

Est. 1182

# In the year 1361

1 family, 1 castle,  
800 years

*Short*

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*The Sinclairs of Wrathe are descended from William, a younger son of Comte de Saint Clair in Normandy who came to England with William the Conqueror. Through early fortunate marriages, this branch of the Sinclair family acquired the Lordship of Wrathe very nearly Kings in their own right and since the twelfth century have made their home in the Castle Am Binnean built upon the foundations of a ninth century watchtower. Fortunate marriages haven't ended over the family's history, the Princess of Navarre and a Granddaughter of the King of France through an illegitimate line most notably.*

*Despite their far-flung seat, the Sinclairs have long been prominent in Scottish affairs. They supported Robert the Bruce in the struggle for Scottish independence and fought at the battle of Bannockburn. After independence they were given the title of Duke of Cairnmuir. Sinclairs of this line have fought at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356, Battle of Bauge in 1421, the battle of Flodden in 1513, and the battle of Killicrankie in 1689 only to name a few. So many men of the clan were lost in several previous battles that they escaped involving themselves in the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite attempts to retake the crown and thereby saved themselves having their lands forfeited. More recently, they have fought in the Napoleon campaign as well as both World Wars.*

*Male members of the family generally pursue military careers. The Black Watch has always boasted a large presence of Sinclair men in their ranks. The family has produced military heroes who have no less than fourteen Distinguished Service Orders and three Victoria Crosses. The current generation has all followed the family tradition, Hunter in the RAF, Broderick in the Royal Navy, and Lorne is a highly decorated Captain in the Royal Marines with the 45 Commandos. Not just fighters the family has a long history of attending St. Andrews since its founding in the 1400's. Phillip Sinclair helped found the Royal Society during the Restoration, a prodigy who had started university at 12. In 1886 Arran Sinclair was made Fellow of the Royal Society for his medical endeavors.*

*Titles in the family include Lord of Wrathe extinct since 1328, Duke of Cairnmuir, Marquess Braydallin held by the heir, Earl of Ravensgard, Viscount Stronchergarry, Baron Sinclair of the Marches and finally Laird of Creag. The 35th Duke, David Sinclair, and his wife, Lady Janet, of the clan MacLeod, live in London. A cadet line was formed in 1757 when Robert Sinclair was made Earl of Wrathe by George II. He served as Lord of the bedchamber until the King's death. See separate entry.*

## *In the Year 1361*

Yelling broke the silence in Am Binnean as Gregor Sancler was dressing. There had been a horrible storm for days and even with the sun out his room was dim. But true silence reigned after the Black Death had taken too many people. He was gone when everyone died. Now he was the only Sancler left apart from a sister that had married closer to Edinburgh.

“What is going on Erskine to have this racket?”

“I’ll go find out.” The steward had hardly left when he came running back with Iomhar.

“What’s...”

“There’s a cog that’s been damaged by the rocks my lord, the storm must have pushed too close to the shore. It’s sinking slowly but sinking. The fishermen are rushing out in their boats to see if they can save the crew.”

“Pirates?”

“No, my lord, the flag looks to be the Hanse, but I can clearly see a woman is on the deck.”

Seeing as the traders were not allowed to marry, that was not usual. “Yes, I’ll be out as soon as I have shoes on. Have my ship go. If it’s still limping along, that should be large enough to tow it to the shore to possibly do repairs depending on how bad it is. Or at least allow them to unload the cargo before it sinks. They’ll never make it to their outposts in the Shetlands.”

“Very good.” Iomhar said before he ran off.

Gregor rushed to finish dressing and headed out of the castle. There was a swarm of fishing boats that were taking on trunks, but no men had left. The cog was drifting with the tide and coming very close to the small island that Am Binnean stood on for the last 200 or so years. It was just in time though to see that there was indeed a woman climbing over the side of the ship into a fishing boat. She lost her grip and landed in the water with an oath as the boat listed heavily. One of the Sanclers rushed to pull her in his boat looking like a drowned rat.

“Get ropes on it and pull it in!” Gregor yelled. “Get off the boat, leave the cargo for after.”

“*Es ist meine fracht.*” A voice came. Hell. He was more worried about cargo than dying.

“*Steigen sie von diesem verdammten Boot aus. Wir können es schneller ziehen, wenn sie nicht sterben. Der sturm zieht wieder auf. Die Frau ist die einzige Schlaue unter euch.*” He yelled pointing to the sky on the horizon, it was dark and ominous even more as lightning shot through the clouds. It was still in the distance, but it was coming.

All of them on the boat turned to look at German being yelled at them. Cursing at them even. They looked back at the sky to see the storm clouds. Suddenly people started to climb into the fishing boats quickly and when one was full they were rowing to the dock. Gregor headed across the drawbridge to reach the small town and docks that stood whitewashed in the stormy sky. There was controlled yammering in German over the top of everyone else, making it hard to even understand.

The woman noticed him coming and suddenly there was quiet. "Thank you." She said in English. "They wouldn't listen to me."

"You speak English."

"My father was working for many years in the *kontor* to the south in England. I lived in London for some years."

"Is he the one that is more worried about his cargo?"

She hid a smile. "No, he's the captain of the ship. I am just a passenger leaving my uncle as he marries me off to some man I've never met on an island I've never been speaking a language I don't know. The boat was headed to Iceland to trade stockfish, honey, wheat, and rye for sulfur when the storm hit in the dark and they didn't know how close to shore they had been pushed. It only grazed the planking but it was enough to force the boards apart so there's a slow leak, we tried to plug them as well as we could, but we couldn't steer anymore with the rudder damaged." There were ropes being thrown over to the tow it finally so no one could argue they were letting it sink.

"Yes there isn't much further west of here. Erskine, take her into the castle and find her a room to get dried off before she freezes to death. The men can find rooms here in Wrathe. I'm sure the village will gladly take any cargo that the water damaged if it's not ruined."

"The trunks are mine." She said quietly.

"What?"

"The trunks that were being offloaded are mine. The wedding gifts. You were angry people weren't leaving the damned boat fast enough."

Gregor started to laugh. "That would take one man pulling your goods over, not the entire crew unless your wedding gifts take up the entire hold. You were the only one I saw even trying to leave. You're still the smartest on the boat, Fräulein?"

She blushed faintly. "Ilse von der Linde."

"Gregor Sancler, Duke of Cairnmuir. Welcome to Wrathe and my home, Am Binnean."

There were mouths falling open among the group as Ilse translated before Erskine led her off and he just yelled orders for the boat. The fishing boats were headed to push the cog along once the ship got it near the dock on wind power. The nearly sunk sailors took poles to help push the boat upright. It took some time but finally they grounded the cog on the shore. The moment they had it secure, there was a great rush as they unloaded everything as the rain had reached them. The winds had picked up too, but it wasn't a complete deluge quite yet. Stockfish that had been

soaked for days was offered to cook with immediately since it was no longer dried to last. Barrels of grains and honey were put into storehouses out of the rain. When the ship was finally emptied everyone ran for cover. Gregor headed into the castle and had to change his clothes again to get dry. Even if he wasn't hauling things around, he was giving orders. The cook gave him a cup of hot broth to get him warm as he sank by the fire.

He'd barely sat down when a large portly fellow came barging in. No amount of fine fabrics he was covered in could hide that fact. Gregor knew he was the captain worried about his cargo, but he'd never said his name.

"Where is she?"

"How should I know, I just got in and I've been with you for the morning."

"I was given the task of delivering her to the groom."

"Yes, you've done that quite well I see after trying to sink. You should thank your ship builders in the Hanseatic League. You have bigger things to worry about like your crew taking every woman in town to bed; with or without a husband and my men killing them for it. We don't have a brothel here for all the Hanse men that aren't allowed to marry, you do have reputations. Until you get your cog fixed if you even can— Fräulein Van der Linde is my guest. If you need to send word to get help or get out the ship can go, but you are not being a tyrant in my home seeing as you are not some relation that has any say over her welfare. If you come barging in again I will help her escape you because there is no thought of sending her weeks with you to Iceland. I am cold, and hungry and spent all morning saving your cargo that you were more worried about than anyone's life. Go now before I have you thrown in the dungeon for deplorable manners like barging into a Duke's rooms."

The man started walking toward him looking like a waddling pig.

"Erskine, see our guest out and he is no longer allowed in the castle. If Fräulein Van der Linde wishes to see him she can arrange to do so in the village. If he takes one more step, throw him..." That finally got him as Erskine stepped into the room barely out of hearing. Erskine was not a waddling pig, he towered over the man and he was armed.

"Have to have your man do it when you can't?"

"I'm not a fat old man throwing his weight around. If I stand up you aren't leaving this castle alive."

Erskine shoved him out the door and there was no missing Poitiers being hissed. He had fought with King John on the side of the French. John had lost and Gregor was taken captive, only the next spring had a truce been made and he was released when Edward the Black Prince had taken John to London. He finally returned to find he was Duke.

"Thank you." A quiet voice said in the silence and he looked around. After a moment Fräulein Van der Linde peered around the corner. Washed and dressed properly after trying not to sink for days she looked nothing like she had. Long blond

plaits hung over her shoulders, setting off a rather beautiful woman. What was he saying, she was stunning. Her silk cotehardie style overdress set off her coloring well as did the amber jewelry.

“If he’s been like that since you left you needn’t thank me, it is my pleasure.”

“He’s been trying to force me to turn against my uncle and marry him instead. The dowry would mean that he wouldn’t have to sail anymore.”

That sounded more like the anger of him not immediately handing her over. “I’m sure your uncle will thank me then.”

“Not really, Goossens only was pushing me because I had asked him to help me not make it to the groom. I thought we were headed to stop at the outposts in the Shetlands when he was instead stalling to reach land until I agreed to marry him. The storm came up and well you saw how that ended.”

“You can sit down, have you eaten?”

“*Ja*. The servants have been most helpful. I wouldn’t have worn such a dress as this to explore, but they took all my other clothes to wash. My wedding clothes were all that hadn’t been soaked.”

“The castle is brightened considerably with such a lavish wardrobe, I’ll have to make sure I dress for supper with more care than being here by myself.”

She finally sat across from him. Brightened the castle indeed. Pale blue silk with a white fur collar that still allowed her shoulders to be bared. “It is only you and me? I did think I would find others to meet as I explored.”

“Yes, my sister married away from here, the rest have died while I was gone.”

“Where was that?”

Of course. “I was captured at Poitiers and held for some months. When I returned I was Duke. Had been for some time as it seemed.”

“And you’ve never married? Sorry I shouldn’t have asked that, horribly forward of a stranger.”

“No more forward than me running your captain chaperone off just because he offended me by barging in like it was his house.”

“After he barged in my berth, like that would make me want to marry him, I approve of you running him off. He only laughed when I shoved a knife at him, he didn’t think I would do it.”

“He didn’t...” Gregor murmured.

“No, that was only the night before the storm came up and his boat was damaged.”

Gregor narrowed his eyes and she stiffened. “You can guess what I’m thinking?”

“That my uncle must be a fool. It’s what I think. If my family was taking me to Iceland, if the groom was coming to get me, if he was a King arranging a dynasty with a royal marriage, no, he’s just a Hanse merchant that made a fortune and wanted to make a trade dynasty so some sulfur seller in Iceland is getting a fortune.”

“Sulfur?” Gregor asked.

“It’s used to fumigate things...”

He started laughing. “No, I know what it’s used for, it just doesn’t seem the occupation that would create a dynasty with a marriage. Trade or otherwise. Silk yes, gold, spices, those I could see.”

“Ja.” Her eyes narrowed and her mouth fell open as if to speak more, but nothing came out. Every moment longer she looked more offended, or was it angry, or confused. “Excuse me.” She said before she rushed out of the room. She gave nothing away as to why that was though.

## Chapter 2

Coming to supper in his best clothes if there was to be a guest in her best, the dining hall was laid for a feast. A rather pointed reminder that the clan had been decimated recently, only the head table was laid for anyone to eat. The others stood in silent uselessness where once it would have been full.

"I see you have done us well, Beileag." Gregor said as the cook was laying out dishes still.

"Your guest came to the kitchen and asked if I would mind using the spices she had and receipts from Lübeck."

"I hope you don't mind." Ilse said from the door.

"No, of course not." He said as he turned. His mouth went dry. She was dressed even more magnificently than earlier. Whatever had her on that cog it wasn't lack of money, she looked more like a queen than a trader's daughter.

"You look beautiful." He said quietly.

"*Danke.*" She smiled prettily. Far too prettily.

"So what are we eating?"

"Heathen cake, which is more of a beef pie than a cake. Blancmanger chicken and rice with almonds, King's chicken, salmon pie, and some pickled vegetables."

"You'll put the table to shame when it's my turn."

"Then I'll have to make sure that you are connected to the League, and they can bring you as much as you desire, my lord. Spices, stockfish, wine, grain, broadcloth, silk, furs, salt, metals, herring, sulfur, timber, beer."

"Are you trying to bribe me for letting you stay? I would do that without bribes after meeting your captain. You are a welcome guest."

She stiffened as she went to the table and poured them some wine.

"Fräulein is something wrong? He didn't get in again, did he?"

"No. Not that." She whispered as she sat. He took a seat and sipped some very fine wine. She started taking food so he followed suit. Ginger, anise, pepper, saffron, and almonds filled the various dishes, she had to be using her wedding gifts on him.

"Fräulein exactly what are you bribing me for? Shouldn't all this spice go to your husband when you've wed?"

"It should." She said quietly.

"Then?"

She lifted her eyes and brilliant blue stared back at him. "I wondered if I bribed you enough you would marry me before Goossens could get word to get me out of here."

That was not what he expected to hear. He thought she was bribing him to help her escape. She was a woman though, and her uncle was marrying her off to an island far from all she knew already. If she said no, he would only find someone new. A forced marriage would explain begging a ship captain to get her out of being delivered to the

wedding. She didn't just decide such an action because they nearly sunk. Beileag returned bringing cherry sauce filled with spices as well.

"There that's the last I needed to bring. I didn't think you would start before I was back."

"It all looked too intriguing to not start immediately."

"Then enjoy." She left them at that.

Fräulein Van der Linde stared at her plate as she ate. She just ate in silence, she had said what she wanted.

"Why did you run off this afternoon?" He asked finally.

"Because I was worried that my uncle had made sure that the dowry never made it into my trunks."

"Something was wrong at home before you were put on the boat?"

She shrugged her shoulders that were gloriously bare in the dress she wore.

"Like he talks to me about business. I worried if he lied about the dowry then I was being sent to pay a debt."

"And was it there?"

"Spices, silks, furs, amber, salt, sugar and almonds, cherries, but no dowry. I can bribe you with everything but Marks. Unless Goossens managed to steal it from under my nose and the trunk was always with me— I am here to pay a debt."

Married for a debt? Hell.

"You were supposed to marry some titled King's daughter and I have no dowry to buy a husband like you. I'm no longer able to stay and you're throwing me to my uncle's bad business practices." She wasn't going to just let him think even.

"I didn't say that."

She looked up slowly. "You..."

"I have questions and there was a reason I paused."

"What questions?"

"How much was the dowry he told you he had sent?"

"1000 Marks." She whispered.

Dear god, most lords he knew would take the woman for that alone, let alone the goods he actually sent. "Second question. Are you willing to ruin your uncle for that amount, because if you never show up he still owes it?"

Ilse looked up with a spoon still at her mouth. That was not a question she expected to hear. "To be sent to Iceland to marry a stranger I can't even speak to. He might not speak to me about business, but for that amount he had to have taken a vast amount of credit and the shipment was sunk or taken by pirates. I'm being sent to Iceland, as you said it's not the location for prestige items worth fortunes. It's a steady income provided the ships don't sink. It's not exactly the situation that family loyalty is first on my mind and that's not that I think I am better than a sulfur seller. I'm being sold for a debt, never to be seen again."

"He doesn't make the runs on ships that he would see you every visit?"

She shook her head vehemently. "He sits in a counting house in Lübeck, I was given a last goodbye. Not an 'I'll see you in a year or two'. Is that the only questions you had?"

"No, the other is I'm as much a stranger as this sulfur seller. Why am I any better of a choice? Yes, I have a title, but we're still strangers. You spoke to me how few moments earlier and then ran off. This is what there is, a castle and a small village, there are farmers and shepherds that spread across the area that belong to my title and clan. We ship in everything that is not able to be found here, and there isn't much here but fish and sheep. What money we have we marry, there isn't a huge rent income."

"You have to marry a fortune?" She whispered.

"No, but if you don't like me, it's a prison sentence. Bear a few children because there do need to be legitimate children for a Duke to continue on and then because there's nothing between us I go find a mistress or 5 depending on how long I live and you do what – find your own in a village where either most are related to me or to the mistresses I would have. A wife loved is not the same as an arrangement."

"You never go to Edinburgh or anywhere?"

"I do, the Netherlands, France, Ireland, I have a ship, I can go many places, but this is my home. This is my land, my clan. My question is what makes me a better stranger than some man in Iceland your uncle owes money to. You were trying to get out of going to him, but you are asking the same from me. Just because I am a Duke, that doesn't change that I am a stranger."

Ilse pushed her chair back from the table and walked to his side of the table. There was no bashfulness like blushing on the dock when she leaned near his ear.

"Because before you ever said you were a Duke and I did not know your name you were a man I wished my uncle had married me off to. I mean I might have a great many words to say if you went to a mistress or 5 when I am very willing. I can't say that is love, but it's not a prison sentence."

Gregor pulled back so he could see her face.

"I know I have no right to even ask, I know I am nothing compared to a Duke. I am just a trader's daughter, but I can't go back now that I know he threw me away for his debt and I didn't want this match before I knew that. The dowry was money my mother left me, and it was stolen from me. My mother died when I was small and my father had kept that money for me. When he died my uncle became my..." Tears were coming down her cheeks. The words fell away when he reached up to wipe them away.

"Go eat your supper."

"You're not even considering..."

He tried hard not to consider the woman all but throwing herself at him. A beautiful woman like her, throwing herself at him. "You made a fine meal, you should eat it while it's hot. After supper we can talk. I would not even consider it if you were trading one stranger for another. I could get you away before you think this is the only option."

"To do what? I am a woman, I can go be a nun or I can marry unless I want to go work in the brothels. Do you think I came to the decision to throw myself on your mercy because there was another option? Goossens will have word to my uncle, he'll have word to one of the outpost factories that are in the Shetlands or Bergen and they aren't men to allow an unmarried woman her freedom. Even less if my uncle sends word I have to be returned no matter what I want. I am at your mercy, or I am at my uncles'. I have resisted Goossens he will not keep his tongue at my asking for help to escape this marriage."

"Please go eat supper."

"If..."

"If you do not go eat, I'll have you on the damned table and you don't have any idea what you're even offering do you?"

"What?" She whispered.

"You shoved a knife in the man's belly to stop him coming to your berth, you know that much. Do you know what he wanted fully, because if your uncle was stealing your dowry I don't think he was worried about explaining the wedding night."

"I know you don't make me feel..."

"You need to go eat your supper."

Finally, she stepped away and went back across the table. Gregor let out a deep breath. Not consider—dear lord. Having her in a pool of cherry sauce nearly happened. She wasn't even that young, 20 perhaps. Looking at her across the table crestfallen, the offer was far too enticing. Marriage to a woman without title or fortune it was hard to argue against it as she looked up through her lashes at him. Willing to take life in her hands to escape a future she couldn't imagine. Far more than Isobel was.

"You won't even talk to me now." She whispered.

"Ilse..." her head flew up at him using her name instead of Fräulein. "I cannot think of a reason to not accept the offer."

"You feel like I do, only you know what that means?"

"And it's not courtly love spoken of in romances, if you change your mind, you're ruined and your uncle is even angrier. We are strangers and I'm trying to be chivalrous and not taking what you are feeling when an uncle sent you to prison. It will be very easy to accept the offer, but a good many men would take the offer without marriage."

"I know. That's the one thing my uncle screamed about, I had to be a good girl and then he threw me on a boat with that pig for weeks. I haven't felt like being a good girl since I saw you, but no I don't know what that fully means. I just know I don't want to leave if it means I can't see you anymore. I didn't think you would turn me down."

"You spent all day thinking about it, I spent the day thinking there was a beautiful guest engaged to another man, that you were off limits. Not that you would offer what I was trying not to think about all day the moment I saw you again."

“Would you show me what you are thinking about? If I’m defying him I’d like to truly have something to confess in church rather than just ‘I bound myself to another stranger to...’”

“Damn woman.” He hissed.

“Eat my supper?” She said with a wicked grin.

“Eat your supper. The food is too fine to waste.”

“We use mustard a lot at home, there’s some on this end of the table if you would like it.”

“No, I’m fine. I would hate to cover up all the other spices you’re bribing me with.”

Sitting there after eating as much as he could, Gregor drank his wine until she finished. Picking a fight with the League wasn’t simple, but then it wasn’t like the estate would suffer if they cut him off. He had his own ship to get what was needed, to sell what was needed. They controlled the Baltic ports, but they were in the end a group of traders. Not a government with an army. No, it wasn’t that big of a fight to pick, it was in the end saving a woman from being sold, and not even from her father. The biggest worry was Goossens sitting there with a ship he couldn’t leave in. It would make things difficult in the village. Sending the ship in the morning to take word that the crew needed to be rescued would...

“What are you thinking of so hard?” Ilse asked when he looked up she was standing there again, close. Her hand held out for him to take, an invitation offered so simply.

“You aren’t very innocent for a sheltered bride on the way to her wedding.”

“I never said I was. If you had asked, you would have heard there was a boy when I was younger, we never got as far as ruining me, not after my uncle sent him to Novgorod and he never returned. I spent half the day once I saw my dowry gone thinking back and I would guess he stole and spent it long ago. I just know that you make me feel far more than he ever did. I am offering a very willing woman in exchange for protection. I might not have a fine dowry anymore, but I am my father’s daughter and he was the best trader in Lübeck. My uncle is not. You have the ship, I can improve the profits of any product that the estate makes. I can get you the best profits from any investment you would like to make in goods across the region and sell elsewhere. But I have spent the entire time I ate sitting here wanting to take my clothes off and show you just how much I am offering. Only the dining hall is rather drafty and your cook will likely return. Take me to bed, if I have to say please I will beg if I have to. If marriage is beyond your doing I’ll leave in the morning if you can help me leave without Goossens finding out I’m not here, but I am still begging. I’ll know once what it meant to be a woman before I join the convent or I’ll be starting well in a brothel.”

Gregor pulled her in his lap and her breath grew short. No, she wasn't a shrinking innocent. Ilse ran her fingers over his lips before she kissed him. Hungrily. No, she wasn't lying about coming to his bed very willingly. She was going to start ripping his clothes off then and there when he pulled back.

"If we go to bed, we'll marry tomorrow, but we aren't telling. The village has to live with Goossens being there until either the ship is fixed or they've left. I can put him off until the time comes for him to drag you away and I'm hoping that will be when he's ready to leave. I don't want anyone hurt."

"If..."

Gregor slipped his hand beneath the skirts of her dress and found her calf, she stared into his eyes as he ran his hand up her leg. "Can you keep it quiet until he's not taking his anger out on my people?"

Ilse's mouth parted in ecstasy as his thumb ran along her *coynte* opening spread wide as she straddled him. She nodded slowly before leaning closer until her mouth touched his again. "As long as you touch me I don't care if we even leave for the church. I just need you now."

"It will hurt a bit the first time."

"Hurt?"

"A little."

"The blood I've heard of on sheets on wedding nights."

"Yes, the little pain is what causes it. I can make the priest drop his prayer book at everything you confess, but there is a bit of pain even if you played with that boy." Slipping his thumb inside her she let out a moan of delight and everything relaxed.

"Not this?"

"No, not this." When he caressed her bud Ilse buried her head on his shoulder, but it wasn't enough to hide the moans of delight.

"I think my boy didn't know what he was doing." She whispered. "It did not feel like this."

"He had you making him feel like this, I take it."

"If this is what it feels like for you, he got the better end of the play." She moaned. "Is my offer over someone else..." It faded into a moan.

"No, I am not asking questions because I'm trying to put you over someone I know well. And you moaning so prettily is taking away any thoughts that you were making a choice that you will hate."

Ilse started bucking in his arms as her end hit hard and he made it last until she lay there against him in silence.

"If?" She finally whispered.

"Having you come to my bed would be a dream come true. I'm here alone, and have been since I came back from Poitiers and being held for months."

"There isn't anyone?"

“No. My talk of mistresses is all what men in my position do when marrying a stranger. Marriage for safety for you is too lonely to think about when one is alone...”

She stood up and took his hand. “Where is your room? You aren’t alone as long as I’m here.”

“Second floor south tower.”

When she walked into the round room there were tapestries on all the walls, a huge four poster bed hanging with wool. A long set of shelves, heavily carved, squared off one wall held some pieces he brought over from France. A large armoire held his clothes while his shield from battle hung over the fireplace. There were a few chairs sitting before the fire, and a small table. It looked like most of the rest of the castle. Furniture to impress, tapestries, paintings, and fabrics to show off they were Ducal, Lords before that not so long before. Gold and silver gleamed on many shelves. Scandinavian, Scottish, French, Italian, English goods from marriages, battle, or just expensive. She barred the door so no one could interrupt and never took her eyes from him as she pulled her clothes off slowly. A trail of them led to the bed where she turned around nude, a piece of art.

“Are you scared to come over?” She asked when he still stood by the door dressed.

“I’ve never seen such... I never imagined such a bold offer when I awoke this morning.”

He walked back to him close enough to touch and there was nothing stopping him as she began pulling his tunic over his head. She stopped cold when she saw the scars. “You didn’t just surrender?”

“I was wounded before the surrender came. Not sure how I didn’t die with them when I was taken prisoner.”

Her fingers ran over each one gently. “Is this why you sit here alone?”

“I’m sitting alone because too many died of the plague. It’s why I have a hard time letting Poitiers go. I’m sitting here alone worried I might get caught up in the next battle or war over a land some stranger owns. Do you see the men here to fight? There are some yes, but not an army. The English and the Scottish are not friends really, I fought against the enemy, nothing more. If it comes to Wrath I’ll fight, but that’s my battle, not a stranger’s.”

“You don’t want to fight one with a wife either.”

“No.”

She slipped her hand in his leggings and found his shaft. His eyes closed when she kissed the worst scar. “I need security. I will admit that I am rushing, I may have blushed and played innocent if you showed interest and I wasn’t running to make you pursue me. But the whole truth is I have wanted you to touch me, I will never fight you and if you are alone, I will never leave you alone.” She pushed his leggings off revealing all of him as much as she was.

"You can't just think it was a compliment to you being exquisite and have to sell me your offer again." He said as he hauled her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around his waist and let out a gasp as she rest on his shaft.

"I can't imagine leaving you and I know I shouldn't have even asked." She whispered in his ear. "I might keep asking if you're sure."

"Then I'll just have to make sure you know to never ask again. Just take me to bed and show me you don't want to leave."

She sighed in his ear. "So what are all the sins you were going to show me? I want to learn properly to make sure you don't need a mistress as long as I'm around."

"Seeing as you enjoyed a moment ago and not for procreation, you were already sinning."

"That's all. Here I want to be..."

He fell on the bed letting her straddle him. "Seeing as I have killed and that one is a commandment, I've already sinned. No amount of rosaries will end that purgatory for me. I don't see anything about wanting to enjoy a willing woman in the bible. Every rule they push is one man made, not god. So when I say show me you don't want to leave, I am serious. On every holy day you want, if you want to be on top or have me lick you till you scream, or you need me when you are great with child. Every want you have I will give to you." He moved his hips running himself against her *coynte* and she bit her lip.

"I have a question?"

"What's that?"

She reached down and took hold of his shaft and caressed it so he couldn't argue about how long it had been and he was being denied. "If you're marrying me tomorrow that would make me the Duchess, *ja?*"

"It would."

"Do I have to sit here and embroider all the time? I helped my father until he died, it was only my uncle that pushed me aside. When I offered..."

"You can run the entire estate if you want. I am the eldest male after my grandfather died. That doesn't mean I am the perfect steward. If you can improve the finances then it is all yours to do."

"You would let me?"

"Ilse..."

She started kissing him like she did earlier. There was no stopping her now, nude, door locked, supper eaten. Whatever this arrangement was, it wasn't going to be regretted.

### Chapter 3

Gregor woke to whispering, there was no one in bed with him. Looking out, Ilse was collecting a tray from someone out in the hall.

“Is that you Erskine?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then bring it in, we need to have a talk and yes it’s about the lady answering the door.”

Ilse rushed back to bed and her feet were freezing as they slid in along his leg. “Damn.”

“Well I didn’t plan on having to answer the door when my clothes were strewn across the floor. I own heavy wool stockings, but they’re washing them.”

There was no missing that there was enough breakfast for 2. They had already found her room empty. It wasn’t a vast tray of food – enough to take off the hunger.

“The captain was here banging on the door first thing. I refused to wake your guest but did find her missing when I went to take her something to eat.”

“Did he have something to say or is he just throwing his weight around again?”

“He was coming to offer cargo to the castle before he offered it to the village. The kitchens bought some honey, stockfish, wheat and barley, but made sure that there was enough for the village to be able to buy some as well. I did hear what your orders were yesterday to let them have first choice. Did you have to seduce the woman that fast? He’s going to be trouble.”

“Yes, he is, and no I didn’t. She seduced me.”

Erskine narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t look like that, I did.” Ilse snapped and he looked shocked. “I found that my dowry was not in my trunk. It is likely that I was sent to Iceland to pay a debt. Anyone in Lübeck knows that I had 1000 Marks from my mother, I had it when my father died, but now I am being sold off to a man I never met, to an island I can’t speak to anyone on and was talked to like I would never see him again. Debt or not, the dowry is gone. I had asked the Captain to help me not reach the groom even before I knew of the dowry missing. He spent until the ship was damaged trying to force me to marry him for the dowry, he even barged into my room one night and I had to stick a knife in his belly to get him to leave. When I was offered a room to escape him, I knew I could not go back on the ship and I could not go back home. If my uncle finds out I am sitting here unmarried...”

“You asked if he would marry you?”

“I did. We discussed it over supper and the fact that I had not wanted a man as much as the Duke quelled any arguments he had.”

“She’s to be allowed any say in the estate finances she wishes. She’s a trader’s daughter and knows far more about it than I do. I had one condition, that we do not tell everyone until that Captain has left so he cannot make trouble for the village. No,

just saying we will does not fix her problem. It has to be married. So if you could have her things moved in here, an armoire moved in to hold her clothing and send for Father Bertrand. No matter what happens, the captain does not come into the castle.”

Erskine straightened up. “That’s why he was coming to sell stock. They don’t think they can patch the ship well enough to use. They’re selling what they can to recoup the losses and will be asking to return soon.”

“Have they even looked at it? Has the storm ended and they were out there in the dark looking?”

“Well the storm ended finally at least there’s nothing dark on the horizon to be seen. I don’t know how much they’ve looked at it though.”

“The rivets held, but they were stressed and gaps formed. We were able to stuff what we could in the gaps to keep us from sinking utterly, it wasn’t that they needed to go out and look. They had 3 days of going down to the hold trying to keep us up to see that there is nothing to do but rebuild it. The rudder was dragged over the rocks as well.” Ilse said quietly. “If you had shipwrights here that could do what was needed – they could after a time get it fixed. It would involve taking off nearly the entire side and rebuilding it with a new rudder. It’s not going to be done without serious work.”

“They’ll just leave it here and go?”

“They will—the owner of the boat could send the men and materials needed to fix it. If you’re serious about marrying me, it sounds like it has to be today.”

“Send for Father Bertrand, if they’re leaving soon have all the men armed and ready for him getting angry.”

“If you tell him there’s no dowry when I looked in my trunks once we got off the boat I don’t think he has a reason to be angry. He was pushing to marry me thinking he could get that, no other reason. My uncle is the one to worry about.”

“If you think there’s no reason other than money.” Gregor murmured.

“For him, money is all that matters.”

“Bring her trunks so she can get dressed to wed. She can make the room what she wants after you can track down what she would like. You should ask if Sine would like to come work as a lady’s maid.”

“Yes, my lord. I’m sure she would since she came back when your sister married.” Erskine headed out finally.

“She didn’t go with your sister?” Ilse asked.

“Everyone in the family died in Edinburgh, Sine doesn’t feel safe there even though the black death for the most part has passed.”

“You really shouldn’t marry me should you?”

“Stop. We are an old family with a grand title, but truthfully if I am getting serious we don’t have the grandest income. 200 years ago, roughly we were given the land and called Lord to marry a princess. He was the third son of an Earl. We married very well at times before and after that, my grandfather was made a Duke when there was a war. It took us out of trying to be King as was fought for not that long ago. We

had to swear allegiance to the King to get the Dukedom and get this castle back. It was confiscated, and we spent over 15 years away from here. Maybe it was 20. There were no roofs and furniture, and we have never had the largest number to call when there's trouble. To protect the place yes, but to be sent to fight a war we don't have vast numbers to lose. We have married princesses, we have married commoners, and everything in between. One married the woman that saved his life in the Crusades. That is Erskine's family, they came with her and have been the stewards ever since. Not a noble bone in her body. We live on the edge of the world. It can take a couple days to ride to the nearest neighbors that are titled, it is faster to sail to the Orkney's. My grandmother is one of those families. Get dressed and we'll get married and you will be as good as any of those that claimed the title of Lady Cairnmuir as long as you show me you never want to leave."

"After last night I'd be crazy to even think about it. Every dream I could have about a man you did not let me down."

"Glad to know I impressed, but how would you know if I'm better or worse than anyone else."

She nudged him with a laugh. "Should I go find out before we wed, I would hate for you to think I didn't appreciate last night properly."

"You can go find out after you've gotten tired of me, until then stay where you are."

Ilse rested her head on his shoulder, all joking aside. "Do you think it's worth trying to get back my dowry?"

"You know the Hanse better than me. Is there any authority that could force him? And a question to go with that, is it possible he did it because he doesn't even have that anymore? If he stole because he's hated you or his brother all his life or is it because he was a horrid businessman and he's lost it?"

"Truthfully, probably both. He always wanted to marry my mother, so they were at odds my entire life."

"All right, as we are strangers I have to ask, do you have any other family? And if your father didn't necessarily trust him and you were to have a 1000 Marks, could there have been more to the estate? That was your mother's money, what about from your father? Was there a house? Someone with a 1000 Marks—did she marry down, marry equal, marry up?"

Ilse turned and stared mouth open as something never came out. "You're asking if he could have taken more because I was a child?"

"Yes. If there was a will as a child even if people died before you, you would be the heir, and it could be proved he stole it. If he was left everything but the 1000 Marks and he was your guardian until marriage and that's all that's missing then it's harder to prove. If he owes money to this groom that was arranged in Iceland he could argue something that wouldn't be theft outright, a family debt and you are family to repay it. A beautiful woman in the land known for being German plump, I haven't seen any fault

that would keep you from marriage except being very headstrong when going for what you want, to live your own life rather than chattel. And throwing you away was what it took for you to finally get that headstrong. The debt idea was only a possibility, there is another, he married you off to that out of the way place never mentioning you had the dowry to the man entirely so that he could steal it. You aren't of the age that is it commented on that you haven't married, get you out of the way before anyone that knew you had the dowry asked. Unless you have that 1000 Marks in your trunks after all and you just saw me and threw all caution away because you had to have me and I have learned nothing about you really."

Ilse started laughing. "I did throw all caution away because I had to have you, but the money isn't there. I had even considered that he didn't trust me and he would have Goossens carry it until we arrived, but he wouldn't have been such a pig if that was the case. He had to marry me to get it or kill me. I was told it was in my trunks..." Speaking of which the first of several were being brought in.

"So what do you think about the rest?" Gregor asked as Ilse got up and went to pull out some thick stockings from her things. She pulled the curfew off and threw some peat on the fire and sat as it started to catch.

"I had a brother Georg until I was 15. He was supposed to get everything other than that 1000 Marks. When he died I'm not sure what should have happened. That was the only close family I had left. The house though was father's, not my uncles. It is possible there is more."

"Would you want to go back?"

"What, and not get married?"

"No, you're stuck marrying me, going back to fight over it as a single woman that ran from a groom that her uncle arranged it would be hard to fight. But I do have a boat and as a Duchess going back to fight there is far more threat you can wield."

"Only if you come with me." She whispered.

"I didn't learn German by sitting here."

"You've been. You never said."

"Before Poitiers, I sailed down on this side of Denmark and made my way overland to Pomerania then came back by ship from that coast. The black death decimated my family, I wasn't the only one not that long ago. The village was spared widespread destruction, but there were some, while my family traveling down to Edinburgh at court were decimated. My uncle died without issue, so all his gains in marriage became my lines. I was married years ago, it was arranged to a woman of great fortune, she died from it when she went to visit her family. No child had come before that."

"You never said that either."

"Offering to not leave me here alone was all the offer you needed to make. I know what it's like to live here with a stranger. You are far more congenial to live with

than she was on a day's knowing her. I didn't feel like bringing up the well-placed wife when you were arguing all the reasons I shouldn't want to marry a traders' daughter."

"Who was she?"

Gregor pulled on a robe and slippers and came to sit by the fire across from her. "She was daughter to William Douglas, made the first Earl of Douglas only 6 years ago. When we wed, there was a good deal of fighting down on the border, he arranged with my father that she marry out of danger. I was at Poitiers with him, he still called in the debt of marrying his daughter dead or not, the reason I went. I was knighted by the French King. William fled when he saw the battle was lost, he was not captured but left one of his relations and myself behind. The relation managed to escape sometime later; I was there for months because I had been wounded. Isobel was an heiress on her mothers' side, no title, but rich as could be with lots of land in the south of the country."

"I see why you didn't mention it."

"That's the reason I don't have to worry about if you have a fortune or not. My great grandmother brought a fortune as the daughter of the King of Tyrone, but I had a fortune of my own before I was Duke. I could go live down there in those lands if I wanted to sit in the middle of my in-laws who left me behind. I would have been down there if she lived or if a good number hadn't died here."

"They don't have many people living there paying rents though with plague deaths, do they?"

"No, not really. They spend all their time raiding into England and repelling raids by the English. I'm not very generous after being left to save themselves. They do send word that I should come join the fight."

"Gregor, I can't say I heard of many nobles that died, and your family was decimated. They all would leave to estates like here with no one around to breathe in the bad air."

"They were attending a wedding, and there was an outbreak. They left as soon as the word went out, but they were on a ship and by the time it arrived here they were dead. The whole boat had it at least. My father refused to dock. They sat out there and one day no one came up in the morning. They set fire to it and it sank rather than going aboard risking themselves."

Ilse sat there, mouth opened in shock.

"Do you want to go home as a honeymoon? It's been years since there was an outbreak." Gregor asked.

"I assumed you would want to do it after there was an heir if there's no one else left."

"It would pass to any males my sister has. It will be summer soon, this is the end of the winter storms you were caught in. Not that it never rains anyway, just that the nastiest ones should fade. Or do you want to spend years until you've given birth

worried about what your uncle is doing once word gets back without your side of the story.”

The other trunks were brought in as she watched him in silence. He didn’t really have to wait for her answer, it was all over her face she wanted to scream at her uncle. If not take a sword to his neck. There were a good many trunks. 6, no 7. Not little things, full wedding chests that could hold a good deal.

“Shall I help you dress?” Sine asked. She must have run the moment she heard she could work. “You don’t want to get married with hair that looks like you just survived a storm.”

Gregor bit his lip trying not to grin as Ilse immediately put her hands to her head feeling the devastation.

“It’s your fault.”

“I never said it wasn’t. You’re blushing like the whole castle doesn’t know you spent the night begging for more. Do you want to go? I can have Erskine start laying in supplies for the boat.”

“If you aren’t against it, I want to wring his neck. You have to get Goossens out of here though I’m not riding the same boat with him all the way back home. It wouldn’t be immediately would it?”

“We need to get married with the priest to oversee it so there’s no one can say it was done in secret and it wasn’t sanctified. I was going to go see what their plan was after that, I was hoping to just take them up to a Shetland outpost where they could get back via Hanse routes. We could even sail straight from there if we were that far north, it doesn’t take much change to go to Lübeck rather than here.”

“That would work— by the time they could get a boat back we could have dealt with business there and come back here.”

Gregor stood and kissed her enough she looked to go back to bed. “Get dressed and you can save that look for the wedding night.”

She just grinned before he left her.

It wasn’t even lunch time yet when they stepped into the castle chapel, and Father Bertrand performed the rights and blessing. Erskine and Sine stood witness, the only 3 that knew of the wedding. They changed back into normal daily clothes and Ilse spent some time turning the room into theirs, the castle too. Putting several small chests on shelves, one with amber jewelry, rings, broches, necklaces with other jewels. An armoire for her clothes was moved in from another room. The dresses he saw put in there were worth a fortune. He doubted a Duchess in England could outdo the best silks with golden thread, furs, and even a bit of purple dye. Opus Teutonicum embroidery in all white thread on linen. A bronze lion aquamanile, a fancy name for a vessel to wash hands with, was placed on the head table in the hall. A book holder and dear lord 4 books on the shelf. A tapestry of a griffin on a wall, jugs on the tables, some

heavily embroidered pillows to some window seats and chairs. There was a fine bone set of tables or trictrac depending where you were, with a chest of counters she put with the chess set that was one of the oldest pieces in the castle. A whole locked small chest was put in the larder full of sugar cones, saffron and spices. Several casks of the best Hanseatic ale, almonds, and dried cherries, even some German wine were added to the shelves there. A huge bag of mustard seed. Pottery vessels for cooking mussels, metal pots with the Leagues seal. No, she was being shoved aside if she wasn't marrying a man of serious position or wealth. A trader in sulfur, no. A king should have been glad of her as long as they didn't need an alliance with the neighbor.

When the afternoon was fine with the storm fully gone, he took her out for a walk proving that he wasn't keeping her captive.

"What are you wearing?" Goossens called.

Ilse looked down at the dress, it was made of heavy local wool in a fine check pattern. Something to be warm in. "The servants are washing all my clothes. They loaned me this one to wear, unless you want me ruining silk gowns while going for a walk after the storm ended."

"Oh."

"Why are you yelling at me like you own me?"

"I was given your..."

"No, you were hired to deliver me to Iceland and you failed, I would thank you to stop treating me like I am your wife and you have any say over what I wear. I'm sure the whole village will appreciate hearing about you barging in my berth hoping to marry me by rape." Goossens turned beet red, not a good color for a man as large as he to have. "Which reminds me, did you steal the dowry that was in my trunks?"

Gregor didn't expect her to bring that up, but after being trapped with him perhaps she couldn't hold it in.

"You think I stole...what do you mean there's no dowry in your chests?"

"Exactly what I said, I was having to pull my clothes out to have them washed, I looked to make sure nothing had been ruined getting in the water as we sank, everything I packed was there but the actual money. I wasn't wearing all that on the boat. I hadn't opened the chest since we left Lübeck. If you didn't steal it then I would guess my uncle did. My mother's money, not his."

"I...I...I..."

"Just realized you tried to rape me for no benefit? I'm not going back, I will stay here. If my uncle threw me away to some sulfur seller in Iceland I can't even talk to without MY dowry I am not going back to him. You were paid for the trip, if he says anything you can tell him you delivered me to where I'm not being thrown away. I can stay here and help the village sell their goods to all the contacts I know in the League. My father would be horrified to see what happened to me. You and my uncle, the both of you are no better than the other."

"I thought we weren't going to talk of that." Gregor whispered as the man actually looked shamed, the crew was looking at him in shock. There was using a brothel and there was raping someone after all.

"The more I thought of it the more I didn't want to stay on the same boat. You can take them to Shetland and they can get us on the way back. A few days delay won't hurt anything. I don't like him."

"I'm sure you don't." He hissed. "I understand you want to leave soon and that the boat can't be salvaged." He called louder in German.

"If we can, it could be rebuilt, but that won't happen with what we can do. If you don't mind it sitting there for a while, the owner will either send workers to fix it or send word that you can just salvage it. Selling the cargo would be best, I've sold everything that the village would buy..."

"I can buy the remainder. We just wanted the village to have the chance rather than all going to my stores. With the black death taking people even here everything is harder to get."

Goossens pursed his lips. "Are you sure about staying here?" He said as he looked around.

"Are you saying it's worse than Iceland? It's where my uncle is not. And I would thank you not to offend the Duke seeing as I have a place to stay until I decide to move on. Seeing as I have no funds it is here or going back home. I have nothing else for him to steal from me. If you knew Uncle was robbing me..."

"Do you think I would have gone..." He looked around red again that he had nearly actually admitted what he had done.

"I'll have the boat ready to leave in the morning. Tell Erskine what is left of the cargo before then."

They walked away as the brisk wind off the water hit them full. "Feel better?"

Ilse gave him a glorious smile. "It's one worry off my shoulders. To the west of here, there was some sort of tower we saw for almost a day before we were pushed in sight, what was that?"

"A broch, it's a tower that has been here 1000 years at least. The family story is that it was what was there on our little island when we were given the land. Sometime before that someone had reworked it into a watch tower only they married the Vikings rather than fight them. The first lord and his wife made it livable before anything else was built."

"Is that your room tower?"

"Probably. It is larger than the rest, over the years they just built on and over the last 200 years made what it is now. There are plans to build a vastly larger one working what is there into the whole. Lacks funds though."

"Even with your first wife's money. Or is that getting too personal on a day knowing each other."

"It was planned back then, only now the black death killed so many. There isn't the labor to build it, all the materials would have to be shipped in and there aren't the people to make many of those. Huge amounts of timber, quarried stone, only flagstones we can get here on the estate, but flooring doesn't help without walls. It would have been enough funds before, but now there's no point. If there's anything you want to do to make it more comfortable, things from home, feel free. No matter the money it will be a while before we build much larger. They did add on some about 30 years ago, that's when the house there to the side was built. An uncle had a wife that no one could stand so they built that to keep her out of the castle since it didn't have enough rooms for everyone. They were living in tents until the houses and the castle could be repaired. They added a new kitchen and storage to start. She brought a large cattle herd so there's a large dairy supply. Cheese and butter. A wife a long time ago brought most every unmarried woman where she was from, all weavers because we had too many men without wives. No, they didn't force them, they came as weavers. If there were marriages all the better and there is a huge stock of sheep around the estate. Almost every house on the estate has a loom and we make a good supply of wool fabric of the quality you're wearing."

"How big is the estate?"

"You can ride a horse for about 5 days from one side to the other. From the sea inland it's about 3 I think. Harder to ride that direction, more mountainous. By road it's easier to go along the coast from the east. Hence why we have the boat. We have to consider the weather, but you can be there in days instead of weeks."

"That's all there is for industry?"

"There might be a few small things but yes. That's about it. It's the highlands. Well there's fishing of course, I figured you knew that one though having sailed our coast in depth."

"*Ja*, we did." She said with a laugh.

"Salmon we can get in the streams, crab, we put out traps for. Cod, haddock, mackerel, pollock, herring and blue whiting, scallops and prawns. Mostly they stay around here and the Orkney's, but if they hear something is running they'll go as far as the Shetlands. Occasionally they'll even go far north to the Faroes."

"They don't go to Bergen?" Ilse asked as a brisk breeze came off the water and she gave a heavy shiver.

"Not usually. The ship will for trading, same with Ireland. They do occasionally go up to Iceland."

"It's my wedding night, I don't want to talk about fishing." She whispered.

"I hoped you might ask that, my lady." He held out his arm and she slipped her hand at his elbow as they turned back to the castle. "But then I thought perhaps you were trying to get froze to the bone so you could cling to me for warmth."

"So is there anything you didn't show me last night?"

Gregor whispered in her ear even with Goossens watching them. There was fire burning in her eyes when he pulled back. "Really?"

"Every word."

Her pace sped up as he tried not to laugh.

Her yelling worked, the men were on the boat the next day headed north without an argument. A few days later they were back, supplies were loaded up and they set sail as soon as the wind was right. It was the first time they left the bedroom.

## Chapter 4

The boat had made its way around Denmark and up the Treve River leading toward the city of Lübeck. Ilse let out a sigh as she saw home again.

“So who do we need to see first? I’m assuming you aren’t going to go up to your uncle first thing.” He asked. The trip was talking about life mostly. Ilse was educated as one of the League might have been, only done because her mother had died when she was young so her father took her and her brother with him to London. It seemed they could marry, but it was not in the first years after they joined and those that were married usually were living in the hubs of the League. Not sailing ships or in the *Kontor* that most would meet. They also pushed to marry among the Hanse, not diluting their power with outsiders.

“I was thinking about doing some decorating first, you did say I could make Am Binnean what I wanted?”

Gregor could only laugh. “I did say that.”

“I thought that if we completely anger him and we have to leave doing that task first might be a good thing.”

“You’re that worried?”

She leaned against his arm and let out a sigh. “I think I’m with child.” She whispered. “I haven’t bled since we docked in Wrathe.”

Gregor kissed her forehead. “So soon?”

“That I know of it only takes the once and it was many times more than once. I do seem to like you.”

“I know. Just—I was married before and it was longer than this without...”

“Never?”

“Not that she told me.”

“Then we’ll just have to finish here fast and head home. I don’t want to give birth on that ship.”

“No, but if it came that close, we’d just stay here until you could travel. Where should we rent a house? We should get you off this boat.” Gregor asked.

“I was thinking near the Market, it’s just near St. Mary’s and the town hall. They would be the ones to ask about a will. Not that it’s that big of a city, anywhere really. On the river if you need a wider open view after leaving Am Binnean with no one there.”

“Overlooking the noisy, busy, working river, no. I’m fine with being in the middle of everything.”

“Just offering. 3 months ago, before I left, Herr Müller had his house for rent. The black death made houses empty that didn’t used to be. It’s a lovely house just off that part of town. I wanted to get some decorative tiles for the floor in our room. That’s the main thing I was thinking of.”

“That’s all —a new floor?”

“That’s the specific one. I saw these tiles a few years ago and I always wanted some like them. I would buy some pieces if I see them, but that’s the only real want. You do have a castle you’ve spent 200 years filling. It’s not like I was having to rebuild it like when it was confiscated.”

“They did put a good deal in storage before they were run off. We have things from the first Lord still. But one could never have a Duke thought out of fashion. If you see anything you like please make us fashionable. I had wanted to get some stained glass for the chapel perhaps, but it’s not like the room has any windows.”

“Would there be enough manpower to build a chapel if a larger castle isn’t possible?”

“That we might be able to do if you wanted to add any touches from home. The Holy Roman Empire is far more known for their churches than Scotland after all. Can I make one suggestion, about being here, not the chapel.” Gregor asked.

“What?”

“Don’t tell anyone you are the Duchess, or I’m the Duke. I am Gregor Sancler and you are Ilse Sancler.”

“I thought the whole point...”

“Do you know all the titles of Scotland, I don’t know all the titles of the Holy Roman Empire.”

Ilse thought for a moment. “You mean as Frau Sancler I can go around doing business. A Duchess shouldn’t be walking around town.”

“The minute you mention the title people expect one thing, and it’s not a trader’s daughter returning to her home after marriage. Make any trade deals you want, buy anything you want, throw feasts if you want, only bring out you are Duchess if it will help. Like there’s a Prince you need to impress, but I would try to impress them after you’ve dealt with your uncle.”

“Not even tell my family?”

“If you trust them you can tell them anything, it’s the Hanse and your uncle that are the problem. I don’t know all the workings of the league, which means I don’t know who would be more likely to trust. A guild member or family. If this uncle is family and Hanse where do his loyalties lie. Just from what I’ve seen it’s not family. I know we haven’t discussed any of this on the ride, but now that we have reached Lübeck.”

Ilse watched as the capital of the League came into view, one of the greatest cities of The Holy Roman Empire was growing closer by the moment. Tall, thin steeples filled the air from a handful of churches. Bricks making up nearly everything. All surrounded by a wall, oddly enough the wall wasn’t on the island. They were passing through the walls on opposite shores allowing the riverbanks to be secured along with the island. “Herr Müller that owns the house is on the city council, he was very good friends with my mother and her family. That’s why I suggested his house. I trust the Hanse more than my uncle, he has always been out for himself. Even if I didn’t know he

stole from me, I knew he did not care for me despite being his ward. My father was part of the Hanse ruling council once we had left the Steel Yard in London. He was also a councilor that would be sent when diplomacy was needed. He wasn't just a trader. I wouldn't trust any man that said he was Hanse alone, my uncle is among their number as well. No, keeping the Duke quiet while my husband and I do business might be a prudent idea. Would that affect you wanting to do any diplomacy with any local nobles?"

"We came for your business. Scotland is rather tied to France and seeing as I have a new wife I'm not out fishing for a Princess to woo. If there is someone around that you think would be good to meet that is something we can deal with."

"I can actually. No Princess to woo, but there is a Duke I can get you an audience with."

Gregor turned to stare at his wife. "Have you been holding out on me?"

"I don't have secret noble blood if that's what you are thinking."

"I was thinking more the woman that kept saying 'I'm a trader's daughter' has a Duke among her acquaintance."

"I've never set eyes on them in my life, only that there is some family I can petition to make that connection. As my father's daughter they wouldn't make it, but as the Duke's wife I could. My father could as the Duke was looking to secure terms with the league."

"Ilse!" A voice called from the shore as they were sailing down the narrow river near the docks. "Is that really you?"

She turned and started smiling. "It is, Baltasar and since you're the first to see me you can get my business. I have wool cloth to sell."

"From Iceland?"

"No, Scotland. I never made it to Iceland, I went and married the first man I saw after they saved me from shipwreck and death. The village he's from weaves fine heavy cloth and they aren't connected to anyone to sell it abroad. Are you interested?"

"I am. Throw your ropes over and we can talk business."

The crew shifted the sails and took them closer and the ropes were thrown over to tie them off.

"How do you know him?" Gregor whispered.

"He was at the *kontor* when my father was in London. He was just an apprentice then, worked his way up from scrubbing floors to master. If someone sees me and greets me like he does, you'll know who sent all the wedding gifts that cover your castle now. Very little was mine."

"Not even the silk dresses?"

"One that I had made I wore at our wedding. The rest no. Uncle said I had 1000 Marks and I would want what fashion fit in Iceland. It was the Hanse that made sure I went well provided."

"I see why you were so determined the moment you saw it was missing."

Sailors helped her over the side of the ship and the man hugged her to the stares of many. "I didn't think we'd see you again."

"If no one is headed to the Shetlands outpost this season I would make sure that a ship going to Iceland stops at the outpost to pick up Goossens and the crew."

"They didn't come with you?" Baltasar asked as he eyed Gregor leaving the ship.

"I was trying to get him to not take me to the wedding, and he took that as I wanted to marry him, by rape if necessary. We hit the rocks the day after I shoved a knife in his gut. We had to be saved from sinking."

"He did what?"

Ilse still was in his arms from the hug. "My dowry wasn't in my trunks with all my wedding gifts." She said quietly. "I'm here to wring my uncles' neck legally at least. I have wool to sell too, and I would like to buy some décor and goods for my new house as well but ruin his life the way he tried with me without him getting me killed."

Baltasar pulled back, staring at her.

"Is Herr Müller's house still for rent?"

The man nodded. "I'll send a man to go find him so we can get you settled after your journey." He immediately waved an apprentice over and gave him directions. When he turned back he gave Gregor a stern look. "You saved her?"

"Men in the village did, with the ship here and fishing boats. I was just the one she decided she had to marry instead of being sent to Iceland or return in a boat with the man that was trying to force her. It is my ship though."

"Then let's see this wool you have to sell? Is there anything you would want to get while you are here? Salt, whetstones..."

"We have a good deal of stockfish, grains and honey after buying the cargo on the cog before we got them on their way home."

"It wasn't all ruined then?"

"The stock fish was soaked on one side, most of the barrels were kept out of the water with rearranging to try and keep the boat upright. There was a lot of fish stew being made in the village when they were brought ashore to use up what had been soaked especially for a feast when we wed."

Baltasar started laughing. "Indeed." He answered by the time the wool was coming out of the hold. "Fine stock." He ran the cloth through his fingers. "Is there anything you want in trade, or only money? And how long does it take for you to make this much."

"Since the black death longer than it once did, like everywhere. If you are discussing a regular supply, I would have someone going to Iceland or the Shetlands stop on their way here and buy what we have made. I wouldn't want to promise a certain amount at this point. A decade ago, would have been another story."

"Sensible plan. Any trade or just coin?"

"I'd gladly take trade. Salt is always needed, Aqua vitae, whetstones, spices, furs, ale, timber, wine. There's a cog sitting there, we need to talk to the owner about what

they want done with it, we've tied it off to the dock high up on the shore so it's not going to sink."

He eyed down the docks for a moment. "Goossens was out on Heinrichs boat. That's who you need to talk to for that, he's going to want to know why Ilse is here and the crew isn't. If you can give me some time to talk to the people who have stocks that you'd like I can see what we can get for this. If not, I'll give you the Hanse price for it and you can buy what you want."

"If that's easier I can just sell it outright and buy what we want."

"Right, I was the one that brought up trade."

The apprentice was already back. "He said you can have the house gladly, he will be sending people in to clean it and have it ready for you to take possession. He'll see you there when you are done here."

"Is there anyone that would like work for a time? A cook and maybe someone to take care of the house." Ilse asked. "I will be sending word to my other family to come visit, I was sent off so quickly I was never able to see them."

"Oh, I would ask Müller that, he would know more than me. I still live in lodgings, the unmarried man that I am."

Ilse just nodded and still haggled with her old friend for the best price for the wool, before they went to an inn and got something to eat that wasn't shipboard food.

It wasn't long before they were heading to Müller's house. The stunning St. Mary's church rose into the sky over the streets of brick houses, the town hall, the market. The house they finally were shown was right next to the church, the town hall behind it.

"*Mein Ilse!*" An older man called and hugged her as he stepped out of the town hall. "I did not think to see you again. I thought you were going to Iceland."

"The house is for rent?"

"Yes, of course, I have it opened up and someone is cleaning it since the man ran to say you were wanting to stay there. I sent word to Reginburg that you would need a cook."

Ilse stopped cold. "What do you mean Reginburg is coming, isn't she still working for my uncle?"

"Could we step inside?" Gregor asked.

He narrowed his eyes and showed them in the door. They were in a dining hall that opened to the roof beams, at least in the middle. A large iron chandelier hung above a large table. Railings ran around the edge so there must have been bedrooms upstairs. There were a few women cleaning.

"Why isn't she still with my uncle? She'd been in the house since I was small."

Herr Müller sank onto a bench at the table. "Your uncle let everyone that was in the house go not long after you left. He hired all new servants. Why are you back?" Herr Müller asked as he sat on the bench.

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“Only that we all gave you gifts for your wedding and thought to not see you again. I am happy you are here. Only shocked.”

Ilse was silent for too long.

“You aren’t here for a good reason?”

“I did marry, but I chose the man when the cog we were on was damaged enough we were slowly sinking, the rudder damaged, and came to a spot where a village could help us get ashore. This is my husband, Gregor Sancler.”

“You never made it to Iceland?”

“No, Scotland. When we were rescued and my trunks were opened to use the contents, my dowry –my mother’s money, was not in them. The generous gifts that I was given from all of the Hanse and others here in town like you were there. Those are now decorating the house of my husband, but that money was not. My husband is not a simple man, he asked the question if anything else could have been stolen as well. Like everything of fathers, when Georg died father was already gone. Would I not have inherited our father’s estate when there was no son? Would it have gone to a brother that never got along with my father because he had married mother and now her money was gone? *Ja*, I asked him to marry me because I wanted to be married to him, but also a woman with a husband has more say than a woman that was the ward of the man stealing from her.”

The man’s aged eyes stared into him, not her. “You let her ask?”

“She did ask very nicely. Are sulfur sellers that well of a marriage? The gifts I saw unpacked would have made a King happy. A man that goes and picks up yellow pebbles off the ground near volcanos I wouldn’t have said are...”

“That’s why you’re here?”

“No, my wife wants to find out if she was thrown away. Married far from here to get her out of sight so her money was stolen, or was she sent as payment of a debt. I find it hard to believe that 1000 Marks was owed to a sulfur seller on a single ship that went down on credit.”

Herr Müller stared for a long time. “Your uncle has been spending heavily since you left to get elected to city council with me. He has been wooing Widow Krüger.”

Ilse let out a snort of what might have been laughter. “She would never marry him, he’s a burgher. She’s a Margravine.”

“That is why I was silent for a time. You are in Iceland and he is using your background and money.” Herr Müller whispered.

“You aren’t just a traders’ daughter?” Gregor asked.

“Traders’ daughter! Her father was a Grand burgher, she is a Grand Burgheress. The richest in the city, but her mother didn’t leave her 1000 Marks because she married Von der Linde.”

“Ilse who was your mother?”

Ilse had more on her mind than that question. The one that likely answered how she had a Duke even if it wasn't an acquaintance of hers. "Even stealing mother's money, and her background as a Margrave would never marry a Hanse petty burgher."

"No. She wouldn't, but I don't think she'll turn down him wasting 1000 Marks on her before she says that out loud."

"Ilse who was your mother?" He asked again.

"A Burgmann's daughter."

Gregor shook his head. "Not a title I've heard of."

"Like a Castellan in other countries. A man who runs the castle for the big lord and he was given payment for the service. Her grandfather was one for a Duke. It gave him a castle and feud in payment. Not like some here that get houses just outside the walls. They have their own special law, no fealty to anyone but the lord of the property they are contracted to."

Ilse shook her head. "That is my mother's family. Those uncles are the ones that have anything to do with that. It did not go to my mother, it is not a title for her either, it got my mother money at marriage. Father was wealthy enough that she never spent it so it was my dowry. The Hanse didn't like that he married out of the Hanse, he should have married a trader's daughter. When I say I am a trader's daughter it says more than what my grandfather's title was meaning nothing to my mother or me. I have relations. Would I be the heir if my brother died? The will left it to him. It wouldn't go to uncle would it?"

Müller sat there looking in shock. "It is yours. I wrote the will up for your father. When you left to marry we thought you had your money and gave the house over to him because you would not need it. Not that he was stealing it all."

"Was there anything to the estate other than the house? If she is a traders' daughter and everything of her mother's side went to the brothers." Gregor asked.

"There will be more than her marriage sum if he hasn't spent it all on this widow. All the furniture, jewels, 3 cogs, I don't know how much in Marks there would be, but it was all yours once Georg died. It would be easier for you to come across and file for your inheritance."

"I am wanting to buy some things for the house, the finery that Lübeck can provide that Scotland cannot. If I go right now and uncle is angry enough, I'd want to have any of that done before we run from getting killed."

"And how much could he waste before you finish." Herr Müller argued. "Come across and claim it. If you're married, no one can even argue that you aren't of age or he's your guardian anymore. Save what you can. If you have to hire guards on the house until you leave then hire guards, but I was your mother's friend, I would never live with myself if you lost everything because your uncle was stealing from you."

Ilse looked over at him and he knew the look. It was the one she took him to bed with. Cogs weren't meant for honeymoon's though, they hadn't done more than slept

since they left Wrathe. The words out of her mouth said anything but that. "Fine, let's go claim it."

Before Müller could even stand the door opened and Ilse was gathered up in a hug from an older plump woman. "I never thought I should see you again."

"Ja." Ilse quickly repeated the story of the ship nearly sinking and she married but not to the sulfur seller. Her money missing, the woman stood there mouth open in shock. She gave Gregor a look up and down.

"Can I come back with you? You want a cook from here, this husband has money to afford one even if that uncle of yours stole all your money." Clearly the clothes he wore spoke of money even if they kept the title part quiet for now.

"We are here trying to get it back." Ilse argued.

"You are more than welcome to come." Gregor added.

"Gut. Now then, an empty house, how long are you here?"

"Depending on how long it takes for business, there are some pieces we would like to buy to take back for the house. Supplies for the village that would be cheaper if we are here to transport them. But likely 2 months at least. Going back before the winter storms hit again would be best, I suspect I am with child and we would want to be back before too long. We were married hardly more than a month ago, I'm not fully certain yet."

Gregor opened his purse and pulled out several gold coins. "Go to the market and buy what you'll need to feed us for that long. If we stay longer, that will be determined later. Ilse has talked of having her mother's family to come visit so there will be a few feasts, but unless everyone comes to visit it should be us for the most part. Before we leave I'm sure Ilse will want to lay in supplies of foods from here, so this is just for immediate use."

"Ja...Herr?"

"Sancler."

"Reginburg, don't spread that we are here. I know it will be out eventually, but with our business being my uncle he cannot find out for as long as possible. You were hired by a visiting Scotsman until we can get some things done."

"He turned me out after working for your family for 30 years. Whatever it takes to show him what it is like I will help." She snatched the coins and rushed out.

"Is there someone to hire to the other work a house needs past cooking?"

"The women working now will take that task. I only sent word for the old cook you knew. The others that were in the house have work again for others. Your trunks should be upstairs already. If the house is at hand shall we go see what you can get back before he spends it all."

\* \* \* \* \*

The will was quite clear but because her brother was in between her father and her, it was simple for her uncle to easily tell her and everyone that she was too young, unmarried and needed a guardian. The entire council that sat there listening to her discovery of no dowry was made up of men that had gifted pieces in the castle, they were all horrified. When guards were sent to the house, they had gotten there before word spread everywhere. He was brought back screaming through the streets, 'Do you know who I am?' could be heard ringing through the brick-lined streets even from the market.

There was utter silence from him as he was brought through the door to see Ilse sitting there. So that was the uncle. Unfortunately he looked far too much like Goossens, both large pigs of men.

"Uncle." Ilse said quietly.

"Why aren't you in Iceland?" He screamed.

"You need to talk to Goossens for that seeing as he nearly sank Heinrichs cog. I am married though, before you claim anything about my sex. My new husband was quite willing to let me show him my home while he came to petition for my dowry. He took me without it, it is my debt of honor that has been offended. Not his. We weren't planning on announcing we were even here until we had purchased a good many things that the house needs, at least until we heard that you were using my mothers' background to sound grander than you are, my money to spend on acting grander than you are, my house to pretend you were father who you have always been jealous of. While I was sent to Iceland to a husband I had never met, who I could not speak to, in a country I had never been to, being told that I need not to buy anything new here because I had 1000 marks for Icelandic fashion only it's not in my trunks. If not for the generosity of the Hanse and even the council I had to petition for my own inheritance I went with nearly the clothes on my back. Luckily my husband found I had other qualities that he appreciated to take me with nothing but my wedding gifts. If the council sees you as that much of a thief it seems that I can enjoy my visit here."

"You aren't going to find the money." Her uncle yelled.

"I can't see that the Hanse is that loyal to you after hearing you were still trying to steal your brothers' life that you would give it to someone else to look after since the whole town knows you aren't that good of a businessman. Trying to get on the council here, you really thought they would appoint you. Even as a child I knew that you were not the same businessman as my father, the Hanse does value such skill. They would not let father negotiate the trade deals that made the entire city money if they did not value his skill. I don't need you to say a word." Then his wife turned on the council as some sort of nemesis in the bible. "How exactly did you let him do this? You all knew my father's will, knew my brother died, and I was a 16-year-old girl. Like I know every law when it comes to a girl not of age when we have few other rights. You knew it was all my money, not the 1000 marks from my mother, all of it even before he never even left me that. Not one of you had designs to marry me off to your sons, marry me yourselves to

even attempt to keep me here because you do have a thing about not wanting a Hanse daughter to marry nobility, you want to keep it all in the league. You just gave me expensive gifts to be married off to a sulfur seller I had never met, and waved me goodbye never to be seen again while my uncle went to go woo the Margravine that would never marry a burgher, a rather poor burgher at that.”

“Had some time to think on it?” Gregor whispered in her ear.

“Indeed I did. Seeing as we haven’t had the chance to enjoy our honeymoon in weeks, I had little else to do as the new wife. Are you saying you knew the whole town worked against me?” She muttered watching the council eyeing them as they were trying to decide what to do with her accusations.

“Oh I doubt they helped him. But a woman always needs a man to rule her and he was your uncle. You are right not one of them had the desire to marry you themselves for that prize? And I do mean you, not just the money.” Gregor leaned over and kissed her in front of all of them.

“Herr, you do not have the decency...”

“Seeing as I saw the prize to make her Herzogin, it is your reputations now that you have been found out.” Duchess in German.

“What?” Her uncle screamed along with the others.

“Gregor Sancler, Duke of Cairnmuir and my new wife Duchess Ilse. I would suggest that the deeds, keys, and everything in that will be brought by dark tonight if you do not want this to leave these walls. Your wives and daughters I am sure would not think very well of their men if they find out you haven’t the spine to allow your own daughters their estates. We were not going to even mention said title unless needed, but it seems that it is. We’ll be waiting for you to deliver everything to do with the estate, and we will not be leaving until Herr Von der Linde has been tried for theft, found or not. My wife is not as simple as you must think her. I’m sure she’ll find it. Ilse, I think you should talk to your uncles’ and arrange that visit with the Duke. We’ll have time while we wait.” He held his hand out for her to take and led her out of the Rathaus.

Ilse led him away from the rented house though.

“Where are we going?”

“My father’s house.”

“Do you know where it is being kept?”

“There are a few spots that I know assuming he’s going to hide it in the places father had. If he found a new place, it would take searching everything. Are you sure about having the Duke invited?”

“Shouldn’t we?”

“More I wondered if you said it just to threaten them?”

“I said it just to threaten them, but I was going to say it to you once the main business was dealt with for you.”

“Why for me?”

"Get used to your new title in your own home. Showing it off to some Scottish nobles you've never heard of is not the same thing as showing it off to some German nobles you know all about." She was leading them in the general direction of another large church. Turning down a side street there were several larger houses than many he had seen. Still brick, when she stopped at one with shutters on the windows painted in green. "Which Duchy is it?"

"Saxony."

She pushed open the door to a very fine house. "He redecorated." Ilse whispered as servants suddenly jumped at the intrusion again.

"Fräulein Von der Linde!" One gasped knowing her at least. "Where have they taken your uncle?"

"To the city hall, seeing as he stole my dowry and everything that I inherited from my father. If he ever gets free, he won't be coming back to this house."

"Would you want to stay here instead?" Gregor asked.

"And is the Duke of Cairnmuir going to live in Lübeck? The house has to be sold doesn't it? Save what I want, but I am assuming we'll not come this way every summer. Even if you send the ship to buy supplies when needed we personally wouldn't need the house. We'll have a place to stay while this one is put into chaos. Although, this one is grander for hosting a Duke, if we did that sooner we could do that here and then clear it out."

The woman suddenly ran to the back of the house and then she and 2 others rushed out the front door looking scared.

"Why does that not fill me with calm?" Ilse muttered.

Gregor suddenly turned to stare at her. "Does he not know where the money is himself? And he was using them to search everywhere to find it."

Ilse's mouth fell open and then the laugh started to fall from her lips. "You might just be right. I would think they would be begging to keep their jobs otherwise."

"Is there anything of your parents left?" He asked as she just looked around confused.

She took his hand and rest her head on his shoulder. "I think so. The more I'm looking, maybe he just rearranged everything which looking for Marks, he'd need to do. It's not the house I left that had memories of my parents. This one might have the same location as where I grew up, but he took away any memories of the whole. It's pieces I have memories with now. Do we have to worry about guards or revenge? You did threaten the council."

"No, they'll do the right thing to hold our tongues and want us out of here as fast as possible." There was a massive trestle table with carved trestles with a long tapestry that covered the top, cupboards with linen fold carving, a safe carved with a knight slaying a dragon with a heavy metal lock. A canopy bed he liked better than his own covered in oak leaf carving, a washbasin cabinet. There were several rooms like

that, all with large carved beds, chests painted with knights and lovers. Ceilings were carved wooden masterpieces, frescos on the walls.

Gregor started laughing. "We'll need to build a bigger castle just to hold all of the furniture, much of this is nicer than what Am Binnean has."

"Well we do have forests. It does help when you can practice the skill."

His laugh only grew. "It does."

After wandering the whole house, filled with furnishings that rivaled his own it was clear the trader she called herself a daughter of was no burgher barely making it. If the Margravine only cared about money and not title she very well might marry the man. "Any thoughts of where these Marks could be?"

Ilse went back to the most lavish of bedrooms and pointed to a large trunk. "Can you move that away from the wall?"

"There's a secret panel? Ilse, is it possible that your dowry wasn't in your trunks because he didn't know it was there either?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe. There are several around the house, but this is the room my parents used. It would be the first one to guess even if the furniture looks different than when it was their room. My mother's jewels were hidden here, I saw her opening it whenever there was a visit with the great of the land. The fact that the trunk is front of it, tells me he might not know it's there." The walls were wood paneled, painted with scenes of hunting and lovers. The fireplace chimney painted with a coat of arms. Gregor pulled the chest away from the wall and she slipped her fingers behind one of the panels. It wasn't just the small panel that came free, it was more of a section of 4 panels. He moved the trunk even further out of the way as she pulled it open fully. Small chests were inside. Several of them. Pulling them out, one involved Gregor letting out a grunt when he lifted. It was heavy.

"Any idea how much your father had, because this is heavy?"

"If my mother had 1000 marks and she never had to spend it, I would guess far more." She opened a smaller one she could lift. It was filled with jewelry. "This was my mother's that I mentioned." Another one she opened. "You're right, right here is what was supposed to be in my trunk. Untouched as far as I can tell. The jewelry that my mother was to pass to me. What is back in Am Binnean were gifts."

"You hadn't seen it since your father died."

"No, Uncle took over, Georg wasn't old enough to not have someone looking over us, I was 3 years younger. He started sleeping in this room after our parents died, I thought he had to know about this spot. It never occurred to me that he just didn't know."

Gregor opened the heavy chest and a Duke's ransom sat there. "Dear god."

Ilse came and looked over his arm, but there was still another small chest. She went to lift it and it didn't move.

"This might have just as much."

"This talk of a trader's daughter is starting to feel like you were lying."

Ilse started to laugh. “No, I did not lie. Father considered himself a trader, he was just the trader that was sent to make the deals and run the city. As far as title and such goes, people pay to be considered a burgher, just more for Grand burgher. You never asked how good of a trader he was. Granted this is far more of a trader than I knew he was. I thought a couple thousand, this has to be near to 10 at the very least.”

“So since your father died, what did you live on if this hasn’t been touched in years?”

“The income from the cogs. He had it all set up, captains he trusts. When you were telling Baltasar to send a ship to Wrathe for cloth, I can do that with those if I own them. Father always was involved in the Steelyards in London; they run down there instead of Bergen, and the Baltic ports. He also is one of the few that sends ships to Spain and buys silk that the Moors make in the south there. So what do we do with this until we leave?”

“Put it back, it sat there for years and months of him searching without anyone here. If you want to sell the house we can hide it in among shipments to the ship. And do not mention you found it. If you want to buy anything just say it’s my money. It’s that or we worry about it being stolen for months.”

“That’s what I was thinking but I’m not used to this much to worry about. I suppose I should check the other spots though just in case.”

They put all the small chests back and moved the trunk back in place. Three more spots she opened scattered around the house. One was in the kitchen and there was a chest full of spices. Far more than she had brought to marriage. That one they kept out. Another spot—was filled with silk. They kept that out too. The last was in what looked like an office. The accounts were still on the table and he looked over them as Ilse opened the last hiding spot.

“Are you sure about just selling the house?”

“Why?”

“Well the cogs are making good money, to be part of the League you have to live here don’t you? Or at least one of the member cities.”

“Pack up all the accounts I can look over those at the other house. If my uncle was clever he would have let things go as they were; if he feels he’s the great trader and he changed things this season they’ll probably lose money. Either I should sell the ships and forget about it, but I could probably find someone that would oversee them, like Baltasar. Just have the profits delivered when they come to collect wool for instance. Women aren’t part of the Hanse, and not even living here no, they would likely not just let it go as it is. You aren’t a member, they haven’t trained you and you have no loyalty to them. If I took the cogs with me, we could run them from Wrathe, but you hardly have enough population to crew them all and I don’t know if the crews they have would want to move. And you have a ship that I can do what you can handle with the local population.”

Perhaps... "There is a suggestion I could make that you might not like, but would perhaps be a more political solution than..."

"Just say it."

"Give the cogs to your uncle. If he fails he fails, if he's the trader he thinks he'll do well."

"Not the house?"

"I'm not saying let him off. No, not the house. But the cogs are trading business, if they will not let you run them, and it would mean the men's jobs, then give them to someone that can run them. He's already Hanse. The house as a daughter would go to you and if he wants it, sell it to him."

Ilse came over and kissed him. "I think my father would have liked you."

"And the fact that I debauched you before we wed."

"Does any father like that?"

"Do you want the accounts or not?"

"Bring them, if I turn over the cogs, they should go to him without letting him back in here. And I am leaning that way. I mean if he didn't know where it was to take him to court saying he stole it is hard to prove. Getting me out of the way trying to steal it is a crime we could prove more and there's not exactly a law for that I can think of."

"It is a good compromise. But go finish up unless you want to renew our honeymoon in your father's office."

She grinned as she went back to the last hiding spot. "I'm sure a father would not appreciate that even married." She pulled open a panel among the many the room had. There was another small chest that she pulled out. Not as massive or heavy as the big ones, but when she brought it over to the table that didn't mean it wasn't—he let out a gasp. There was a bag of coins, probably day-to-day funds for buying and selling, but most of it was full of jewels.

"Did your father usually trade in jewels?" Gregor asked.

"No, if it wasn't your usual timber, stock fish and broadcloth, he went in for silk. That was his usual luxury item. Others that gave me gifts traded in amber and stones. These are unset, this is just from the mines sort of stones. Do those accounts say anything at all? This isn't something he bought for me as something pretty to wear."

"No, I would say not. How long ago did your father die exactly? It's not something new if it's been hidden in there for years. I'm not sure I am the one to look, I don't quite understand the bookkeeping here."

She laughed at that. "The Hanse has their own method, what comes in, what goes out, all, so you can look at it and know at once where your finances are. I suppose I should look." Ilse came around the table and sat in his lap running through the entries. "It was 8 years ago, my brother died 5 years ago. These don't go back far enough." She went over to a cabinet and went through page after page.

“Here we are.” She finally said as she came over to get more light. She sat back in his lap to look it over. One page, nothing. Two pages later she started laughing.

“What?”

“I think what we heard about wooing was just gossip. According to this father bought them specifically for said Margravine that uncle was said to be wooing. She paid, she got nothing for her troubles. My father died before they were delivered, uncle immediately swept in and took over. Georg was off at university in Oxford when he died. With father close to the Hanse there he went to school there.”

“He didn’t go into a Hanse apprenticeship?”

“No. Georg wasn’t the sort to do well at it, he had the brains, just not the physical part. He was small for his age, I was taller than he was and I was younger. Father was going to London often enough that he saw him regularly, once mother died, he took me with him or we lived in a house near the Steelyard. Once my father died he was there alone and I was here by myself.”

“You hadn’t mentioned he was there in Oxford.”

“He’s been dead 5 years.” She said quietly. “You don’t mention your family, except they left you alone at home so it came up when I hoped you might want to not be alone with me.”

“I should have guessed.” He kissed her neck and she leaned back in his lap resting his hands on her still flat stomach.

“Not alone anymore.”

“No.”

Dropping the silk, spices, and jewels at the rented house, Ilse took a deep breath as she pushed open the door to the city hall. All the council turned to stare as they were arguing. Then one of them brought over the deeds, keys and such she had demanded.

Her uncle was sitting there looking pitiful.

“What do you want?” He growled at her.

“You were yelling I would never find it, because you haven’t? You married me off to Iceland so you could find it all, but you never have.” She said quietly.

“What, you found it?”

“Did you find anything!” Ilse snapped.

“No.”

She went through the papers in her hands and found the cogs, holding them out with the recent accounts.

“What are you doing?” Herr Müller gasped.

“I am a woman, I am not Hanse, I am only the daughter of one. They will not allow me to sail the ships and trade as Hanse. You get the cogs, I get the house. I am not staying however and if you want to buy it I will sell it to you, the goods in it however will come with me and I might even take some of the decoration. Take home with me. I have a castle to decorate with what I remember of my parents. If you found

nothing then there is no case to take to court, it would be wasting both of our time to try and have you punished. I will not be used, but I do not need you ruined and in stocks. Even for the fact you are a selfish money grubbing trader that would sell me off for no reason but you wanted to steal it all without anyone seeing, he was your brother. The cogs are yours and you can walk out of here.”

“You found it.”

“How does it matter? If that is all you care about I can keep the cogs, and see you in the dungeon. Even if you never found anything, you still swept in years ago and used it all regardless of Georg and my existence because what, my mother married my father instead of you. I am leaving when my business here is done, we will return on occasion to buy supplies that are needed. But we are not going to live here, the house will fall to ruin left to me to take care of. The money isn’t needed. If it is found it is found, if it isn’t then we’ll survive without it. I want my parents’ things for my new home. You aren’t throwing away my life because you’ve spent years looking for something and failed. If you want to worry about your brother’s estate instead of living your own life then I can ruin you. Or you can take the cogs that a Hanse can make a fortune with.”

Her uncle glared at her before he snatched the papers from her hand rushing out before anyone could stop him.

“You would let him go?” A man asked.

“I can still make sure the entire town knows that you were letting him look for something that he hadn’t found in years even before he threw me away. Does he owe you all money or something?”

Ilse walked out to find her uncle standing there in the market. “Can I get my things from the house, all my clothes are there?”

They had looked once more before they left the house. Nothing showed that they had done more than looking around. “Of course.” They started walking down the street.

“Do you have any idea where your father would have kept something that he bought for someone?”

“Like what?” Ilse asked.

“Jewels, unset stones. Your father owes the Margrave a large shipment.”

“The Margrave died years ago.”

“He ordered them before he died. His widow has been asking for them for years. She is not happy.”

“So you aren’t courting her? That’s what Herr Müller was saying before he took us to the Rathaus.”

He started laughing. “Like she would ever marry me. She yells at me.”

“There is a hiding spot in his office. I did look in it when we looked around the house. I can return them, so she’ll stop. I looked in the accounts and found the outstanding order from shortly before he died. I was going to do that already.”

“Hiding place?”

“Stop. There was a small bag of 50-60 Marks that he must have used for day-to-day business. That fact it was enough to make a normal man a burgher doesn’t make it a fortune to father. You’ve been living off his ships for 8 years now. You sent me to my wedding in another country with a man that wanted to rape me if it meant I married him for the dowry when I didn’t even have the money because you lied to me. You sent me without new clothes, all I had were the gifts when my father was one of the richest men in the city. Was there even a sulfur seller?” Gregor grabbed her hand before she started yelling. “Whatever there was is gone unless you found it in the last 8 years even with the help of those women in the house that fled guiltily the moment that I saw you weren’t coming back.” She threw out instead.

A man all but ran up behind them gasping for air. “Where exactly is my ship?”

“Heinrichs. Heavens, we were going to find you.”

“Where is it?”

“In a village called Wrathe in Scotland. Goossens and the crew were taken to the Shetland outpost and will be arriving with your money from the cargo sold either at the end of the season when they close it down for the winter or when a ship from Iceland passes back this way.”

“Wait, the cargo was sold?”

“Ja, what was salvageable, some of the stockfish that was soaked they gave to the village to cook and made a great many pots of fish stew for my wedding, but most of it was saved and my new husband and the village bought the rest. The ship was damaged enough it was sinking slowly but bad enough Goossens said it wouldn’t be easy for them to repair. We drifted in by Wrathe when the fishermen there saw us and they were able to get us off and towed or pushed the boat into the dock there and it is grounded at the back where it can’t sink and lashed so it won’t tip over. If you can get the shipwrights and the planking there to repair it you could have it back on the sea.”

His eyes narrowed. “But you are here and Goossens is not.”

“Seeing as when I asked about not making it to Iceland to marry a sulfur seller I had never met he decided that I should marry him and trying to pressure me into marriage by rape thinking my dowry was on board. NO, we were not going to spend the ride back here with him.”

“He did what?!”

“The man is a pig and that has nothing to do with him eating so many *krapfen* that he looks like one.” The donuts were very popular in German lands he knew.

“You weren’t joking about that, just to make it sound worse than it...” Her uncle muttered.

“I was not. I had to send him out at the point of a knife and he just grinned because I was trapped. If he hadn’t been trying to force me, the damn ship wouldn’t have scraped the rocks. If the ship hadn’t scraped the rocks and he was worried about sinking I’m sure I wouldn’t have gotten off that cog without being taken by force. And

I really don't like thinking about the fact that since there was no dowry in my trunks that everyone thought was there including myself, what he would have done when he got to my trunks to find them empty of a single mark. We are not friendly Uncle, I only saw that it would be hard to make a proper case and all of that would have to be dragged through city hall to see you thrown in the dungeon. You are not leaving the house with a Mark of what you kept from me as his heir for the last 8 years. If that is the things you wanted to collect from the house then I would just walk away now, I'll allow you your clothes, nothing more. If you wasted 8 years of profits from one of the richest traders in the city and have nothing left from it, that is your problem not mine. I can still take the cogs back. I can drag this through the ears of every gossip in the city."

There was silence and her uncle just walked away. Ilse rested her head on Gregor's shoulder with a sigh. "Heinrichs it's my honeymoon and I had to spend weeks on the boat without any privacy. Can you come ask questions about the boat in a few days?"

"Say no more." He rushed off grinning.

"Damn I didn't think he would..." Gregor murmured. "Now I feel bad even suggesting the cogs."

"No, don't be you're right. I'd rather not have all that dragged through the muck, leave my parents some dignity. Thank you for letting me deal with all this instead of coming to my rescue. And I know you offered thoughts and suggestions on occasion, but that's not treating me like I can't deal with it myself."

"I can't say you ever showed that you needed rescuing, well except from a sinking ship."

Ilse only laughed as he kissed her forehead. "Let's get the house locked up and find you a bath and bed."

"Just me? I don't want to go there alone."

"Insatiable you are."

"Surely that's why you married me." She whispered before hurrying them along.

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