hours later, with my gift and the kitchen knife packed in a suitcase, and a heavy jacket over my body; I stood on a dock in Kust City and said goodbye to my sister. It was cold, the wind was blistering and the tears were frozen to our cheeks. Once more I could barely accept the money she thrust into my coat pockets. I did not want to let her go, she had been in my life eleven years and I could not stand to lose her. The ship's horn blared over the crash of the waves, demanding that we break. I was as ready as I ever would be, but I could not believe it.

Nadejda spoke to me and tried to force through the last bit of information I needed.

"When you arrive in Krone, find a hotel. Then you must make yourself noticed, this money will hold you for a few days. Ask for charity, don't be too proud, and get that appointment with Lorelei Maier. You'll need to convince her to give you work at least."

"Nadejda-"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

A crewman came up to us and asked if one of us was coming aboard. He would have grabbed my arm if I did not turn to him with a glare, he decided to wait. With one final kiss on the cheek, my sister let her little *Fiel*a go. I walked along the bridge which was removed behind me and onto the deck. I stood and grasped the railing, never letting Nadejda out of my sight. In that moment, I realized how much life was to change. The responsibility to provide for us now rested with me, Nadejda could do no more. It was time to be the woman I was meant to be. Standing up straight, holding onto that railing like a lady and belting out my last words completely unlike one. I told her. "I will make you proud! Do not worry!"

Softly, "It is time I take care of you..."

Small, cramped and with only five passenger rooms, no one traveled between continents and it showed. I spent days in the canteen, there weren't any other options. Boxes of luxury goods were piled to the ceiling in nearly every room, with one even stored in mine. This was before people traveled the world, before they cared. No one traveled aside from merchants servicing the nobility. Norden was built on minerals, gems, gold and silver and that's what we carried. Fortunately for the few who needed to travel this made doing so cheap, my fare was nearly free so long as I offered to waitress in the canteen during meals. The rest of the crew were all men, and I wonder if my waitressing during meals was not part of some display. It was isolating, but aside from the occasional comment they left me well enough alone. Sometimes I wonder if it was in part to my stronger body, or the fact that I would occasionally pull back my coat to reveal the kitchen knife sheathed along my chest.

While the trip was forgettable, I will never forget the sight of Krone. I lost count of how many days we had been sailing south, between the two continents and up along a wide river to the bay which met the mountain city. We arrived in the dead of night, and I woke to the sound of boots pounding the deck and shouts to prepare for landing. I wanted to see my new home, squeezed out of my room and hurried above deck. The moment I laid eyes on it, it was grander than I had imagined. A pillar of electric light running straight up a gigantic mountain, it shined bright and lit the bay through which we sailed. The crew passed me by, letting me watch as the light came and overwhelmed us. Every inch of street was lit, you could see the spirals and lines all the way up to the peak. I was not expecting the peak, a shining black prism known as the 'crown jewel' and the seat of power for the most powerful city council on Kolybel. The lights at the top were lost as we docked, and I looked down across the shadowed wooden bridge leading into the city.

I was ignored from that point, we had docked and they had no more obligations to me. I was lucky in that the streets were so bright, and the beaches at the foot of the mountain were nobility owned. I would not have to pass through the poorest areas if I planned correctly. The mountain was essentially a hierarchy, aside from the noble owned beaches the middle class owned the center, and the nobility at the top. Culminating with the councilmen's offices in the crown jewel. The poor I learned, had a cave for a home deep inside the mountain's belly and along the lowest southern side of the mountain. If I marched straight up the steep side-streets and kept off the long spiraling main street, I would be able to pass them. I remember how quiet it was, I remember how warm it was and how I sweated in my wool dress. Tsentr was considerably warmer than Norden and despite being on the north section of the continent their winter left in January. I could not have made it, lugging a heavy suitcase up a mountainside (hardly scaling cliffs, but steep enough) if I had not trained like I did.

I needed more than a hotel, I needed a home. Residency was nothing new, but to rent to a person such as I apparently was. I could not afford to stay in the luxury hotels for the few traveling nobles, and staying in the poorest regions would not help my status and image. I needed to stay in the middle-class section, half way up the mountain. This was easier said than done, I still remember the fear which their rejections placed in me. The first place I visited advertised residency discounts, it was clean and respectable. Sterile, but it would do. I remember walking up to the counter to find a sleepy man behind it. I did not care to have him sleep. I was exhausted and needed "one room, and I plan on becoming a resident."

The man's eyes barely opened, he had to steady himself on the chair as he tried to wake himself up. "Residence... Fine, Red." Spoken with disdain. "Just... need your occupation."

"I plan to be a *Mellissare* courtesan. Rent will not-"

"Plan?" His eyes widened. "You don't have a job?"

"I have just arrived." He looked me over, he saw the sweat and I assume he knew I had walked from the docks. "You will have your rent."

He looked as if he was trying to think. "Bloody Reds..." My Norden blood was an asset at

home, but in Krone it would isolate me. "How about I rent you day to day, and we'll take it from there..."

"Thank you. As long as you promise my room is not to be disturbed, by the maid or anyone." Nadejda told me how my work would revolve around confidentiality, along with my body requiring it.

He reached under the counter for some simple paperwork, talking to me as he did. "You're not in much position to make demands, but make your rent every day by noon and we'll see about setting up something lasting." He flipped through a stack for the right registration. "Why exactly isn't the maid to come in, I mean a courtesan doesn't have much to hide. I know what you're doing."

"I cannot discuss it."

"If you're living here you will."

I made my mistake. "If you must know I am a *Fiela*." The papers were promptly returned and he pointed to the door.

"There we have it..." Cold turned colder. "*Fiela* whores aren't my patrons, and I won't have you sully my good name. Sorry, but you..." He was almost looking for an excuse. "No job, you're not a courtesan, can't make rent. Get out."

I was stronger than that. "I will take my business elsewhere."

"Hey, unless they check your room and find you're a *Fiela* too. That's illegal, whore. Lying about something like that, any reputable man would toss you out before you scare away good business. You're probably an addict to, *Fiela-Marin's* contraband. Are you carrying now? I might just let some of 'em know to check..." I did not know what to say. I would find out that it was illegal to lie about these things, businessmen were protected that far and that even requesting confidentiality did not guarantee it. If they had a look through my room and found my *Fiela-Marin*, I would arrive home to find the Krone City police. "Get out before I ring you in."

I had no choice, I could not trust the owners of the hotels to keep my privacy. The risk was so high that I had to declare it. I was pure Norden, that alone aroused suspicion in people. In the dawn as I walked to the next hotel (realizing how limited my options were), I noticed the curious look Krone's citizens gave me. Seeing something they had only heard about. It was the same story, over and over again. They would see me come in sweaty, Red and without a job. I could have taken a poorer area where the standards were more relaxed, but how would that look asking a client to send a coach to the worst parts of town? It would have ended my career before it started. The owners would look at me, ask me the same questions about my work, why a Norden was there and finally I would declare being a *Fiela*. One place acted apologetically. "I'm sure you're lovely but... I- I can't have you here. It's not that I don't like *Fiela*, but some of the other clients might not."

I would ask in return, "Were you aware until I told you?"

The response? "Nordens too, I think you should go home. Really I'd love to give you a room but my hands are tied."

I left that hotel having hopes about the next. I left the next under threat of police once more. I left the largest middle-class hotel in Krone weeping, and walking on aching feet. I had very few options left. Without being given referrals to other hotels, and alone in a new city. I felt hopeless. I had even taken a few steps down the mountain, a part of me wanted to take the boat back to Norden. I had nearly given up hope. Looking down the mountain to the beaches and the dock, I started my way back from the mid-point of the mountain. Still, I knew I could not give up. Nadejda depended on me and I was not about to let her down. While I did walk down the mountain, I kept my eyes out for another hotel. Worse comes to worse, I decided I would risk it in the poorer sections of the city. The sun was shining in the morning now, I smelled of sweat and my feet ached. It remember walking along the main street, through the center of Krone amidst the growing crowds and trying to hold back my tears.

Eventually I looked back up the mountain, as if about to say my goodbye. I read the sign on one of the buildings, a proud wooden carving displaying "The Midway Hotel". Heavy wooden doors opened and a man stumbled out below it, I could smell the alcohol from across the street. He was followed by another, and one more. They seemed frightened of the sunlight, I suspect they had lost track of time.

One yelled to the other, "Hey! It's too much sun!" He called to someone inside the doors. "You kept us all night ya bastard!"

The second one called indoors as well, "You're getting us a coach! I can't stumble home in this light!"

The third man seemed preoccupied, stunned even as he looked at me and I looked at him. He wiped sweat from his own brow and blinked. "Hey! Ever seen a Red lady?! Hey Red! How about ya let me take that suitcase, I'll carry it, if you'll give me a-"

A fourth man burst through the doors, nearly knocking the first two over. Nearly dropping the lit cigarette from between his lips. "Suitcase? Red lady?" His dark eyes found me, and the bastard grinned. He started rushing across the street to me, and I quickly pulled back my coat to reveal my knife. That made him pause, holding his hands up in front of him. "Stop, Red, stop. Just trying to help..."

I told him, "I do not need it." I had enough of being called 'Red' for a lifetime.

"You're sweating! And why do you have that suit-"

The second man yelled to us, "Xavier, get us a coach ya bastard!"

Xavier turned swiftly and told him to, "Shut up! I'm working!"

"Working?"

Xavier motioned to my suitcase. "Heavy thing like that, Norden girl and I know all the Norden girls in Krone..." He flashed me another smile and wiped back greasy black hair. "Need a place? I got nice rooms, great bee- wine, and if you don't want to pay rent you can always stay in my room!" He laughed, but kept his distance when I placed my hand on the blade's hilt. "Hey, settle down, look..." He was drunk. "I'm just a bit tired. Been up all night taking a few good men's money. You look like you need a bath, we got hot water piped right from the mountain's veins. Not your chilly ice water of Norden. How about you come in, take a bath in a spare room, no charge. Stay for brunch. Come on, I'm not about to let some poor Red-"

"Do not call me Red!" I stopped him, but then changed my tone. He was the most helpful someone had been. "Please. I am not used to it."

"Force of habit, no offense. Really Norden girls are something else."

"Please... slow down." He was talking far too rushed, and despite his comments I really wanted to take him up on that bath.

"Alright, I'm just a bit drunk..."

One of the men called to him, "Xavier, coach!"

"WALK, I left you your clothes!"

Xavier and I wiped sweat from our foreheads and he slowed down I got a good look at him. Young, strong, greasy. Scratchy stubble. Dressed well in a vest, white shirt, tie, and trousers. "You probably already figured my name's Xavier, Xavier Castello." He came close enough and offered me his hand, I shook it and introduced myself. "You really are Norden... Sound like that *Mellissare* girl..."

"There is another *Mellissare* Norden in Krone?"

"Another? You're a *Mellissare*?"

I told Xavier that I hoped to be, and admitted that I wasn't employed before stressing why I needed a home. I hung my head a little and worried. "I have told the other hotel owners that I would make rent, as a courtesan or as-" Xavier was nodding, but he seemed somewhat disappointed.

He was curious, "But you look like you've been out all night. They won't even give you a room? Do you have any money?"

I told him that I had enough for about a week, and that I was looking for a room.

However, "They would not rent to me."

"This town really can't hate Re- Nordens that much. We're a center of the world... of course no one travels-"

When you have nothing to loose, it is easy to throw everything away. "I am a *Fiel*."

My heart leapt when he asked me, "But you can pay? A few days right?"

"Yes!" I grabbed onto his vest with both hands. I then had to regain my composure and release the startled man. "I will find *Mellissare* Maier and see about finding work and becoming one. However I would pay you day by day and would not stay a night I could not-"

"Hey, how about I write you up for a month and you can take a room on the top floor."

I did not believe it, and I needed to make sure. "You want to give me a room? For a month? You realize I carry *Fiel*-*Marin* on me."

I did not get the response I was expecting, he seemed to be thinking aloud. "So you're carrying contraband, and wouldn't want anyone to find out? And you need this home? Sounds good."

"Xavier, if you believe you can extort me you are sad-"

"Tat, I'm going to call you Tat, I won't use that against you. Just seems like you'd understand my hotel. Now, having a resident is good steady income, not to mention having a Norden girl might be good for business."

"I am not your whore, Xavier."

Xavier looked down at me, folding his arms. "You're a bit jumpy. All I'm saying is that there aren't many of you and it's good to have women around. Even *Fiel*, though that stays between you and me... Regardless, I sell more drinks when there's women around and usually I just have my waitresses. That, and are you a betting *Fiel*, Tat?"

The crowds were thin enough we could talk between us and no one would hear. I wondered. "What do you propose?"

Xavier came up with the first of many bets between us. "I'll take what you have for a week, and give you a whole month's rent and meals (anything but the turkey). If you become a courtesan, if Maier gives you work and you're on your way you win that month."

I thought I knew why he wanted a courtesan around the hotel. "I cannot tell your patrons that I am a *Mellissare*, my clients would need confidentiality."

"Not a problem, just another thing between you and me."

I needed to know, "And if I am not on my way to becoming a *Mellissare*?"

"Same deal, but you're in my room."

"I am a *Fiel* and you would have me?" I had to ask.

"As a maid, happily. I have a nice couch you can sleep on."

"You cannot be serious."

"I am."

"You expect me to agree with this?" I had no intentions on taking this wager. I did not not steal, if I lost I would have stayed.

"I expect you to take it because you need the home. Maier doesn't take any girl off the street, and I figure it'll take time to get noticed. Certainly you're not going to inherit industry to do so."

I started to walk away from him. He called from behind and caught up with me. I told him, "Your friends are right, you are a bastard Xavier Castello."

"I might be, but I know you're going to take that bet."

"I am walking away..."

Xavier sighed and stopped me again. "Alright, if you don't become a *Mellissare*, you can work elsewhere and pay off the rest of the month. Now, a lady shouldn't be walking Krone's streets in a sweat."

He shrugged off *Fiel* like it meant nothing to him. He still called me a lady. I softened. "Xavier, if there is so little to gain why do you care?"

He smiled. "Aside from knowing you'll fall for me eventually (they all do), I figure... shot at having a Red *Fiel* courtesan under my roof... Might be interesting, might be useful."

"You will not use me, Xavier."

"Not in the way you're thinking. It's a tough city out there, Tat. You look handy with a knife, good lookin' for a *Fiel*, might just pull it off. Besides, got no one besides borderline alcoholics and the occasional tradesman passin' by. You'd be a good distraction. Now, come take a bath and pay me some money to live here."

"You are not going to watch are you?"

"You respect my privacy Tat, and I'll respect yours. How's that for a deal?" He offered his hand once more to shake on it.

I took it, even smiled. I had a chance at a home. "Agreed."

"Smart girl. Come on, room 506. Right at the end of the left hallway, top floor. Don't usually fill up that far so it's quiet. Leave the rent on the counter." He motioned for me to follow him back to The Midway and I did.

There was something about Xavier. He truly was a bastard, but he was the first kind face I had seen since arriving. He offered me a home, and hope returned. I put the last of my money on the table to pay for the week and went upstairs. I passed through the small beer soaked bar and lobby up a narrow flight of stairs at the back. My feet begged for a hot bath. Inside room 506 was a cozy little home, nearly barren but with the light coming in through the window and a view stretching all the way down the mountain to the ocean bay. I set my suitcase down on the white linen bed by the window and passed a small closet on my way to the bathroom. Exposed copper pipes and a porcelain tub. I filled it with hot water straight from the mountain's veins and eased myself in. It had been a long day already, and while at the time I was still anxious about the future, I realize now how much more secure it had just become.

Xavier's definition of privacy greatly differed from mine. In the evening I was rudely awoken by the sound of a heavy book slamming against my room's desk and Xavier calling for me to wake up. "You are a real Red!" I quickly pulled the sheets over my naked form and looked for my kitchen knife.

"I thought you would respect my privacy!"

"Not now, there's work to be done." Xavier was flipping through the pages of the tome, and sorting through the loose pages and notes he had shoved between its pages. "No need to get dressed, nothing to cover that I haven't just seen."

I wrapped the sheet around myself and stood. "I would castrate you."

"Tat, from what I see you haven't even done that to yourself yet... I'm sure I'm safe." He placed his finger to a page and seemed to be reading down a list. "Here... here we go, this might help us figure out where she is..."

I looked to the knife hung and resting in the small closet with my belongings. "You do not have the right to come into my home like this, we had an agreement..."

"We had an agreement that I wouldn't sell your client's secrets, besides it's no secret you're a *Fiel*. Come, we have work to do."

"We do not have anything to do toget-"

Xavier looked over his shoulder, frowning. "You want your family to starve? Then you're going to help me find Lorelei Maier!" I paused, sighed and hesitantly walked beside him. "You can't go up to her estate, there's security. And I don't know her schedule, because only the council knows that. It's a damn shame so many people hate her... Even with the council's blessings, she's not making her movements known."

"And why would you care that I found *Mellissare* Maier?" I was not about to be intimidated by this man. "There is nothing in it for you."

"Except a *Mellissare* who would help me track her movements, give me her schedule..."

"So you could do what? You are a barman!" Xavier laughed, grinned over his shoulder to me and went back to his page on Lorelei Maier. He had two large pages of scrapbook with names of businesses, contact information, but only a penciled in itinerary. "Perhaps there is a reason she keeps this secret, because of men like you!"

"Please, Tat... I ain't nothing like the men who fear her. It just helps to know the movements of nobles and the movers and shakers, is all. Helps keep things smooth."

"Regardless, I do not work for you. Get out."

"You're not working for me, you're working with me. Here, Tat, look at this..." He showed me the list of businesses. I decided to hear him out as it was obvious he would not leave. "Nobles are easy. Trips to the countryside, social calls, events; I can figure them out easy enough... But in order to find Lorelei when she isn't walled up at *Mellissare House*- Lorelei's estate and headquarters for the *Mellissare* of Krone. "we have to find a pattern. I think I got it. It's evening, but one of Lorelei's businesses runs a little later, the big one."

I slammed my hand down over the list. "Xavier, do not intrude on me." Xavier looked up to me with big puppy dog brown eyes and a toothy smile. "Xavier..."

Nodding softly, he agreed. "My apologies, Tat." It was sincere. "But hear me out. You need to feed your family, that involves finding Lorelei Maier and you won't do that without my knowledge. I want to know that I'm not running against Lorelei in my dealings." I released my hand and Xavier went back to his book. "Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. This is how life is going to work sometimes." As uncomfortable as this was, he was right.

I decided to be agreeable, Nadejda was counting on me. "What is the plan?"

Xavier pointed to the business named 'Maier's Splendor', a large shop farther up the mountain on the eastern side (opposite of us). "Alright, in the last few years Maier's started branching out into designing dress. She's a hands-on boss and I hear she'll visit her shops on occasion. This isn't her big industry, but it's open late. I figure, if she's spending her days at the *Mellissare* house and evenings with the nobles, then she's going to do these runs in the evening."

"And being the one open latest, you believe she would be working there?" I was learning. "It almost seems too easy for a woman keeping a low profile..."

"Well, that's what I thought. But the threats against her are fringe and she has the council's protection. I figure, no one's really looked because no one's really cared." Xavier smirked, chuckling to himself before continuing. "What we need is for you to find a way to introduce yourself..."

"I thought she would not take any woman off the street."

"Which is why you're going to leave your mark." He appeared to be having fun with this. Xavier turned the chair, crossed his legs and leaned back. He looked up to me and lit a cigarette. "Tat, how'd you like to save Maier's life?" He blew smoke in my face.

I waved it away. "That would leave my impression..." I understood a little more. "That of a strong woman." Xavier laughed, clapping his hands together and went back to the book.

"I got a guy with a criminal record willing to pull a gun with blanks-"

I caught on. "And I will be there shopping in the early evening, in the right place at the right time."

"It's not complicated. He pulls the gun, you give him a few hits, he gets off and you'll ask if Lorelei's alright. You're a Red, that helps to get ya noticed too."

"When is this happening?"

"As soon as you're dressed, we got about an hour's window between now and closing and Maier might not be around longer than that." With that he left me alone, to dress in the only finery that remotely made it seem I belonged in that shop.

Xavier and another man met me in the alleyway behind The Midway as the sun set. There was enough light as I walked from the hotel for them to see my white leathers in all their glory. I reveled in the moments Xavier was rendered speechless. Slender fingers ran along his arm as I entered his coach, and I sat comfortably along the longest seat. I regretted that meeting Lorelei Maier would be under a lie, looking forward to the day I would meet someone of stature under legitimate circumstance. It did not take me long to realize that this coach only had one seat, the place opposite me was raised and appeared to be a safe. A large man pushed me aside and sat down. Xavier stayed outside and held onto

the door.

I wondered why he was not getting in. "You are not coming with us?"

"And get that close? My records clean and I'm going to keep it that way! Have fun you two!" With an exaggerated smile and a wave he slammed the door shut and pounded on it to motion the driver to go.

He left me sitting next to this man whom I had never seen before. "You have a criminal record?"

The man snorted, and folded his arms. "Shut up, Red." I looked down to see the revolver at his thigh, the weary skin on his arms and the dirt on his outfit.

I did so, averting my eyes before I decided I had enough. Unsheathing my knife I held it so he could see. "Call me Red once more..."

His strained eyes looked to me, not budging an inch. "Have it your way cunt." I was young, and had a job to do. Had either not have been the case I would have taken that knife and coloured him red. The man continued, chuckling. "This is going to be good, put a good one right into Maier..."

"You are not to threaten her, only show the weapon." I was starting to feel guilty, I have never had a pistol pointed in my direction but could guess at the experience.

He reached over, grabbed my arm and held it. "And I thought I told you to shut up." The coach was flying through the streets on a hurry to meet its deadline. He squeezed me, I believe he was trying to hurt me but failed to do so. Curiously, I felt his hand covered in sweat. Something was making him nervous.

I spoke as I would address my clients during play. "Release my arm, or I will turn yours into a stump." Red eyes glared at his, holding the blade of my knife at his wrist. "I can always find another way, and you are talking to a woman with nothing to loose." He released me, and spat on my chest. I would not let him get away with it and punctuated our first words with, "Good boy."

The coach let me off a short distance from the shop. The streets were thinning out and not many took notice, until the Norden beauty in white leather stepped out of the coach. I could feel people's eyes on me for a moment. It was decided that the man Xavier hired would wait until Lorelei was on the street before putting on the show, giving me time to try and introduce myself. I left my partner sweaty, furious and breathing oddly enough that I knew something was wrong.

I casually walked to the shop, admiring the view of the dense forrests which lined the bottom of Krone's base. Noble's territory, if I were to walk down into the thick of it I would run across many luxury cottages. The shop itself was impressive, three stories with ever window filled with revolutionary fashions. Lorelei had thinned women's skirts, added dimension to the jacket's shoulders and made them subtly more powerful than anything I saw in Norden. There was barely anyone inside, at closing time I did not expect there to be.

When I entered, I was there to browse and learn about Krone's fashions. Fortunate that this cover story was somewhat accurate. A woman at the counter smiled, and I knew my white leathers gave me the apperance of someone meant to be there. I decided to strike up a conversation.

"Do you need any help, miss... milady..."

I showed her a friendly smile and stood at the counter opposite of her. "Browsing, if you do not mind dear. I have only just arrived and want to get a feel for the city's fashions." I leaned back, resting my elbows on the glass counter and looked around the shop. "This is one of *Mellissare* Maier's shops is it not?"

The woman nodded and seemed proud of it. "She collected the best women designers of Krone and opened shop years ago."

I was not playing any role, authentically I asked, "So I have heard. Tell me, is *Mellissare* Maier around by any chance?" I held out a gloved hand for the girl to shake, she did. "I am Tatjyana Asya Novikov, recently arrived from Norden."

The girl at the counter did not know what to say. "Uh... She is in but doesn't really meet anyone... Sorry, Miss Novikov."

Nodding softly I took a few steps onto the showroom floor. "Understandable, I realize I have yet to make a name for myself. Perhaps it is not time..."

The girl came around and followed me. "Well maybe you might see her on the way out... Is there anything else I may help you with, Miss Novikov?"

With Lorelei nowhere in sight I continued to chat. "I am surprised you have not called me Red."

"Never, Miss Novikov!" I liked that place. "You won't hear slurs here... Have you really only arrived?"

This woman was not Lorelei, but she was under her employ and I decided to make a small case. "I am here to strike my fortune." Confident, eloquent. "Krone is one of the major crossroads of the world, it deserves the best. And I am the best." I stood much taller than this girl.

"Bold words, Miss Novikov. Is that why you wish to meet *Mellissare* Maier?"

"Smart girl. I was hoping to catch her here."

The girl seemed eager to help, though nervous of upsetting Lorelei. "What is it that you do?"

I leaned in and whispered what kind of courtesan I was to her ear, faintly purring by the end. Speaking aloud, "And I believe I might offer something no *Mellissare* can." I watched the girl bow her head, while her eyes searched me. I know she was wondering what kind of woman I was, was I a fraud or truly someone her employer should meet? My sister chose my outfit so well, I dressed in finery you could not fake and with unique style.

She weighed her options and told me. "*Mellissare* Maier is in the back, finishing up some business. When she comes out this way I could introduce you," tempered with "briefly."

With a firm nod I went over and examined a beautiful sapphire studded dress. "Much appreciated. I will be admiring her work in the meantime."

It wasn't long until I heard a voice behind me, feminine and strong. It was beautiful. "Chloe, I am finished with the books. Close up and enjoy your day off tomorrow." I looked back over my shoulders at Lorelei. Perfect golden curls streaming down her back, sapphire blue eyes, skin nearly as unblemished as a Norden's and age had only enhanced her features. She wore crimson, a dress wrapped along her body and culminating in a perfectly tailored and bound corset. She wore a necklace of rubies, set in gold which fell to her deep cleavage.

Chloe helped her into a long crimson coat and followed behind her as she walked through the showroom. "Oh! Lorelei, there is a woman who I think you should meet." Lorelei had already spotted me, and I could not take my eyes off her.

"I see, child..." She looked to my eyes. "Quite the Norden picture you are."

I curtsied and even bowed my head. "Tatjana Asya Novikov. It is an honour and a pleasure to make your acquaintance, *Mellissare* Maier."

Lorelei looked embarrassed. "Curtsying... Please, I do not expect you to do so. Not here." She motioned for me to rise.

Chloe explained, "Miss Novikov came here wishing to meet you, she says she's here as a courtesan of-" now she was embarrassed, "she's a mistress, Lorelei."

Beginning to walk towards the door again she gave me a nod. "Well, I wish you luck in that endeavour."

I decided to take the risk. "I was hoping to speak with you about joining the *Mellissare*."

She paused at the doorway, and through the glass I could see my partner getting into position. Lorelei did not see him, she had turned to me, even as my partner raised his weapon. "I am afraid I will tell you what I told the others, I cannot consider every woman wishing to be a courtesan... Even if you are particularly striking." My eyes drifted from her to my partner.

At that point I knew something was wrong, why would he fire if Lorelei was not watching him? There would be a noise but without a bullet smashing into the glass behind her it would so obviously be a show. I watched him, and he watched Lorelei with a hate in his eyes and sweat dripping from his brow.

Lorelei was pushing the door open, her attention still on me. "I wish you luck, should you need to acquire property or expand your clientele then we might discuss-" She pushed the door open and I knew what was coming.

I had never moved so fast, on my way to the door I grabbed Chloe by the back of her dress and forced her onto the ground. Lorelei barely had time to react as she walked into the open. Before the gunshot rang out, I wrapped my arm around her and dropped us both to the floor. The shot was real, the glass which shattered behind us was real and the streets were in a panic. I heard Chloe scream, I felt Lorelei hold herself on the ground. The horses of Lorelei's coach were close, and I could hear them rear up and panic as a second shot rang out.

My partner looked at me, and yelled to Lorelei. "Time to put the bitch down!" I could feel a surge inside of me, my muscles tensed and just ran at the authentic assassin. "Don't move!" I did as Nadejda told me, I zigzagged when I saw his weapon on me, throwing myself to the side and rolling out of the path of his next shot. That was three, with three more in the chambers.

He was close, and I could see the sweat drip from his hand he was holding that revolver so tight. I didn't look back to see Lorelei on her feet, only heard her yell at the authentic assassin. "I'm the one you want!"

He turned and trained his weapon on her, but I was close enough. The fourth bullet was fired at the clouds when I gripped his wrist and forced it upwards. He took a swing at me, grazing along my shoulder but not enough to connect. I got around his swing, fast enough to force the revolver out of his other hand and it dropped to our feet. He tried coming in close to overpower me, taking my blows to his stomach as best he could. He tried to wrap his arms around me, nearly got me too if I had been a blink slower. He connected a kick against my thigh, I nearly faltered but held my ground. The tide turned when he took a shot at my nose. I dodged it and punished him by twisting that wrist in a way that caused it to snap. He howled like a dog. I could see a man, the driver of Xavier's coach, running towards us. I had to work fast. Ducking under his next swing, I swiftly elbowed him in the nose. The moment I connected, I gripped his hair with both hands and forced his face down. With my skirt designed as two pieces, the leather gave way to my exposed knee which smashed into that face. I ended that threat with a hook shot to the side of his head, knocking him out cold and carefully stepped away from the pooling blood.

I kicked the revolver away from him and took a step back, watching the driver of Xavier's coach approach. He was not armed, and seemed to be in shock. "What happened?!"

I did not trust Xavier nearly enough to have known. I drew my knife and held it at the driver's neck. "You, your guy and Xavier had this plan from the start!"

"No... No I didn't know anything of this!" He begged to be freed and when I gave him space he began to move the authentic assassin towards his coach. "We need to get him off the streets, Xavier will know what to do!"

"So the police won't be able to know who was really behind this?"

"No, so Xavier can."

It would take some time for the police to respond. Phones were not widely spread, and the driver was quick to bring the coach in close enough to move the man. I had no part of it, but I did not stop it. There was enough adrenaline flowing through my veins that I felt I could take on any threat, Xavier included if it came to it. I let him go, but refused when the driver asked if I would come as well. Truthfully, that led me to conclude that Xavier did not know of this, if I returned he risked being skewered the moment we arrived back. The driver did not wait for me to decide, when I stepped back the coach took off down the street and would be out of sight in seconds.

Lorelei did not run, and she had stood in front of a bullet for me. She was as brave as they all said. When I looked for her, I found her helping Chloe to her feet and comforting the girl. When I approached, she steadied her breathing and nodded to me. "You might have saved my life, child."

Guilt for what I had done was not with me yet, and while I had led that man to her I did not know the chambers were loaded. I focused on what was important. "Is there a phone? I will call the police."

Lorelei laughed at me. "I would have more use for a carpenter..." She motioned to the shattered glass windows. "Chloe, have one here tonight when you are able and I will find an escort for you."

Chloe was shaken, but with the threat gone it did not take her too long to recover. When she went to the phone in Lorelei's office at the back of the shop, we had time to talk. I asked her, "Is there anything I can do?"

Lorelei smiled, wrapping her arms around me. "You saved my life, child." She looked out at the small pool of blood. "Not only that, but you are an impressive combatant... Where did a lady learn such things?"

I spoke the truth. "My sister." The guilt was starting to eat at me, but I could not tell her about the ruse.

"And to what end?" She began to casually clean up shards of glass with her shoe. "You want to be a courtesan, but she trained you to be a fighter?"

"She trained me to defend myself, and if I had not..." I gave a sigh of relief, until her next question.

"My would be assassin was carried off in a coach, and you were seen speaking to the driver. What was that about?" She was peering into my eyes, and it caused my blood to run cold.

I thought quickly, "The driver turned out to be a friend. He took your assassin somewhere to be questioned, I believe."

"You don't know?" She placed her hands on her hips and seemed more than a little threatened.

"I have not been here long..." I wished I could have told her the truth, but had to settle for a half one. "The man must have-"

She snapped at me. "Do not lie to me, Tatjyana Novikov!" Lorelei had a knack for knowing when I was. "I need to trust my *Mellissare* and lying to me jeopardizes what sliver of trust I have in you." I was nervous, frightened of betraying Xavier's trust but Lorelei did not deserve to be treated that way and the guilt ate at me. I placed my hand to my forehead and tried to think, Lorelei's glare was on me and I could feel it. "You will tell me."

I sighed, wiped beads of sweat away and admitted. "It was a ruse. The man was supposed to be firing blanks. I enlisted the help of a man hired by my landlord to gain your attention..."

"So you could save my life and I would be more than happy to consider you... Child." Spoken without endearment. "You stupid little girl..." Lorelei left the glass alone but her glare did not leave me. "What would make you do something like that?"

I felt like I was being berated by a parent. "I did it because I need to become a *Mellissare* to support my family."

"Then go back home! *Mellissare* exist in Norden!"

"I could not hope to be made a *Mellissare* in Norden!"

"Why not? You stupid... stupid-"

"Because I am a *Fiel*." That gave Lorelei pause, even if she became more furious. I pushed through. "A council would never consider me a woman, it is my only hope that you will."

She yelled at me. "Lying to me! Putting my life in danger!"

"I never intended that, and I am certain the man who hired him did not either! I promise you we will interrogate him!" I calmed, not wanting a shouting match. "But my family depends on me, I would not have come all this way if they did not."

Lorelei laughed. "You came all this way to play courtesan, *Fiela*. Nearly getting me killed."

"I saved you, Lorelei. And I have told you the truth, everything."

A long sigh, arms folded. "What is so awful that you have come all this way? To do something so stupid?"

I told her the truth, "Because we were abandoned by my father, who took our savings and our home. I am a *Fiela* instead of a son and I cannot stand by and let them pay because of it."

"Whore, I hear your kind loves to do so."

"With five mouths to feed, and a home to restore? My sister has already done so much, and more than her share of that work. I was born to be a courtesan." Lorelei was quiet, waiting for me to finish. I did not realize it at the time, but she was realizing we had more in common than either of us first thought. "I cannot be one in Norden, I need to be a *Mellissare* to pay back my debt to them. I am not sure what you believe *Fiela* are-

"Some of my girls believe them to be conspiring against us, women."

"*Mellissare* Maier, if I were conspiring against you would I have risked my life to save you? Would you have had to risk yours to save me?"

Her expression didn't change, there was hate in those eyes and she waved to dismiss me. "No, stupid girl. Good intentions or no, you nearly cost me my life. I have no interest in you as a *Mellissare*." I tried to protest but she wouldn't have any of it, raising her hand to silence me. She refused to listen. I began to plead with her with failing dignity. Telling her about how everything rested with her. How my family would starve, how I was born to do this. She would not have it. Quietly Lorelei sighed as Chloe came in from the back room. She motioned to the girl. "You will escort Chloe home, at least I know she will be safe with you. You owe me this favour." I agreed, what else was I to do? She continued, collecting herself. "Go home, and see about that man. I will send for someone to collect him later tonight." When asked how she would know where I was staying, she dismissed me. "I will know. Go home, now. Say another word and I would have you arrested for what you did to me."

In my life, I would build and lose everything constantly. But it was Krone which truly loved to give and take. I felt as if I had spent my life reaching for the dream and that night had come up painfully short. I did not say a word, as much as I wanted to I only kept my head held high. Lorelei attended to Chloe while I stayed silent. Considering the gunfire, Chloe was in good spirits and Lorelei mentioned for her to go with me. Lorelei did not say anything more to me, dismissing us before meeting her driver whom had parked down the street.

I did not talk much with Chloe, I let her speak. I worried if I uttered anything I would lose my composure. Afterwards, on the solitary walk home to The Midway I wondered what Xavier had done, and if he had cost me my life. Fear and anger, never a good mix. At the large wooden doors I did not know whether to collapse against them or knock them off their hinges. I found the strength to do neither, wearily entering and only thinking of my fading future.

The bar had few patrons but hardly the roaring crowd I had seen earlier. A waitress smiled meekly to me and motioned to one of the side rooms. "Down there." I did not feel I had any place better to be and burst through the wooden door, finding a staircase going down to the dark stone basement. When I was at its foot, I saw light reaching out from under a door on the other side. I walked between stacks of crates, casks, a locked chest or two before arriving. With every step I knew I was getting closer to Xavier, and I felt more and more angry at the man. I didn't knock, and I am sure if the door had been locked I

would have broken it. In a small stone room, Xavier stood over the would be assassin, who he had lashed to a barbell. I learned how Xavier kept in shape, he had built a private gymnasium for himself. Xavier held a crowbar, the tip dripped blood and a long gash on the man's cheek came into view as I circled around him.

Xavier didn't look back, but he knew it was me. His tone was far from cheery. "So? How'd it go?" He paused and I could hear the crackling lanterns around us.

I did not know whether to strike him, yell at him, take the crowbar from him then strike him. "Your driver raised her suspicions." It came remarkably calm. "I had to explain things to Lorelei, and she banished-" That made him turn, clutch the crowbar, cigarette in mouth and come in close to me. I would not be intimidated. "-me from her sight!"

"You told her?!" Xavier was losing his composure, I kept mine. "You know, Tat. You're the worst girl I ever got for a job." He took a drag from his cigarette and raised the crowbar to meet my gaze. "Come now, Tat! You lie, lie your way out of it! And you tell me you snuck into-"

I had enough. I stood tall and lowered the crowbar. "I am not sure if you have noticed, Xavier Castello, but I am at a severe lack of friends..." I nearly growled while I spoke. "Since arriving here twenty-four hours ago, I have had racial slurs spoken to me with impunity..." I began, gripping the crowbar as Xavier realized he would not intimidate me. "I have been cast out of homes because I am a *Fiel*, I have fallen in with a barman who-" I motioned to the man who sat bleeding, "-is clearly not a barman."

Xavier grinned, "And you got more under that skirt than I was expe-"

"Hush, Xavier. Shut up." I continued. "I have been attacked, shot at even. I have risked all and lost. And it was you who lost it. Your unreliable men and your stupid plan." Something had come over me. I leaned in, he was barely taller than myself but I felt as if I was looking down upon him. "I did my part, and perfectly. But Lorelei deserved to know the truth, and with the job a failure that was my call to make. So Xavier, on the subject of my skills, kindly shut up." I released the crowbar and pushed Xavier back, with a force he was not expecting. I let my left hand fall on my sheathed blade. "Lest you forgot, Mr. Castello, that I deal in knives."

I believe I won a degree of respect. Xavier stepped back towards the bleeding man and smiled. "Didn't knock this guy out cold." He tapped a bruise on the man's forehead. "Attacked my driver."

"Well it is only my first day." Somehow, we could make each other smile.

I stood at the bench opposite Xavier. "I assume you have interrogated him."

"He squealed an hour ago, this is just for fun." Xavier ran the crowbar along the man's leg. "Short of it is, he saw an opportunity to take care of a problem people would pay to take care of. And, you know the rest."

The man was breathing, barely conscious and looked at me through a bloody eye. I looked back, without an ounce of sympathy. Still addressing Xavier, "Who would have paid?"

"He gave me the name of a few men's groups, small scale and fringe like I figured. They mostly meet in bars in the hole, talk about how science says women aren't capable of what Lorelei is. Never really accepted the *Mellissare* of being a different breed of women..." He laughed, dropping one dying cigarette onto the man's lap and lighting another. He could not stop laughing. When I asked about it, Xavier told me plain and simple. "We've got one group who believe science hundreds of years old, and another thinkin' the *Mellissare* are some kinda man-born-woman, and we got the *Mellissare* clinging to that to survive... We're living in a house of lies!"

I was not sure why, but the strangest thought came to me as Xavier spoke his words. It was crystal clear to me, a play of lies and everyone wore a mask. So much time has passed, but I will remember Krone as a remarkable beast. Where order reigned until the masks were dropped. And the house would collapse, fear would rule, and the Nordens would bathe in blood. Softly, "Is it a pageant?"

Xavier looked back to me, holding the crowbar at the man's chin. "Hmm?" He thought quickly. "Are you asking if we are living the grand stage? We might as well. This world loves a show more than it loves itself!" Fury. Xavier cracked the crowbar across the man's chin and laughed in delight. "Might as well, might as well! You hear that?" He pressed his fingers against the broken bones and yelled in his face. "You hear that?! Only you showed us who you are! Hasn't life taught you, you don't show them who you are..." I listened to Xavier torture that man, but wondered how much of his speech was directed at me. Regardless I had lived a lie for so long, I would show them who I was. Xavier put his cigarette out on the man's bruise and all the man could do was whimper. Reaching for a holster on his chest, Xavier looked to me. "Tatjyana, you've been through enough and this isn't for a lady's eyes. Go upstairs and order dinner, it's on me."

I could not see the man's expression through the blood on his face. "Xavier... I might as well see this through."

Shaking his head, refusing to draw his weapon before I was away, he denied my request. "You've done more than enough, really. Tat, go upstairs and order dinner." Through it all he did not want to put a bullet to a traitor in front of a lady. I suppose I should have been flattered, even if I barely felt as one that night. "Go upstairs, please!" For everything that had been done and said that night, he wanted to protect me. It had been twenty-four hours and I was so far removed from my life in Norden that my mind was swimming. I could have watched Xavier put a bullet to that man, I could have watched Xavier execute ten more. Perhaps Xavier knew that if I did, the Norden girl he met would die with them. I did not think of it at the time. All I knew was that it was important to Xavier, and it showed some shred of humanity. I turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind me. It was not until I had reached the top of the stairs and stood in the small side room, that I heard the shot. Singular, muffled by the basement, and followed by the silence.

I ordered the turkey. I could not afford the turkey but Xavier was buying and he would not have the heart to turn me down. I never had the chance to eat it. Minutes after sitting at a quiet table, two women dressed in red and gold silks walked inside. Crimson jackets with half-sleeves over crimson corseted dresses, adorned with a single line of feathered gold weaving down their skirts. *Mellissare* Maier's colours and trademark. Neither of them were bodyguards or anything of that sort, simply *Mellissare* on an official errand. The one who caught my eye was the woman like myself, the first Norden woman whom I had seen since leaving home. Her eyes found me and she walked over and extended her hand. "Nika Melnikov, I assume you are Tatjyana." I wondered how long it had been since Nika had seen another Norden woman. I wondered what business they had with me, while seeing the *Mellissare* enter had lifted my heart I knew how little Lorelei thought of me. I took her hand and she, unexpectedly, kissed it. I was not sure of the protocol for two women in this situation, so I took her hand and kissed it as well. *Mellissare* still played with some conventions that were not well known, and she excused me for the kiss. As a 'man born woman' her kiss was protocol, mine was apparently flirtatious. A partron or two were watching us, but we spoke so that they could not hear it all.

"I am afraid, *Mellissare* Melnikov, that if you have come for the man he just had a bullet put to him."

Nika did not seem worried. "Lorelei- *Mellissare* Maier said Mr. Castello might do so. Do you know why the man made the attempt?"

"Money from fringe groups, Xavier does not believe they pose much threat. It was spur of the moment." Nika nodded her head, I believe that was the answer they were expecting. Still I had to know, "How does Lorelei know of Xavier?"

Nika laughed, "She said she did not get where she is without having her ear to the ground. Told us that he was a bit of a bastard, but insignificant." I took amusement in the fact that Xavier was unaware that the woman he was trying to watch, already had him in her sights. And she had judged him 'insignificant'. "Lorelei mentioned Mr. Castello would

engineer a plan so bizarre. We would have been here, even if you were not so easy to follow."

She was friendly, I would be too. "It is only my first day." She laughed, I smiled. Xavier came out of the side room beside us, wiping his hands clean with a bloody rag. I continued with Nika, "The man you have been sent to collect is dead, I am afraid that is the end to your business." Xavier's eyes widened at the sight of *Mellissare* in his bar, *Mellissare* who clearly knew who he was.

Nika told him not to worry, but that Lorelei had sent her with two jobs. "Tatjana is to accompany us to *Mellissare* House."

I questioned her. "For what reason?" My mind leapt to the conclusion that Lorelei would have me punished for my role earlier that night. Nika only shook her head and said that she did not know, but that she was to insist. She told me that if I did not cooperate, that I would be arrested for the role I played. Xavier had already walked away to tend the bar, but was obviously listening to us. Another defining theme of the early days were my lack of options, do or die. Rather than rot in a cell, I decided to confront Lorelei and went willingly.

Nika was kind enough, the other *Mellissare* was silent. If I had resisted, neither of them would have been able to overpower me and clearly this was not a usual *Mellissare* errand. As we rode in the coach and passed the electric lights along the street I got a better look at Nika Melnikov's hands and arms. She had been injured, there were rope burns and thin lashes, a subtle scar or two along both of them. Most of it appeared fresh. When I asked her about it, she refused to answer. She was not ashamed of it, but it was not business she would be prepared to discuss with me until I earned my place beside her.

High up the mountain on a plateau, with trees forming a tall fence around the cliffside was *Mellissare* House. Lorelei's residence, along with the '*Mellissare* Social Club' one of few places Lorelei could control entry of. The house itself was unlike anything I had seen before. Four wings, two floors, square and surrounding a beautiful garden and meeting ground in the center. I was designed for its privacy, I would later learn of the sprawling labyrinth Lorelei had constructed in the mountain's rock below. A woman dressed in *Mellissare* colours stood guard, though she was not armed and barely looked up to the task. The coach rode past the sandstone fence and down the immaculate driveway until we reached the mahogany doors of the home. Nika ushered me through them and into the lobby where there was no one to meet us. Lorelei was the only *Mellissare* who lived there permanently, and I would learn that the others who happened to be over for a business or short stay were in an exclusive lounge in another part of the building.

The *Mellissare* who accompanied Nika stayed with us, though she felt superfluous. Nika was the one whom I spoke to, we seemed to have a rapport. Perhaps there is a bound pure bloods share. It was easy to talk to her, though she would refuse to speak about her business. I learned that she was the youngest of the *Mellissare*, and who like me had caught Lorelei's eye and became a *Mellissare* through work alone without inheritance to rely on. That was the extent of it, as we climbed carpeted stairs and walked down the hallways to a specific door in the northern hall. Nika gave two knocks and Lorelei's voice beckoned for me to enter, explicitly stating that she wanted me alone. I said goodbye to Nika and the two left me to push open the door to Lorelei's office. She sat in front of a large window overlooking the central garden, all of it bathed in moonlight. She had electric light, lamps and bulbs on the ceiling lit the entire room filled with stacks of books, a desk with papers piled high and Lorelei herself sitting with a cigarette in hand.

When I sat opposite her in a fine chair of respectable stature, I learned the *Mellissare* follow another custom usually reserved for men. When I sat, she offered me a cigarette and I took it as she held out a lighter to gave it life. Lorelei had yet to say a word and I steadied my nerves with a small inhalation of smoke. I did not know what to say, hoping she would be the one to speak first. After everything she said hours prior, a part of me did not believe that she had me called into her home and office.

The silence was broken by a woman in a simple crimson blouse and skirt entering behind me, carrying with her a silver tray with tea. Lorelei seemed content to examine me, blowing smoke and most likely wanting me as nervous as possible. Perhaps she was looking for a sign of something, though I am still not entirely sure what that could have been. The woman poured Lorelei's tea first, two creams and no sugar. At my request she left mine without and curtsied to *Mellissare* Maier.

Lorelei seemed more relaxed in her presence, smiling and sitting comfortably behind her desk. She spoke with a respect I did not hear mistresses give to their servants. "Thank you, Laetitia." The servant left us, walking more casually and more freely than I had ever seen a servant dare to do. It is not to say she did not do well, she carried and poured respectfully and did not begrudge in her duties; I was simply unaccustomed. Perhaps I had read too much about servitude.

"Your home seems more relaxed than I expected, *Mellissare* Maier. Even your servants." I was curious.

Lorelei gave me a look and spoke as if she had explained this all before. "I do not have servants. And no, Laetitia is not a *Mellissare*. Not yet, for appearances sake."

I was confused. My family were not nobility yet in a few years we might have had our own servants, had things not have changed. It was expected. I conceded. "I do not understand..."

Lorelei had become more stern again, looking at me skeptically with a sip of tea and spoke with a sigh. "Laetitia and the other women who are not *Mellissare* are my employees, they have a regular paycheck and live throughout Krone."

"Not at the *Mellissare* House?"

"No, they are not kept. At the end of her shift Laetitia is free to go home, or wherever she chooses. I am content knowing she'll return to a place more comfortable than before I hired her." Lorelei squeezed in a drop of lemon into her tea. "I am not sure if you can understand."

She dismissed me, seemingly content to sip tea and give me the growing feeling that I was wasting her time. If she did not care for me then I would at least know why. "*Mellissare* Maier, why would I not understand?"

Lorelei motioned her head in my direction and looked me over once more. "You Nordens are so unblemished. You're practically a doll." I was not a doll, though I was sure to become one. "I refer to the hardship we face. The fact that there are men who would have me killed for what I am, and options so few of my girls have."

This was all too familiar. I simply replied, "Help me to understand. You must think I have potential, given that you have not asked about your assassin and have focused solely on myself." I relaxed as best I could, it was obvious that Lorelei did not mean to end me or she would have already. Over the past twenty-four hours, I had learned the importance of being bold. "*Mellissare* Maier, perhaps it is because you know our battles are the same. I already mentioned my family, impoverished because a man was disgraced by his *Fiel* child. I do not know your history, but I learned from my sister the struggles women in this world face. I am sure there is common ground. I have seen the hatred first hand tonight. I have had my status taken from me simply for what I am, a woman. The options I had, the privilege and the power; gone upon declaring myself a woman." I paused, wondering if I should continue with the next part as Lorelei listened to me. I leaned in. "And I know the strength all of us possess, before I had known a single *Mellissare*. In short, I believe I know what you are fighting for." Bold words, to lift the veil Lorelei held and to equate all women's capabilities with the *Mellissare*. My sister, my mother, all of those women around me and myself had taught me there was no difference. Lorelei never stated it, in fact I would see her play up the lie in public, but she wanted to lead all women to enjoy her privileged liberties.

Lorelei smiled, still silent. She blew smoke at me. I would come to know her as one of the most intelligent women I had ever known, but one who struggled with hatreds which clouded her mind. At the dress shop she became lost in the clouds, here she saw with clarity. I continued, "Though I cannot know what it has been like for yourself, and I do not

know the *Mellissare* well. I have read novels with characters inspired by you. Even if I am sure they are not the whole truth."

She agreed with me. "The press is not right. For one only a few of the *Mellissare* including myself inherited industry." A woman with property almost became a *Mellissare* out of necessity to protect her assets with the privileged status. "I was fortunate, when I lost my father there were no male heirs, and no majority shareholders... There were no outstanding debts, and he did not leave a will. As such, the property was defaulted to me." Lorelei reclined in her chair, thinking and taking another drag of her cigarette, tapping its ash away. "When I took over, there were several men vying to control me. They were waiting until I had run the business into the ground and to buy it from me in desperation." She chuckled, proud of her accomplishments. "They gave me six months. In three I had expanded. In nine I had branched into related industries. The style of dress you wear was designed by the best and brightest women under my employ. It was designed with mobility in mind, and at least some power to defend ones self if attacked. This was when you were a small child, when *Mellissare* was a gift from the Krone City Council and not mine to give. I was given that title, but any power which is given can be taken. Any power taken is owned." Lorelei's motto, 'Power given is taken. Power taken is owned.' adored the crests around her home. "The council saw the benefits in my establishment of a formal *Mellissare* order. Under which I could attend to the *Mellissare's* needs and concerns myself, give them a private place to rest and a central place to arrange assignations..." Her voice trailed off. I knew what was coming next. "Most of the *Mellissare* are courtesans, and not by choice."

I interjected, "And this is not my choice. To an large extent I want this, but if my sister had seen any alternative I would not be sitting here tonight."

Lorelei did not mind the interruption. "Your sister seems like a wise woman." I nodded in agreement and let her continue. "Even as courtesans, I can only provide them with rudimentary protections. It is a cruel world where one needs special status to have their murder or rape investigated. The wealthiest noble can be as dangerous as the poorest Jon." All of which my wise sister had taught me, and I assured Lorelei I knew the risks. Snuffing her cigarette in an ashtray, Lorelei made her offer. "Many of the *Mellissare* believe *Fielas* are agents of the council, sent to destroy us from within. I am still not entirely sure they are wrong. However child, you impressed me tonight. You are strong, honest and I can use your talents." Hope returned with every word. She paused to strum her fingers down a box of index cards and plucked one out. She read it over and continued. "I have only one courtesan of dark sensuality, and she is on the opposite side of the coin." She passed the index card over her desk and I read the name 'Sir Diego Molina'. "This nobleman is one of the few who has made public his desires for a woman like yourself, even if you are a *Fielas*. I will contact him, say I have a new girl he might be interested in. If he is, I will contact you at your hotel and you will be ready to meet him anywhere and at anytime." She was ordering me. "You will be the most powerful, dominating and sadistic woman he has ever known while showing proper respect. You will be the best he has ever had. And you will not fail me." Her tone was grave. "You have no reputation, so I will stake mine. Do this, prove to me you are what you claim to be and we might continue our relationship. Is that understood?"

With a proud and joyous spark to my eyes I replied, "Absolutely!"

With a moment's hesitation she took back the index card and dismissed me. "Go home and be ready. Sleep. I will phone him tonight. The man barely sleeps, if he wants you tonight, you will see him tonight."

When I rose, I curtsied. I was not about to overstay my welcome but needed to thank her. We both saved each other's lives that night. "Thank you, *Mellissare* Maier. I will make you proud."

"Make him squeal, this man has quite the thirst." She drew a pen and letterhead from her desk. As I was at the door to her office, she called to me. "Oh and while I am sure he has suitable knives, if you are successful we will need to find you something more appropriate than your silly kitchen knife. That is all."

I could barely contain my excitement as Lorelei's coach drove me home. I burst through the doors of The Midway with a smile on my face, and a euphoria which buried my anxiety of the potential task at hand. I passed Xavier who sat finishing my dinner, and stripped my leathers the moment I was in my room. I fell onto my bed and snuffed out the lantern light. Knowing my chance to prove myself could come at any moment, I had to calm myself. In an hour, I managed to sleep.

My first morning at The Midway. I could not believe what had happened the night before. Memories of the assassination attempt, Lorelei, Xavier, and the murder of that man still hung with me. The sun was shining in through the window, waking me up with its touch. I spent that morning like most others, pulling back the covers and feeling my phallus stir. Forcing me to remember what I was. I put it out of my mind, dressed in simple clothes and walked down to the bar area for breakfast. There was a decent crowd, with Xavier's waitresses busily moving between tables. It was peaceful, and would become my routine for over two years. Xavier called to me from a table off to the side, waving an envelope with a wax seal. I will admit my heart leaped at the sight of it, and it was a matter of seconds before I had snatched it from his hand. The seal depicted a lioness, it was Lorelei's. Breaking it and shaking out the letter, I hastily read it. The nobleman Sir Molina had requested an assignation, it would be discreet and take place in the mid-afternoon. Lorelei cautioned that Sir Molina was married, I would be there during a time when the wife was not. Payment would be given to Lorelei who would give me a cut, until I was a *Mellissare* any assignations arranged by her came at a cost. Signed and dated.

Xavier could tell the letter's contents from the look in my eyes. "Looks like the *Fiel*a just became a courtesan..." I looked to him and smiled. "Order something expensive for breakfast." I learned later that it wasn't on the house. I barely had time to eat anyways, I had to prepare. In decisively un-ladylike behaviour I consumed breakfast. A pot of coffee, a pile of eggs and potatoes gone in a heartbeat before I raced upstairs to shower. I had hours, but I was not leaving anything to chance. Not after what I had been through and not with my family depending on me. With a razor-blade I removed every hair below my neck, while Nordens are notably hairless I had decided to cleanly shave around my phallus. The hair on my head was washed, dried and brushed a hundred times over. My white leathers were inspected and any dirt was promptly cleaned. Dressing I sat at a mirror on my desk and applied make-up. Bloody red lips, simple black lines around my eyes. It did not require much, creamy and unblemished alabaster skin easily made the look. I found and tied a crimson ribbon around my arm after an idea came to me. I held and played with my kitchen knife, read taboo romance novels as a way to warm up and finally it was time.

When I walked back to the bar, I drew people's attention. Proudly Norden, dressed in leather and with a devilish grin on my face. I stood out and for all the right reasons. I did not breathe a word of what I was doing to any of them, simply smiled and walked past. Xavier held his arms open to me with a smile. I felt my long red hair sway as I walked to him. "If I had any doubts before... Come here." I came close, holding my arms out until the last step when I promptly and skillfully slapped him across the cheek. He looked at me stunned.

"Practice." I smirked and headed to the Midway's backdoor, with Xavier rubbing his cheek right behind me. I did not recognize the seal on the coach that had just pulled up, but I would come to know the two ravens as the Molina household. Most of Krone's nobility had a liking for powerful animals, it was odd. The driver opened the coach, bowed and I paid him no attention. Even as he held out his hand to assist me climbing in. My chin never sagged, my eyes never lost a Norden's intensity and I sat with relaxed confidence. Xavier stood just outside, I could still see the red streak across his skin. I blew him a kiss, and winked. "Time to do what I do best."

"Gonna suck his dick now?"

Purring, "No. But he'll suck mine..." I motioned to the door. "Close it." Xavier did, laughing and knocked on it twice to signal the driver. Truthfully I had wished Xavier would

come, and found myself alone with my thoughts. Trying not to worry about the task at hand, I relaxed and watched the people go by. We climbed the mountain, heading for the west face of the mountain overlooking the beautiful countryside. As we rose, the houses began to get larger, the shops more infrequent and more expensive, and the parks more exclusive. We went over a bridge, a river coming from near the mountain's peak poured hot water along its side. Krone was unlike any mountain I had seen in Norden. I noticed the coach followed along the park, and caught a glimpse of a noble's mansion sitting at the top of a powerful waterfall pouring from the mountain's stone. A stone balcony had been built along it, and the house itself rested on a suitable plateau. Most of the noble's homes rested on flattened sections of the mountain, with some having gardens so thick you could forget you were on it. This was one of those places. The house stood tall, large windows adorned its face and the stone construction was dark and cozy.

The driver came around and helped me to the door, a female servant in a simple uniform opened it and my heels clicked against granite floors in the reception. I looked at the two staircases and balcony before me, and waited in the center of the oval lobby. With folded arms, to show off some muscle and a grin on my face I waited for him. He kept me waiting too long. "Krone's education must be in a sorry state, to teach a man that he can be late to greet a lady, Sir Molina." The first words I said to him. He was local, brown hair with blue eyes and shorter than myself. He took my hand and kissed it. "Good." I think he liked it.

Sir Molina paused for the moment, smiling. "Not bad..." He looked me over, I allowed that. "Who would have thought, a *Fiel* mistress..." I did not enjoy being looked over as a piece of meat, but it would be something I would get used to. "I trust everything is func-" He tried to feel his hand through the slit in my skirt, that is when I stopped him. He played it by looking guilty, so I struck him. I think he liked that too. He paused and nodded to me. "Good. You will do nicely. I haven't had play from a Norden *Fiel* before, and you certainly look and act like I imagined one would be." Sir Molina had made his desires public, I assumed he would respond to someone more forward. He rubbed his cheek, I was getting good at that strike.

I began to play the role he and so many of my clients wanted me to play. "Sir Molina, examine me as you would your dinner once more and I will show you the full extent of what Norden *Fiel* is capable of."

He took it as an invitation. "But you are mine for the next couple hours." I casually undid the ribbon from around my arm. I could not argue with him there, but certainly was not going to allow it. "Tatjyana, do you have any idea how few women do what it is you wish to do?" He knew I was new, I suppose that worked in my favour. "Not to mention a pretty *Fiel*-"

I bound one wrist with the ribbon quickly and learned I was far stronger than him even while he struggled. I pulled his arms behind his back and tied them together, the ribbon enough to hold for the time. "Sir Molina, I may be yours for the next hours, but I was not hired to hear you speak." I ran a finger down his neck, leaning in and whispering in his ear. "Have I made myself clear?" I took the liberty and reached down to grab his prick through his pants. "And I am at full liberty to make use of this."

He spoke louder than I would have liked, but despite my role, I was still his doll. "I understand, Tatjyana..."

"Lady Novikov." I corrected.

"Understood, Lady Novikov." Still speaking in a tone loud enough to let me know my true place in this.

"Good." I yanked him around by the ribbon. He was strong enough to fight against it, but I truly was stronger than him. "Now, where are we to do this? Speak."

The nobility indulges, it is their purpose. Every whim, every craving and every fetish was allowed, even if some had to be hidden in the mountain's stone. Sir Molina, directed me to a second basement where we would play. Windowless, lit only with candles and filled only

with cherry-wood furniture. There was a long bench, stone floor, and cabinets filled with some odd toys. I shoved Sir Molina face down onto the bench as I went to inspect the equipment. It was not for the fainthearted. While most of my clients would prefer crops and flagellation, peppered with small encounters with my knives. Sir Molina was different. The cabinet was filled with knives, poker, syringes with vials of liquid and hooks. He would remain my most formidable client, until the night I would meet Lady Molina.

I stuck with what I knew. The knives were perfectly sharp, with cold polished stone handles and well balanced. I knew he could hear me take one from its holster, I saw his flesh cringe with anticipation. I walked slowly, agonizingly so over to the bench and lay down so that my corset pressed against his back. With the blade, I teased him by slapping the flat of it against his posterior. I purred to him, "You know what I am going to do. I am a Norden after all..." He raised his hips enough to let me undo his belt and pull his pants down enough to expose flesh. "That's right..." With the tip of the blade, I pressed into his rear, enough to excite myself in seeing a single drop of blood. He cringed, and I held him down. He muttered something and with an open palm I spanked the bead of blood to punish it.

He was hard, he loved it when I pressed his body flat against the bench as to press that phallus against the polished wood. At the first drop of blood I felt a frenzy. I gripped his neck, held him and struck him with my palm until I felt my hand start to numb, before taking the blade back up and flicking it against his flesh. Exactly as I had practiced, and knowing that tiny drops of blood only excited us more. I kept him face down for some time, never allowing him to look anywhere but at the floor. I did all the talking. Pulling his jacket and shirt off, I raked freshly sharpened nails down along his back in between my strikes and flicks of the blade. Every time I repeated the cycle, I became more excited, and he was begging me to go harder. It pained me that I would have to keep the bruising to a minimum, lest we wanted to Lady Molina's suspensions. My nails drew thin lines of blood, and my hands struck the flesh along where I had cut. He was bleeding from tiny little pricks, deceptive little drops that had been born from intense pain. We played for some time, he kept wanting more. To strike harder, at his legs and thighs, back, neck. To caress my blade along his flesh, with such faint pressure that it left the tiniest lines of blood to bead in its wake. It culminated when I had him raise his ass, enough for me to dip beside him and tease the head of his phallus with the tip of the blade. That sent shockwaves through him, even if it was one of my lightest touches.

My prick was throbbing, the beast ached for release. I had an idea. Giving him a moment to rest and catch his excited breath, I carefully put the knife off to the side and stood before him. "Look up." He strained to see me, so I bent down and reached back to casually untie the laces of my corset. I freed my breasts from it and let it drop to the floor. I cupped his chin in my hands and raised his mouth to one. Stroking his hair, smiling kinder now. "Go on..." I felt his lips seal around my nipple, and give me a kiss. I did not allow him much time before pulling back and pulling down my lace panties over my boots and letting my phallus spring free. I parted the line in my skirt and had him watch me reveal myself. That I did solely for him. I asked, knowing the answer. "Do you want this?"

I saw him nod. I told him to speak and he said yes. I told him to beg, coming back in closer to him and kneeling so that the head of my prick was at his lips. I watched his lips quiver, I watched the submissive noble's eyes fixate on it. His pleading degraded into simply, "Please... please, *Fieła* Novikov! I want it, give it to me!"

I held his chin up and flashed a wicked grin. "Then I shall, Sir Molina. Though not in the fashion you are expecting." My hand pressed my full weight against his back as I leaped onto him and positioned myself at his rear. I grabbed his firm ass, squeezed him and dug my nails into that flesh. He knew what I had in store, he could have shouted 'Krone' and ended it, but he did not. I realized that I had never done this before. The times of my youth when I and another girl from the village snuck off and 'played' together had all been straightforward.

My hesitation allowed him enough time to breathe. However it was not long before my

nails dug back into his flesh and I indulged him. I pressed into him, he squealed like a pig and I forced into his puckered hole while one hand gripped his own prick. My weight held him down as he thrashed against me, my nails dug into his thigh and I pressed my breasts to his back. That I loved, giving him something only a *Fiel*a could, rubbing myself along his back with every thrust from my hips. I let his phallus go, both hands striking his thighs and back before gripping his shoulders and allowing me to press deeper with every thrust. Sweat began to drip off of me, mixing with the faint lines of blood and sweat along his back. I wanted to see more, biting loose flesh along his back, sinking teeth in. It was a shame I could not have marked him too much, the neck would have to wait.

Feeling his prick once more, I knew he was close. "You would not dare..." I realize I was threatening to inflict pain on a masochist for disobedience, it was part of the game. I gripped along the base of his shaft and held tight. "Not until I have had my fun!" I felt my body give into the beast's desires, guilty release. A destitute *Fiel*a defiling a wealthy nobleman, and having him pay for the pleasure.

In a heartbeat I pulled from him and released his shaft. "Now, if you must." And I did not watch his release, instead walking to a cupboard with fresh white towels and helping myself while he writhed in sensation. I cleaned myself of my juices, sweat and from the faint streaks of blood against my belly. When I had done with it, I tossed the used towel onto his back and cut the ribbon with my knife.

"Krone." Not the most original word but it worked. I paused and stood while Sir Molina got to his feet and felt his wrists. I wondered if something had gone wrong, as he pointed to the cabinet. "I'll take a fresh one, Tatjyana." The doll persona of his mistress was not needed, I tucked it away and passed one to him. He wiped the sweat from his face and I was not sure what to do. He wrapped it around his waist and folded his arms, examining me as I was the only one exposed now.

"Sir Molina, I hope I did you well." I could smell our scents in the air with every breath. I saw a smile, "It is a shame you had to hold back."

"Sir if you wish, perhaps next time?" I eagerly awaited an answer.

He knew I was and laughed, "When she leaves on her weekend trips to whoknows where, at least I will have something to distract myself with."

That was all I needed to hear. "Thank you, Sir Molina!" I curtsied and smiled wide. The celebration was cut short when we both noticed the simple clock on the wall, our hours together were at an end.

"Get dressed, and you will have to wash at home. I'll have my driver ready momentarily. Tatjyana, it's been a pleasure." He nodded to me, collected his clothing and walked out of the stone room. I was not about to loiter and risk discovery, hastily dressing and rushing to meet the driver who already had the door open for me. It is odd, but I had not appreciated what happened until the door clicked shut. My client was happy, I proved myself and the job was done. I remember not watching the crowds as I passed by this time, I remember staring at the opposite wall in a daze.

I had done it. I was a courtesan.

That evening I was resting in my room, and Xavier came to me. "Hey Tat, *Mellissare* Maier's coach just pulled up to my very private loading bay. Could you let me know next time? Just a little in advance before inviting say, the city council or the chief of police? Thanks." While I paid little attention to his gripes, I could not ignore the faint click of heels against the hardwood floor coming towards us.

Xavier said he would put a premium on my rent, only to be handed several notes by Lorelei Maier. "Don't interfere."

"The golden rule around here, *Mellissare* Maier." Xavier pocketed the money and headed down the hallway.

She came into my room, I wrapped a sheet around myself and stood to meet her. "I am

not dressed I fear."

"Do not worry my dear." Lorelei chuckled and held out an envelope. "Diego and I agreed that fifteen quid a day was fair for a *Fiel*." A discount, the other *Mellissare* commanded five quid more. "Here is ten quid for the couple of hours you spent, minus my fee." There was seven pounds in the envelope.

Lorelei did not understand when a tear ran down my cheek and I held my hand over my mouth. "You have to understand, a *Fiel* cannot make the same money as a-... As one of us." She did not understand that I was not crying because the amount was so little, I wept because the amount was so great. Seven pounds, even subtracting some for a *Fiel*-*Marin* injection and my rent, was a substantial amount. From one assignation I had made more than several long trips to market, and I knew it was only a start. I was not content to simply feed and clothe my family, I was determined to earn enough over the years to buy back the land which had been taken from us. In that envelope, I saw that I could.

"Thank you, *Mellissare* Maier."

"Lorelei." I looked to her, as she sighed and considered things. "Diego raved about the Norden *Fiel* with the intense eyes and love of blood. I was even contacted discreetly by a noblewoman, who wants to indulge in my new girl." I was wearing that sheet proudly that evening. "You will meet her tomorrow night, late." I nodded and she continued. "I have also been talking with the other *Mellissare*, they are split on the idea of a *Fiel* being eligible. Some are sympathetic to your story, others want nothing to do with you. At the very least, you are useful to us. It might be apparent that many of my girls are not as skilled as you in self-defense, and I want you to teach them." She cared for them. "Especially *Mellissare* Melnikov. I cannot stand by while men believe her work gives them license to shatter bones and bring her near to death." She took a breath. "And this would be paid."

I wanted to help her cause and endear myself. "No need, I am honoured to do so."

Lorelei smirked, "Never turn down money, child... but the thought is..." She was warming up to me. "-appreciated. The council has approved the *Mellissare* knowing basic skills." She looked to my eyes. "But if you wish to become one of us, you will teach them everything you know. It is a way for you to gain exposure in the group as well, I would strongly urge you to be presentable."

"Thank you, *Mellissare* Maier. Thank you."

Her speech done, Lorelei only had one last thing to say. "I admit that you might find me uncaring, child. You are the first *Fiel* I've known, and the rest I have heard of reside in asylums. I have learned enough never to take the 'brilliant' minds of this world at their word, but I can't know for certain if they are wrong. Tatjana."

"Yes?"

"Prove them wrong." She nodded to me and took her leave.

I sat at my desk, took a pen and addressed an envelope to home. I placed five quid inside, but before I could seal it I wanted to do more. The money was important, but I wanted to let Nadejda know I was well. I took out a pen and paper and began to write. I started with the usual conversation, balling that paper up and tossing it away. I had experienced so much in so little time, and having to keep so much secret from so many was to wear me down. Nadejda was far away, and she loved me, and I wanted to tell her everything. So I did. I wrote her a letter detailing my adventures from the moment I set foot in Krone, to the moment Lorelei left my room. Folding the notes between the sheets, I sealed the envelope and arranged for Xavier to have it on the next courier ship to Norden.

With every payment, I wrote to my sister. Detailing my assignations, my experiences and my thoughts. She wanted to be informed, and I cannot express the jubilation of tone in her first letter back to me. I wrote to her about my assignation with the noblewoman, who had married a husband out of fear of being discovered for who she was. I wrote to her about my morning routine, and theories on Xavier's true business. I wrote to her about my time instructing the *Mellissare*, my private sessions with Nika Melnikov and later with Lorelei

Maier. I wrote to her that I learned Diego Molina was a professor of psychology of all things at Krone's most prestigious university. I wrote to her about sneaking out from several assignments while a suspicious spouse searched for me. I wrote about injecting *Fielia-Marin* into myself, taken from the underground Krone wished to forget. I wrote of how I was invited and welcomed to all of the noble's events, but never on anyone's shoulder.

I began to write about how close Lorelei Maier and I became. How even when I had taught her everything I knew, she still arranged private sessions. The shame and the want, the confusion, knowing she could not pursue me. It would risk splitting the *Mellissare's* perceptions of her, if she became close with a *Fielia*. After eight months it was time for her decision and Lorelei opted not to appoint me directly. For the first time all of Krone's *Mellissare* voted freely on my eligibility. The vote was nine against, eleven for and none of the votes were public.

In a sparsely attended ceremony, nothing like the ballroom events of other *Mellissare*, Lorelei stood with me in her garden and held a fine wooden case. The moon was out, lanterns lit our way, as the attending *Mellissare* sat at one side of us with my friend Nika Melnikov in the front row. I wanted nothing but to experience a kiss on Lorelei's lips as she spoke. "Tatjyana Asya Novikov, tonight I will bestow upon you the privileged rights that all *Mellissare* share. Through your dedication, your loyalty and your talents, you have earned your place among us. Some might still bicker and fight, but tonight you are the only *Fielia* across Kolybel to become one."

"Thank you, Lorelei." I curtsied before she presented the last part of the ceremony.

"It is not well known, but I have a tradition with my *Mellissare*. Each of these women, and those who did not attend, brings with them a unique quality to this home. One is a talented playwright, another the finest dressmaker I have ever known, and one... has the gift to bring out the darkest, most sadistic fantasies in those around her..." There was faint laughter as I looked to a blushing Nika Melnikov. "Then we have you, Tatjyana. Skillful in another dark craft. Beautiful and dangerous. A toy and a doll but one that brings disastrous consequences if abused or. And a woman who lives for the sight of blood, and the thrill of her work... One who longs for the fantasies and fairy tales of which she reads." She reached around the case and released the gold clasps. "To reflect each and every one of the *Mellissare's* gifts, I present them with a unique gift." As she opened the case filled with crimson velvet she said to me, "You are hereby known as *Mellissare* Tatjyana Asya Novikov of Krone. To honour this occasion-" I forgot the rest of her words, I was not listening when the moonlight reflected off of two daggers.

The first had a hilt of spun gold and silver, forming a being from the fairy tales known as an angel. A long and elegant blade sharper than any I had held before. It is to me as a paintbrush is to an artist. It reflected the passion, beauty and elegance of my work, and I named it my 'Passionate'. The second was cruel. A dagger with a jagged and serrated blade. The hilt was carved in the shape of another fairy tale being, a demon. A twisted looking creature, with a beard which ended at the bottom of the hilt in two sharp prongs. It was designed to lacerate, to maim and to kill and represented barbarism. As such, I named it my 'Barbaric'. Lorelei said, "They're sisters."

I reached in and took the two daggers from their resting place. The first weapon ever given to a *Mellissare*. Quickly, skillfully and perfectly I sheathed them at either side of my skirt. My Passionate at my left, my Barbaric at my right. Lorelei closed and put the box aside, then giving me our first kiss. A simple kiss as customary, to my forehead as the others stood and clapped. Lorelei later told me she did not know where the custom had risen, it was as the first *Mellissare* did upon the council appointing another. It is funny to think of it now given everything that has happened, and to know I have the answers to so many of these mysteries.

The next day I began the greatest months of my life. I had made it. I was sending money

home to my family, I was a *Mellissare* of Krone, my dream was my work. I wanted it to last, I believed it would last. I believed Kolybel would be as it had been for more than eighteen-hundred years. I did not know it then, but the world was about to change. I did not know it then, but I was about to witness acts of cruelty and kindness the likes of I had never known. I did not know it then, but I would play a role in all of it. This is a story that must be told. With the help of family, I have collected the letters I sent to my sister. Starting from moment the earth shifted under me, to when I finally stood on solid ground. I cannot pretend to be proud of all of it, but it is how it happened. Truthfully, because this story must be so. This is the story of how the world changed, how I changed, and of a very special woman known only as The Lady General.

- Tatjana Asya Novikov