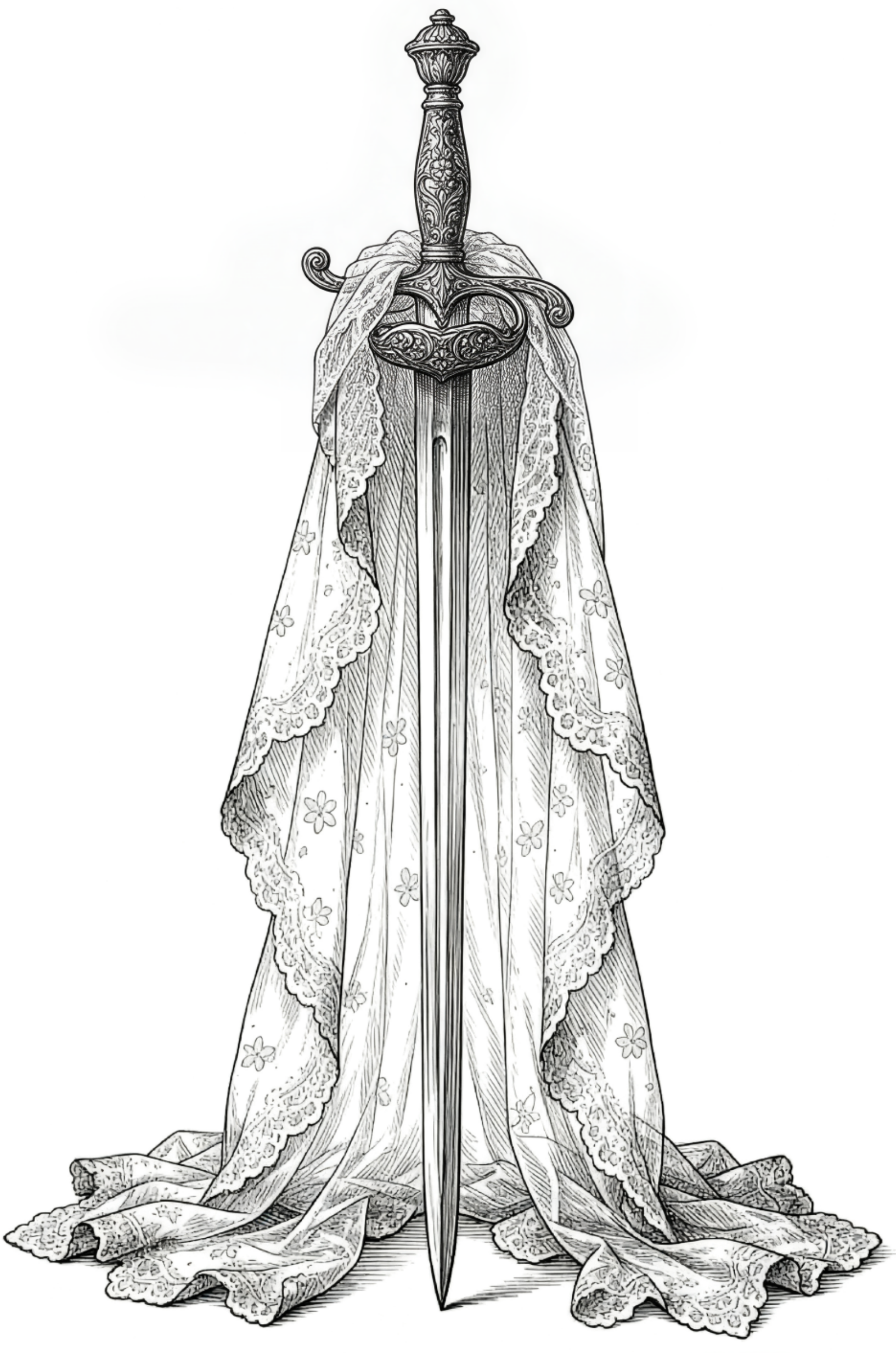
THE SPARE



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Episode 2: The Bride Price

The kitchens were dark except for the bread ovens, which never went out. Johann sat on a flour barrel with a bottle of wine he stole from his father's private reserve. It was a petty crime. He didn't care.

Claudine found him there just after midnight. She was in her nightgown with a shawl pulled tight around her shoulders, her hair loose for the first time he'd ever seen. It fell past her shoulders in thick brown waves, like she'd stepped out of a painting by one of those Italian masters. But even half-drunk, he knew better than to say anything about it. She hated compliments, and he'd used up his ration for the year already.

"You shouldn't be down here," she said.

"And yet." He raised the bottle.

She sat on the barrel beside him, close enough that her knee touched his, and she didn't move away. "What happened?"

"The war is lost." He took a drink. "Properly lost. Not the way people say it when they mean things are going badly. The army is gone. The enemy is coming. Here."

She was quiet for a long time. The ovens ticked and settled. He poured her a cup of wine in a chipped mug. The stuff was probably worth more than her yearly wages, but she deserved every drop far more than he did. She took the mug and sipped.

"What about us?" she asked. "The staff, the—"

"I don't know." He turned to look at her. The oven light caught the edge of her jaw, the curve of her ear. "But I won't let anything happen to you."

"You keep saying that."

"I keep meaning it. I know I'm no soldier, I know I'm not good for much of anything except a laugh, a story, or a poem that doesn't even rhyme. But I mean this. I'll get you out of the city if it comes to that."

"What about the others? I know you think you care—"

"I do care, Claudine. Not just about you but the others too. Yes, you're the one I'd run for first, but I wouldn't leave anyone behind. Not if I could help it."

She stared into her mug. "You can't save everyone."

"But I can try."

Her laugh was low and husky. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe I am." He shrugged. "What I think is ridiculous is people pretending they don't care, acting like nothing matters and then crying in their bed at night. At least I'm honest."

"You ever wonder what it's like for the other side?"

He set the bottle down. “The Ardenwalders? I try not to. If I do, I’ll start feeling sorry for them, and then what’s left? You can’t fight a war if you’re worried about the other side’s feelings.”

“That’s why you’re not a soldier.” Her smile was crooked.

“That, and I’m also a terrible shot. I mean, truly bad. I’d be a danger to everyone within a mile radius. Once, my brother took me out to the stables to teach me to fire a rifle. Or, at least, to try. I missed the target completely, but I did hit the statue of our great-grandfather. Twice. Poor bastard lost his nose and half an ear. Father was furious. Said I’d shamed the family name, thought I did it on purpose.”

She covered her mouth. “Was your brother mad?”

“Auguste? Never. He just laughed. He said I was hopeless, but he always had a way of making it seem like that was my best quality.” Johann smirked at the bottle, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “He said, ‘You’re not made for fighting, you’re made for talking. One of these days, you’ll talk your way out of being shot.’”

She shook her head, grinning. “I wish I’d known him better.”

“Me too. Me too. I… I miss him terribly. I wish he was here. He always made me feel safe, and I wish I could, one day, make someone else feel that way. At least once.”

“You make me feel safe.” She set her cup down and looked at him.

“Nonsense, I might be dashing, but I can’t fight.”

“That’s not what I mean. I know you can’t understand, but… I’m not safe around other men, I’m not safe around the city, or anywhere else. You don’t get it, because you don’t have to. You walk through the palace and everyone’s bowing, but you’re the first man I’ve ever met besides my father who I could just sit with, who I could just talk to, who I knew, somehow deep in my marrow, wasn’t going to hurt me just because he could.”

“Never.” He shook his head. “I’d never hurt you.”

Claudine leaned over and kissed his cheek. Her lips were warm, and she smelled like the lavender she kept in her pillow—he knew because he’d asked her why she’d smelled so lovely once, and she’d told him it was none of his business and then told him anyway. “Go to bed,” she said.

“I do need some rest, I suppose. There’s a council meeting tomorrow, and I’m expected to attend. My first ever. Apparently I’m important now.” He laughed, and the sound was wine-ugly, too loud in the shadows. “All it took was everyone else dying.”

She took the bottle from his hand, set it on the floor, and pulled his head down to her shoulder. He let her. They stayed like

that until the head kitchen maid, dear old Antoinette, arrived at the fourth bell, and then Claudine slipped away as if she'd never been there at all.

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Johann had never been in the council chambers. The black marble floors were veined with white and gold. Huge windows overlooked the city, rooftops and spires blue-edged in morning haze. The walls were lined with maps—most of them, he noticed, marked with pins that had been hastily removed, leaving tiny holes in the paper like birdshot.

The council was a gaggle of old men in velvet jackets, filling the room with the dry stink of wig powder and starch. Father stood at the head of the table in full military dress, looking carved from iron. To his left sat a general who was sixty and looked eighty. To his right, an empty chair.

His cousin Frederick was already there, leaning against the window frame with his arms crossed and a faint smile, like he'd arrived early to get the best seat at a hanging.

And at the far end of the table—this was strange—sat Ernst, the court alchemist. He was a short man in his sixties with wire-rimmed spectacles and a brown coat that had seen better decades. Johann had spent five years studying botany and natural philosophy under him, far more than Father had ever authorized. He'd never paid much attention to Johann's upbringing; if it wasn't coin or gunpowder or his eldest son, it was beneath him.

Johann caught Ernst's eye and smiled. His old teacher nodded and looked away.

"Sit down," Father said.

"Where should I—"

"Sit."

He sat. The chair was too big and too hard. He folded his hands on the table—too eager—put one in his lap, picked at a thread on his cuff, and tried to look like he belonged.

Father didn't waste time. "The emperor's letter contained terms for peace. His army will halt its advance, withdraw behind the river, and return prisoners. In exchange, he wants a bride."

A murmur from the council. Someone at the far end spat into his handkerchief.

Johann scoffed. "Well. That's… flattering? For someone, presumably."

"For you."



The room went quiet. He looked at his cousin, who wasn't laughing. He looked at Ernst, who was staring at the table. He looked back at Father.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I admit, I was drinking quite heavily last night and I must still be a little drunk. For a moment, I thought you said—"

"There is a rumor," Father continued, voice flat, "circulating at the imperial court. It holds that the grand duke's second son is, in fact, a daughter. Raised as a boy to protect the line of succession. Hidden in plain sight."

Johann froze. The words sounded like a joke, but no one in the room was laughing. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"The emperor believes it."

"Then he's senile."

Father's hand came down flat on the table. "He has forty thousand men three weeks from our gates! What he believes is now more important than what is true."

Johann looked around the room. "Surely none of you are taking this seriously. Frederick—tell him this is insane!"

His cousin straightened up from the window. His smile was gone, but he didn't look disgusted. If anything, he looked... curious. Amused, even. "Your father and I have discussed it, cousin. And I think... it could work."

"You—" Johann pushed his chair back. "You *discussed* this? Without me? And you *agree* with this?"

"I agree that forty thousand men will kill everyone in this city if we don't give them a reason not to." His cousin's voice was measured, reasonable. "I agree that you're slight, and fine-featured, and that if anyone could be convincing—"

"Convincing? As a girl?"

"Convincing enough to buy us time." His cousin glanced at the head of the table. "That's what this is, isn't it, Uncle? We're buying time. We accept the terms. We send him—presented as your hidden daughter. And while the empire celebrates its prize, we rebuild. Rearm. Find allies. And when we're ready, we take him back—along with the rest of our nation."

Father nodded once. "That is the strategy."

Johann stood. His chair screeched against the stone. "No. Absolutely not. This is—I'm not—you can't just—"

"Twenty-six thousand men are dead! Twenty-six thousand. Your brother among them. The Sixth Regiment, the Ninth, the Twelfth—gone. The Sable Line, gone. General Kessler, gone. I have four thousand soldiers left, half of them wounded, most of them boys younger than you." Father straightened his cuffs. The gesture was so familiar, so ordinary, it made Johann's stomach turn. "I spent thirty years building this nation's army. Now it no longer exists. What I have left is you."

"Father, please—"

"Sit. Down."

He sat. He couldn't feel the chair. Not the table, not the room. Just a cold pressing in around his ribs, like he'd been hollowed out and filled with water. He kept expecting someone to laugh, call it a jest, but the old men in the room just stared, eyes flat as coins.

"We have no options," Father said. "Our gold is gone, the people will not endure a siege. If you refuse, we all die. If you accept, you may yet save the country." He turned to Ernst. "Tell

him."

The old man removed his spectacles and cleaned them on his sleeve—a stalling gesture Johann recognized from years of lessons—then spoke to the table. "Twenty years ago, I developed a compound. An elixir. It was intended to preserve youth. A baroness commissioned it for her skin. The results were… unexpectedly potent." He paused. "The compound interacts with the body's natural humors. For the baroness, she regained a youthful complexion. For her husband, however… it did something else." His fingers tapped the table. "He experienced a range of physical changes. The voice, the skin, the hair. The redistribution of certain… fat deposits. He stopped as soon as he noticed the effects, but by then, the changes had progressed significantly. I conducted further tests on male subjects—mostly prisoners. In every case, they experienced significant changes. The voice became higher. Facial hair ceased to grow. Fat redistributed to the hips and—ahem—chest region. In certain cases, the subject's body became nearly indistinguishable from a…" He hesitated. "From a woman's. Of course, the church suppressed this discovery. I was ordered to destroy my notes." He looked up at Johann for the first time. "I did not."

A long-bearded councilman snorted. "Come now. We all recognize your brilliance—"

"Really? That is news to me," Ernst said.

"—but do you expect us to believe a little tonic will turn the grand duke's son into a blushing bride?"

"I expect you to believe what you will see," the alchemist said. "The compound is effective. It is not pleasant, and it is not altogether safe, but it works."

The room was right there—the maps, the marble, the old men—but Johann couldn't get air. His fingers gripped the table, the wood biting into his palms. "Master," he said. "Please. You can't be serious."

"I am not in favor of this," Ernst said quietly. "But your father has asked me what is possible, and I am answering honestly. The elixir could make you… convincing. Given your youth, frame, and features, perhaps very convincing."

"Convincing," he repeated.

"Yes. Every body responds differently. I cannot guarantee the extent. But with the elixir, proper costuming, training in deportment—"

"Deportment." He stared at his old teacher. "You want to teach me deportment."

"I want to teach you nothing," Ernst said. "I want to go back

go back to my laboratory and forget this conversation happened. But I don't believe that's an option available to me."

Johann looked at Father. "And if I refuse?"

"Then the enemy marches, the city falls, and our name disappears from history."

Johann stared at the map on the wall. He didn't care about the family name or their gold—but Claudine. The kitchen maids. The stableboys who still had milk on their breath. The city full of people who'd done nothing wrong except live in the wrong country at the wrong time.

He thought about his brother. Not the Auguste in polished armor, but the one who sat on the edge of Johann's bed the night before he rode north, smelling like pipe tobacco and boot leather, and said, *Promise me you'll take care of them*. And Auguste had believed in him. That was the thing about his brother, that was his gift—a faith that was so steady, so unshakable, that it made you want to deserve it.

"You'll get me back," he said. "That's the plan. You rebuild, you come for me."

Father's expression didn't change, but something flickered and was smothered. Relief, maybe. Or contempt. Johann couldn't tell the difference anymore. "Yes."

"How long?"

"A year. Perhaps two."

"Two *years?*"

"Would you prefer forty thousand men at the gates in a month?"

Johann closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked at the alchemist. "Will it reverse? When this is over, can you undo it?"

Ernst hesitated a fraction of a second. "In theory, yes. The compound's effects should be… mostly reversible with a counter-preparation."

"Should be."

"Will be," the old man said, but his eyes dropped back to the table.

"Well," Johann said. "I suppose we should get started. From what I hear, it's no easy feat to be a lady, even for those born to the role."

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Mother was waiting in his chambers, sitting on the edge of his bed in her olive gown, a blue jewelry box in her lap. The sunset



through the tall windows had turned everything gold and rose. She looked up at him with eyes that were dry but full, like a glass filled exactly to the brim.

"You know," he said.

"I know."

He crossed the room and sank into the chair beside the bed. She unfastened the top button of his collar, then the second, loosening his shirt as she had when he was a boy with a fever. He didn't stop her.

She opened the box. Inside, on dark velvet, lay a sapphire on a fine silver chain—deep blue, almost black in the fading light.

"This was my mother's," she said. "And her mother's before. I wasn't always part of your father's family. The women in mine have a tradition. We give this to our daughters when they face

something they shouldn't have to face."

"I'm not your daughter."

She lifted the necklace and clasped it around his neck. The sapphire rested against his collarbone, cool and heavy. "Perhaps not, but you are the bravest person in this house. And no one will ever know. That's what makes it brave."

"Please don't make fun of me. Not tonight."

Her thumb brushed the sapphire, then his cheek. "I'm not. Your father only sees what he wants. But you—you notice things. You care about people. That's dangerous, I know. But it's also rare. Don't let them take it from you."

"Those traits aren't exactly useful on a battlefield."

"You're not going to a battlefield. You're going somewhere harder. You'll have to learn fast—how to read the room, how to listen for what's not being said. The women at court will eat you alive if you don't. So will the men."

He looked up at her. "I don't think I can do this. Not for two days, let alone two years. I'm scared."

"Good." She cupped his face in her hands. "Fear means you understand. Your brother wasn't afraid. He should have been."

She kissed his forehead and left.

***

Three days later, Johann stood in the alchemist's study in his shirtsleeves and breeches, watching the old alchemist hold up a glass bottle labeled: *Elixir Femineitatis*.

"It tastes awful," the alchemist said. "I want you to know that in advance."

His cousin leaned against the bookshelf, arms crossed, watching with an expression Johann didn't like. Interest, maybe. Or satisfaction.

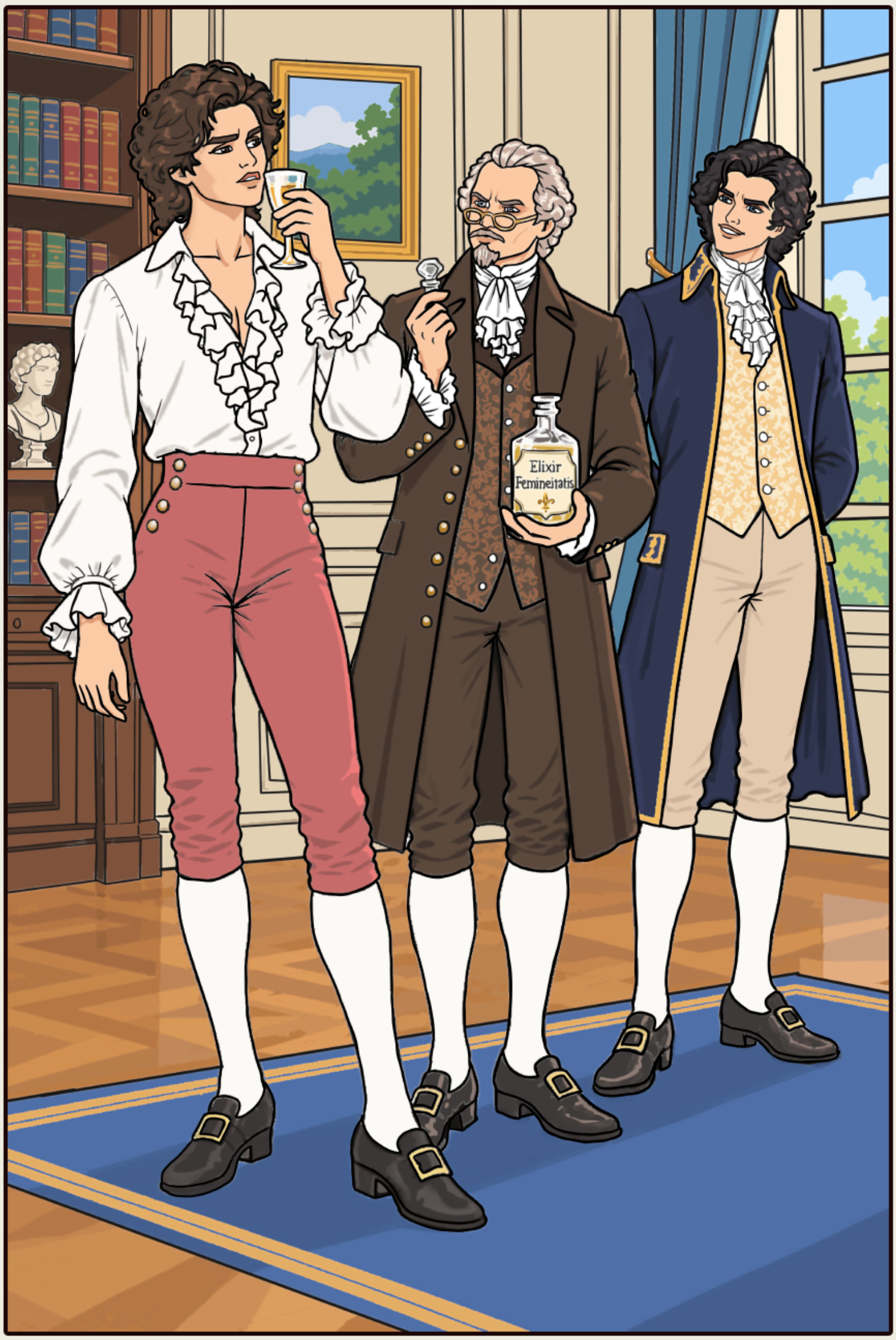
"How much do I take?" Johann asked.

"A measure each morning. In wine, if you prefer." The alchemist held the bottle at arm's length, like it offended him. "The first changes will be subtle. Skin, hair texture. Within a week, fat redistribution begins. Within a month—" He stopped. "We'll see."

Johann took the bottle, poured a measure into a small glass, held it up to the light. The liquid was pale gold, almost pretty.

"To our country," he said. "And to the most insane thing anyone has ever done for her." He drank. His face twisted. "God. You weren't joking about the taste."

"I never joke," the alchemist said.



His cousin grinned. “How do you feel?”

Johann wiped his mouth. “Like I just drank something a horse wouldn’t touch. Otherwise, the same.” He set the glass down. “When does it—”

“Patience,” the alchemist said. “The body doesn’t change on command.”

Johann looked at himself in the study’s small mirror. Same curly hair. Same sharp jaw. Same dark eyes Claudine said were wasted on a man. He touched the sapphire at his throat.

“Well,” he said to his reflection. “Let’s see what you become, you fool.”

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Five weeks didn't seem like enough time to turn a man into something else, but the body didn't care about schedules. At first, he didn't believe the elixir was doing much. Part of him was relieved, but also disappointed—not because he wanted to be a woman, but because his father had been right: this was their last, best chance, and he was the one expected to see it through.

Then the changes came, and they came fast.

First his skin lost whatever little roughness it had, becoming almost translucent, like fine paper held up to light. Then his trousers started fitting strangely—tight at the hip, loose at the waist. His chest ached. Not painfully, but persistently, a tenderness that reminded him every time he crossed his arms or rolled over in bed that something was happening underneath. That was the most disconcerting part—not the pain, but the sense of things rearranging themselves inside, like a house being quietly renovated in the middle of the night.

He avoided mirrors. Then he couldn't stop looking in them.

His face was still his face, but softer. The jawline less defined, cheekbones more prominent. His lips fuller, or maybe he was imagining it. He wasn't imagining the rest.

Then, the reports came in: the imperial army was less than two weeks out. There were riots in the north quarter, a run on salt, flour, and potatoes. The bakers doubled their prices; the church paid for bread, but it wasn't enough. If this illusion didn't hold, the city would burn or starve, and he would be the one who failed to stop it.

The next day, his father summoned him to demonstrate progress, asking him to present himself as the 'hidden daughter' for the first time. That's when he realized he couldn't lace himself into the corset alone. He could barely figure out which end was up. He needed help. He needed someone he trusted.

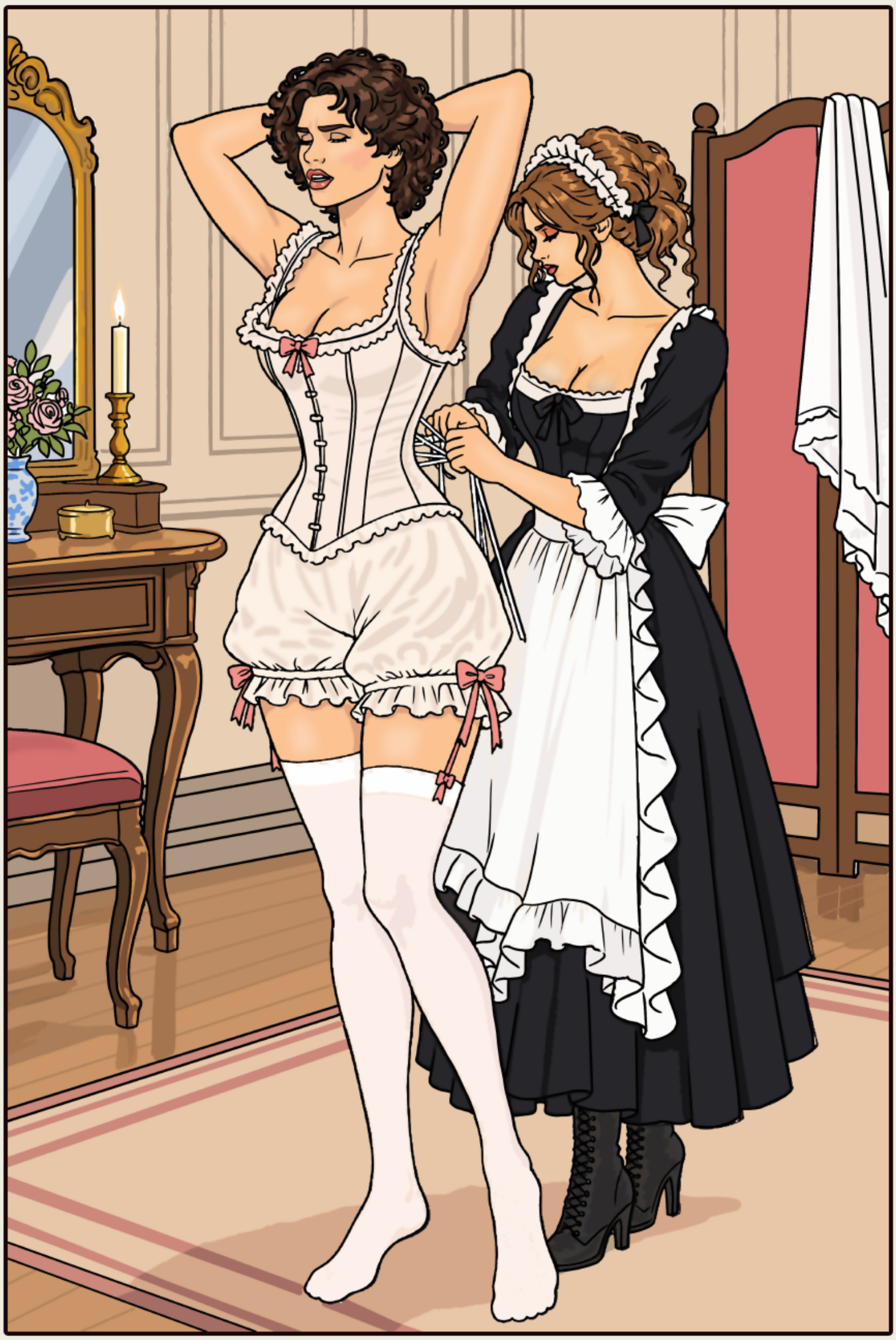
He needed Claudine.

She arrived at his chambers in the late afternoon, summoned by a note he'd slipped under the service door. She came in and stopped, hand flying to her mouth. He'd been avoiding her—avoiding everyone, but her most of all.

"Hello," he said.

Her hand stayed pressed over her mouth while he stood by the dressing screen in white bloomers and stockings, the corset held against his chest—the soft curve at his hips, the slight swell beneath his nightshirt. He looked like a boy and a girl at the same time, caught halfway between one thing and another.

"Don't say anything," he said. "Actually, no, please do say something."



She closed the door behind her, crossed the room, took the corset from his hands, and turned him around. “Arms up.”

He raised his arms. She wrapped the corset around his torso and began threading the laces through the eyelets, her fingers quick and practiced.

“You’ve done this before.”

“I dress noblewomen every day. I know how a corset works.”

“Right. Of course.”

She pulled the laces snug. He gasped.

“Too tight?”

“Of course it’s too bloody tight. What in the hell is this thing made of, steel?” He gripped the edge of the dressing screen. “How do women breathe?”

“We don’t,” she said. “That’s the secret. We hold our breath

for the rest of our lives." She tugged the laces one more notch. "Stop squirming."

She tied the laces and turned him around. Her eyes moved over him—the narrowed waist, the way the corset shaped what the elixir had started. Her expression was hard to read. Not horror, though, not pity. "I'd heard the rumors, but I... I didn't really believe them."

"Honestly, I don't believe them either. And I'm the one it's happening to."

"You're doing this." She stared at him. "You're actually doing this."

"Someone had to."

"No." She shook her head. "Plenty of men would die for their country." She straightened a strap on his shoulder. "But *living* like this? Becoming this—for your people?" Her voice caught. "No one would do this. No one but you."

"You make me sound so heroic, but I'm sure I look ridiculous. Let's hope the emperor is blind as well as senile."

She stepped back and studied him. "In fact, you don't look ridiculous at all. However..."

"Yes?"

"You need to fix your stockings. They're uneven."

He looked down. She was right. He laughed—the first in weeks. "I'm not cut out for being female, noble or otherwise. There's far too much to keep track of. Walk and breathe at the same time? Not possible."

"Shh..." She touched his face, thumb tracing the new softness of his cheek. "I'll help you. Every day. Whatever you need."

"Claudine—"

"Not because you're a duke, not because I'm your servant." She started to pull her hand back, slowly. "Because you're the only man I know who'd do something this stupid for a reason this beautiful."

He caught her wrist before she could pull it away, held it against his chest near the collarbone, far from the new flesh the corset was pressing up and together. "When this is over, I'm going to write you so much poetry. And I'll have an entirely different perspective on corsets and heartbreak. I'll be insufferable."

"More insufferable," she said, but she didn't pull away.

Outside, the evening bells rang across the capital, and somewhere beyond the mountains, forty thousand soldiers waited for a bride.






Elixir
Femineitatis

