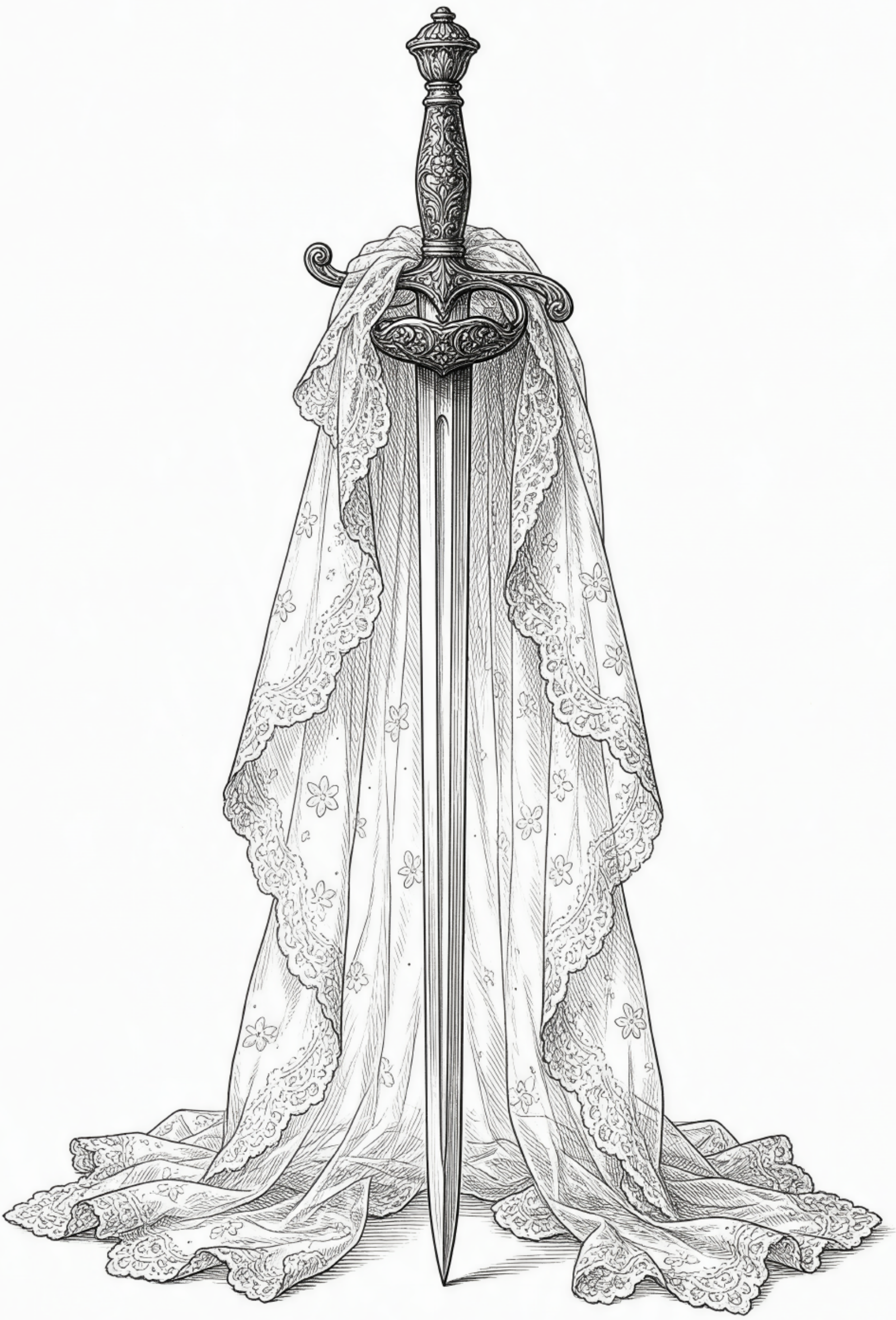
THE SPARE



Written by Emory Ahlberg, Art by Fraylim



Episode 1: A Thousand Colors

The roses in the south garden were in full bloom, which meant Johann de Courvaline was exactly where he shouldn't be—outdoors, doing nothing of consequence, while somewhere far to the north, Valmeraine's army was being methodically and mercilessly destroyed.

He plucked a petal from the nearest bush and held it up to the sunlight. "Claudine, what color would you call this?"

The maid looked up from the linens she was carrying across the terrace. "Pink, Your Grace."

"Just pink? Not 'dawn's first blush' or 'the tender flush of a maiden's—'"

"Pink." She kept walking.

Johann grinned and fell into step beside her. “Are you annoyed with me? I’m trying to be poetic.”

“Really? I thought you were trying to avoid your father’s luncheon.”

“Well, that too.”

He took two of the linens from her stack, making sure to brush her fingers with his own. She shot him a look. He smiled back.

They’d been doing this dance for months: stolen words in corridors, his hand finding hers beneath a banquet table. Once, in the wine cellar, a kiss and then laughter, muffled behind his palm. He’d nearly knocked over an entire crate of bottlenecked Merisienne. Claudine’s lips were salt and honey and like the peel of a citrus fruit. He’d thought about that for weeks. Months, now.

A cannon blast echoed from the distant mountains. Neither flinched. The war with Ardenwald had been grinding on for four years, but it hadn’t reached the capital, hadn’t touched the gardens, the luncheons, the balls. Even so, the Courvaline family had not gone unscathed.

Johann’s brother Auguste had ridden north eight months ago in polished cavalry armor, the blond hair he’d inherited from Father’s first wife gleaming in the noon sun. They’d sent him off with a parade. There were flags and rose petals, a brass band played the national anthem, Auguste’s horse wore a velvet sash, and the city’s best sugar-bakers made a helmet-shaped cake. Father even managed to look proud for once. Johann watched it all from a window, hands jammed in his pockets, heart hammering, wishing he’d said something to his brother before he left. Still, he never really believed Auguste was in serious danger.

The letter arrived on a Saturday evening. He remembered because Saturdays were when the kitchen made *Apfelstrudel*, and he’d been licking sugar from his thumb when his father’s secretary handed him an already-opened letter. General Kessler’s handwriting was neat, his words unadorned, and he reported how Auguste—handsome, broad-shouldered Auguste, who could ride and fence and make rough farmhands fall in line—had been cut in half by a cannon shell.

Johann read the letter twice, set it down neatly on the table, and walked to the south garden. He stood among the flowers for an hour. He didn’t cry. He didn’t know why. Then he went to dinner and made a baroness laugh so hard she spilled wine on the Marquise of Felsburg, which made everyone forget that the duke’s heir had been blown apart somewhere north of the Sable frontier. For a whole evening, no one mentioned Auguste—no



one mentioned anything at all, except the wine stain.

That was what Johann did. That was all he did. He made people forget. He poured another glass, or told a story about the time a goat got loose in the ballroom, or did a ridiculous impression of the Minister of Weights and Measures.

He set the linens on a bench and straightened his burgundy coat.

“Do you think this color suits me?”

Claudine paused in the doorway. The sun through the high glass caught the side of her face. She shrugged. “Every color suits you, Your Grace.”

“God, I wish you’d stop calling me that. Call me Johann. Or something else you like.”

She smirked. “How about laundry thief?”

“My criminal career begins at last!”

“My Grace, I need to get back to work. I don’t want people talking.”

“Let them talk,” Johann said. “They already do. All I ever hear is how I’m not my brother, how I’ll never be Grand Duke, that I’m a waste of boots and buttons. As if I didn’t know.”

Claudine shook her head and went inside with the rest of the linens. Johann was left alone on the terrace with nothing but the roses and the distant sound of other people’s war.

Pink. Just pink! Like he’d asked her the time.

Claudine hadn’t, perhaps, been educated the way Johann had, but surely everyone knew a rose had a thousand colors. Pink was for sweetness, for promises. Red was for passion, or the blood you shed to keep it. White was for the dead. Yellow, for a friend you couldn’t trust.

Inside, the bell rang for luncheon. He waited for it to stop, then went the other way, around the side of the house and in through the garden doors, the folded paper in his waistcoat crackling against his ribs. He’d promised himself today would be the day, that he’d be brave enough, but first he needed a shield.

The library was cool and dim. Visitors liked to say it smelled like old paper, but that’s just what imperceptive morons say about every room with books. Old paper! As if the library was just another mausoleum for boring men and their boring ledgers. No, the de Courvaline library smelled like pine resin from the shelves, like wax, leather, and the faint bite of bitter herbs the servants used to keep out silverfish. It smelled like the fireplace in the evening when he was small, Mother reading to him, even though Father believed reading was for priests. For the Grand Duke, if you weren’t learning Latin or law, what was the point?

Johann pulled down a book whose location he knew by heart—Hartmann’s *Collected Verses*—and slipped out the far door. He caught up to Claudine in the east corridor. He’d never seen a servant look annoyed at his presence, but she managed it. She kept her chin high and didn’t slow down.

“Wait—I need your opinion on something.”

Claudine turned, balancing the remaining linens on her hip. “I have fourteen beds to make, *Johann*.”

“Heavens Above! You make my name sound grim.”

“Maybe it suits you. Grim’s better than useless.”

He pressed the book to his chest. “You wound me.”



“I have work to do. We can play later, after you’re done hiding from your father.”

“I’m not hiding, I just hate lunch.”

“You hate being reminded who you’re supposed to be.”

He blinked. “I… Listen, the beds can wait.” He flipped the book open to a random page, cleared his throat, and said:

“*Her hands know work that mine have never learned,*
She carries weight I’ve never had to bear,
And yet she moves as lightly as smoke through air—
A candle flame that cannot be discerned
From starlight, when the evening lamps are burned.
I’d give my title for her time to spare,
I’d trade my coat for flour in my hair,
If such a foolish bargain could be earned.”

He looked up. Claudine had set the linens on the windowsill. Her arms were crossed.

"Well?"

"It's nice."

"Nice?" He ran his fingers through his hair. "Hartmann is nice?"

"I don't know who Hartmann is, but the last line doesn't work. You don't *earn* a bargain, you *strike* one." She tilted her head. "What about… If such a foolish bargain could be *turned?*"

Johann stared. Then he reached into his waistcoat and pulled out his folded sheet of paper—the same poem, in his own handwriting. "Well. Hm."

"You…" Her lips parted. "*You* wrote this?"

"I did. And you're right. *Turned* is better." He was already pulling a quill from his pocket, crossing out *earned*, writing her word above it.

"You liar!" But the word came out strange, half breath, half laugh. "I didn't know you were a poet."

"Apparently not a very good one, not unless you're around to fix my mistakes."

She looked away, but not before he saw the color in her cheeks. "Your Grace—"

"Johann."

"You can't write poems about the help."

"I didn't write a poem about *the help*, I wrote a poem about you."

She was fighting a smile, but her eyes were sad. He was a fool and she knew it. Maybe she liked him anyway. Maybe she'd let him pretend, for a little while longer.

"It was a good poem. But it's not about me, I'm not like that."

"Like what?"

"Light as smoke, or a candle, or anything pretty. I'm not something to put in a poem. I don't float, I work."

"Maybe you do both." He meant it. Claudine could balance a tray in one hand, pour wine with the other, and roll her eyes at him at the same time.

She shook her head. "You don't see people like me, not really."

"That's not true."

"It is. It's fine. It's not your fault. But this isn't real, Johann. You're bored, and I'm here. I enjoyed our kiss, our secret, but that's all it was. Soon you'll find a new one. And if your father finds out you're following me around again, there'll be hell to pay."

"I get myself in trouble just fine," Johann said. "It's practically a profession at this point."

"Not for *you,* for me. You don't understand how fast a girl like me gets replaced, and how hard it is to find work when your name's been blacked." Her mouth thinned. "Even if you're lucky and they let you go without a whipping, nobody else will hire you."

"I'll protect you." He took her hand. His fingers were warm and steady. Hers were in a fist. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen."

She peeled his hand away, thumb brushing his knuckles. "You want the world to be softer."

"Maybe, yes."

She gave him a small, tired smile. "But it isn't."

From down the corridor came the echo of footsteps. "Cousin?"

Frederick von Aldricht rounded the corner, boots clicking on marble, tall and lean, dressed in a dark blue coat, his smile as perfect as his hair. "There you are. I've been looking everywhere."

Claudine dipped a curtsy and vanished through the nearest service door. Johann folded the poem and slipped it back inside his waistcoat.

"Frederick." He turned to face him with an easy grin. "You look like you're about to tell me something I don't want to hear."

"Your father wants you at luncheon. Immediately."

"See? I was right."

Frederick laughed and draped his arm around Johann's shoulders. "Between you and me, cousin, a letter arrived from the enemy this morning, sealed with the imperial crest."

"Thrilling. I do love other people's mail."

"I think it's a surrender." Frederick's eyes were bright. "Or terms, at least. Think about it—four years of war, both sides bleeding, running out of sons to throw into the grinder. And Ardenwald's coffers must be as empty as ours. The old emperor wants to end it."

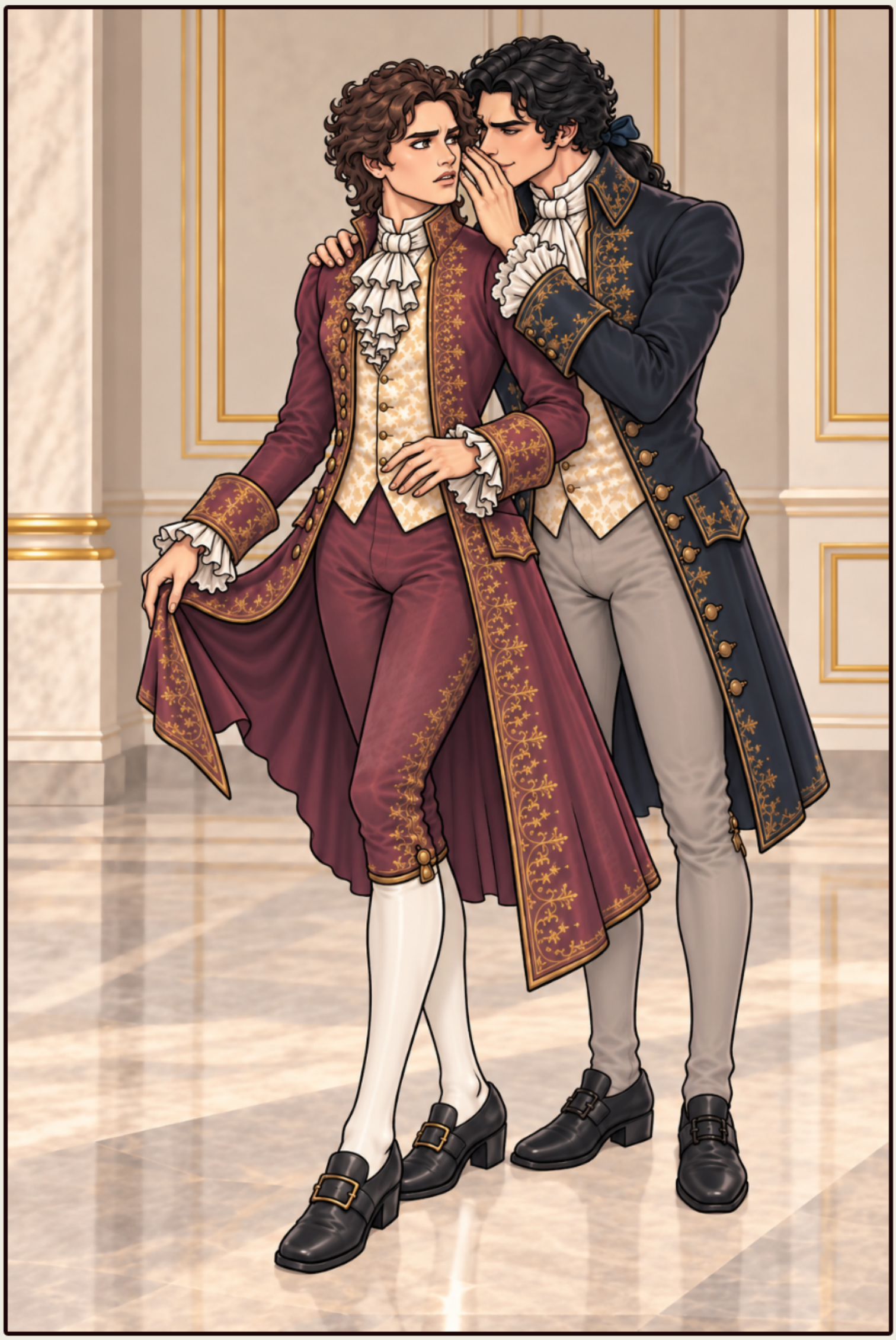
"So why does my father need me at luncheon?"

"To celebrate, probably. First time for everything." Frederick grinned. "Can you imagine? Peace! The whole city will be drunk for a week."

"The whole city is already drunk. That's basically our national character."

"Yes, but they'll be *happy* drunk."

He followed Frederick down the main corridor, past the portraits of dead Courvalines who all seemed to share Auguste's jawline. The dining hall doors were open. That was wrong.



During luncheon, they were always closed. The Grand Duke insisted on it, something about “the dignity of the meal.”

The long table was half-set. Soup bowls still steaming, bread torn but uneaten, wine glasses at various levels of full. Chairs pushed back at odd angles, napkins abandoned on seats. It seemed that the guests had been sent away mid-course, like dogs shooed from a kitchen.

Grand Duke Henri de Courvaline stood at the head of the table, hands clasped behind his back. He was sixty-one and, today, looked every year his age—tall and gaunt, silver hair pulled tight against his skull. His uniform jacket was buttoned to the throat despite the heat. He wasn’t seated, but that wasn’t unusual. Johann had rarely seen Father sit. In fact, the man seemed to regard the use of chairs as a personal failing.

Mother stood at the window behind him, her hands folded at her waist. She was still beautiful at forty, dark-haired and slender, but the streaks of gray at her temples had crept in over the past year. She looked at Johann when he entered, then looked away. That was bad. Mother never failed to greet him, never failed to set the tone. Now she just looked out the window, her hands curling and uncurling at her waist.

"You're late," Father said.

"I was told luncheon was at—"

"Luncheon is over. Sit down."

Johann sat. Frederick took the chair beside him, quiet now, the easy charm packed away. Father didn't look at either of them. He stared at a point above Johann's head, as if addressing a man who wasn't there.

"The Sable Line is gone. General Kessler is dead. The Sixth and Ninth regiments are scattered or destroyed." Father's tone was dry, as if listing expenses, not reporting the annihilation of nearly ten thousand men. "Ardenwald's army crossed the river this morning. They'll reach the capital within the month."

Johann's mouth went dry. "What about the—"

"There is nothing left." Father picked up a wine glass from the table, examined it, set it down without drinking. "I considered a last stand. Rally what remains, meet them on the Feldgrau plain. Die with some honor, kill enough of them that they can't breach the walls." His eyes finally dropped to Johann but they were cold, assessing, like how you'd look at a horse you were thinking of selling. "But a last stand requires a successor. Someone the people would fight for. Someone they'd follow into the next war, or the next peace."

The room was silent. Sunlight picked out stains on the linen, dust on the glasses. The Grand Duke's hand tightened on the back of the chair.

"Your brother," Father said, "would have been that man."

Johann didn't flinch. He'd had practice.

Father straightened his cuffs. "I've received a letter from Emperor Falkenrath. He has proposed terms for peace. We will discuss them tomorrow. You, me, and the council. You will attend."

"I've never attended council in my—"

"You will attend."

Mother's reflection in the window glass caught his eye. She was looking at him again. Her hand had moved to her throat, fingers pressed against the base of her neck, like she was holding something down.

Father walked toward the door. As he passed Johann's chair, he stopped. He didn't touch his son. He didn't even look at him.

"I would give everything I have," Father said, "to have your brother sitting in that chair instead of you."

He left.

Frederick said something, but Johann didn't hear it. Mother crossed the room, paused behind his chair, and rested her hand on his shoulder for a moment. Then she followed her husband out.

Johann sat alone at the table with the cold soup and half-empty glasses. He reached into his waistcoat, pulled out the poem. Read it once. Folded it. Put it back.

There is nothing left, Father had said.

Johann turned his head toward the garden doors. It took him a long moment to realize what was missing—why the city suddenly felt so small.

The cannon fire in the mountains had stopped.

