Chapter 1 The Stranger

Night fell over the town beneath the castle, and with it, a Traveler crept in. Clad in a hooded cloak, he wandered through the dark, empty streets, searching for a place to spend the night. He passed closed shops and a few houses where lights flickered within.

Finally, he came across the local Inn. Stepping inside, he saw only a few men finishing their mugs of beer and an innkeeper behind the bar, wiping down the counter.

“Good evening!” the Traveler greeted him.

The innkeeper merely muttered something under his breath.

“Would you happen to have a room available?” he continued.

“As many as you like. They’re all vacant. No one wants to stay in this dump anymore.”

The Traveler gave him a puzzled look.

“You must be from far away,” the innkeeper added, taking a set of keys and leading the stranger upstairs. “It’s not much, but it’s a place to sleep. If you need an extra blanket, there’s one in the chest. There should be enough wood to last until morning, but I can bring more if you wish. Usually, guests pay in advance, but you don’t look like the type to run off, so you can pay me in the morning.”

“Thank you, that is very kind of you.”

The innkeeper nodded and headed back down to the bar to lock up. It wasn’t long, however, before the Traveler came back down.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Three gold pieces a night.”

The Traveler placed twenty gold pieces on the table. “Will this cover five nights plus dinner?”

“And breakfast, too,” the innkeeper stared at the coins. “You really must be from far away.”

“It depends on how you look at it. I’d like to stay for a while and see the town. Perhaps even find some work.” He smiled and returned to his room.

He couldn’t sleep—and perhaps he didn’t even want to. He climbed out through the window onto the Inn’s roof and watched the empty street. Suddenly, he heard footsteps and shouting in the distance.

He quietly slid down the roof to the veranda and dropped from the ledge. A girl came running from around the corner, glancing back and gasping for breath. The Traveler

pulled her by the arm into a dark alleyway and covered her mouth so she wouldn’t scream. She stared at him in terror.

After a moment, her pursuer appeared.

“You won’t escape me, you brat! You’ll be mine regardless!” The man was clearly intoxicated. When he saw no sign of her, he cursed, gave up, and stumbled away.

The Traveler took his hand away from her mouth. “Are you alright?” he asked softly.

“Yes. Thank you. I should get back.”

“To him?” he asked with a bewildered expression.

“No. Home.”

“I can walk with you, if you like.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“What was that all about?” he persisted.

The girl sighed, looking down. “That was my future husband...”

The Traveler looked at her in shock and shook his head. “My father owes him money and we have no way to pay him back. So, he asked for me instead.”

“And your father agreed?”

“No. But to pay him back, he would have to sell the mill and move our family elsewhere. So, I agreed.”

“What is your name?”

“Klára.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” the Traveler said, leaning forward. In that moment, the moonlight caught his face, and Klára's eyes widened.

“Your Majesty... forgive me. I didn’t know,” she whispered fearfully, bowing low.

“Come now, stand up. How did you recognize me?”

“I help at the castle once a week, Your Grace.”

“Then please, call me Kristof,” he said quickly. “My real name is Richard, but everyone would know who I am immediately. Can this stay between us, please?”

“As you command.”

Richard sighed. “That wasn’t a command, Klára, but a request. Forget who I am. From now on, I am just Kristof.”

Klára nodded and hurried away into the dark. Richard climbed back to his window.

There was much more happening in the kingdom than he had realized. He had known for a long time that the Royal Advisor was robbing the entire realm, but he had no idea how bad it truly was. That was why he had decided to leave the palace in disguise—to see the truth and find a way to help. The King had been pleased by his determination, advising him to remain a stranger for as long as possible.

He woke up early the next morning. When he went down to the common room, the innkeeper was just taking the chairs down from the tables.

“Good morning. I hope you slept well.”

“Good morning. Yes, though I couldn’t stop thinking about what you said yesterday.”

“I say a lot of things...”

“That no one wants to stay here. In this dump.”

The innkeeper sighed. “I’ll make you some breakfast, what do you say? And then we can talk.”

Richard nodded. Before long, the innkeeper returned with fragrant scrambled eggs, a piece of sausage, and fresh bread. There was hot black coffee in the pot. Richard inhaled the rich aroma.

The innkeeper watched him for a moment and then sat down across from him. “I hope you enjoy it. What did you say your name was?”

“Rich... Kristof,” he said, pretending to choke on his first bite to cover the slip of the tongue.

“Well, Kristof, it wasn’t always this bad. I remember times when the kingdom flourished. Life was easier for everyone. Perhaps the King is simply grieving for the Queen and leaves everything to the Advisor, who robs everyone blind. Hopefully, his son won’t let himself be manipulated. But who knows. No one has really even seen the Prince.”

Richard grew sad at his words. He finished his breakfast in silence and asked no more questions.

He set out into the town to see what it looked like in broad daylight. The shops were open but mostly empty. The only bustle was around the bakery and the marketplace.

His attention was caught by a small boy lingering near the fruit stand. The boy clumsily snatched an apple and tried to run, but the vendor grabbed him by his hood.

“Not so fast,” the vendor barked.

Before he could do anything else, Richard was already standing beside them. Being taller than everyone else, he was impossible to miss. He took the apple from the boy's hand, reached for another one, and gently held onto the boy, who was trying to slip away unnoticed.

"How much?" he asked the vendor.

"Twenty groschen."

Richard reached into his pocket and paid. Then he took the boy aside. "Do you know that stealing is wrong? The vendor had to grow these, so he deserves to be paid."

"I know," the boy said shamefully, looking at his worn shoes. "But I didn't even want it for myself. It was for my sister. My mom can only buy us one once in a while."

"Where is your mother now?"

"At the bakery."

"Come on then, I'll take you to her," he said, picking the boy up and handing him the first apple.

His mother was just coming out of the bakery. "Oh, Filip! What have you done now? I'm so sorry if he bothered you, sir," she apologized quickly.

"It's no trouble," Richard said, setting the boy down. Filip immediately ran to his sister and gave her the fruit.

"Filip, where did you get that?"

The boy hesitated, but Richard stepped in. "From me. And this one is for you," he added, handing Filip the second apple.

"Oh, that is very kind of you. I'll pay you back as soon as—"

"There's no need," Richard smiled.

The woman looked at him gratefully. "Can I help you with your shopping then?" he asked.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"No one here has offered to help anyone in a long time."

"In that case, it's the perfect time to start. I'm Kristof."

"Hana. I don't live very far, and I don't have that much to carry."

"And do you have everything you need?" he persisted.

Hana laughed, a bit bitterly. "Not by a long shot, boy."

“So, where to now?”

“Home, Kristof. You’ve done more than enough and I thank you for it, but don’t trouble yourself with me any longer,” she said, turning down the street.

Richard stood watching her until she disappeared from sight, then continued on his way.

A short distance from the noisy center, he found a school. This made him happy; but not for long. Several children ran out into the yard, followed by a young teacher. He stepped closer and spoke to her, and the children immediately surrounded them.

“I suppose it’s not so bad when you have so few of them,” he smiled at her.

She smiled back, though her eyes looked tired. “Do you have experience? It is easier to manage, but not effective. I only have them here once a week. Sometimes, if we are lucky, twice.”

Richard looked at her, confused. “I’m the only one teaching, and the headmaster takes a few classes sometimes. I can’t have everyone at once.”

“Does no one else want to teach?” he asked.

“It’s more that no one can afford to. And parents need the children to help them at home. Especially the older ones.”

“Hmm...” Richard sighed, looking at the laughing children. “It seems nothing in this kingdom works as it should.”

“We’ve grown used to it,” she said sadly before leading the children back into the classroom.

Chapter 2 The Prince in the Mill

Richard was nearly despairing at everything he had seen. He walked further until he reached the river, where he spotted a mill. The miller stood outside, gazing at the water with a worried expression. The mill needed repairs again, and the miller clearly could not afford them.

Richard approached him. “Good day!” he greeted.

“I wish it were better,” the miller replied, not taking his eyes off the rushing river.

“What happened?” Richard asked.

“I wanted to sell the mill, but no one will buy a broken one. I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

“Can’t it be repaired?”

“It can. But I can’t manage it alone, and I can’t afford to pay an assistant.”

“I’ve never repaired a mill before, but I can try,” Richard added quickly. “If you tell me what to do, we might succeed. I don’t want anything in return.”

The miller finally turned his head, looking at him with genuine surprise. “You’re from far away, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been asked that quite often lately. I’m Kristof.”

“Jonas.”

After an hour of heavy lifting and hard work, the massive mill wheel groaned and began turning once more.

“I didn’t believe it could move again,” Jonas breathed, a massive weight lifting from his shoulders. “Thank you. How can I repay you?”

“Perhaps I could work for you. At least for a few days.”

“Oh, Kristof, but then it’s not me helping you, but you helping me. And the daily wage would be pitiful.”

At that moment, Klára returned to the mill with her three young siblings—the very same children Richard had just seen at the school yard.

“Did you manage to fix the mill?” she asked excitedly from the doorway.

“I had help,” Jonas smiled.

Klára's expression darkened slightly. Assuming her father was speaking about her older fiancé or the school headmaster, she asked wearily, “How many children did you promise him this time?”

“None,” said Richard, peeking out from behind the heavy wooden door.

Klára gasped, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Klára, this is Kristof,” Jonas introduced him. “He helped me fix the wheel and wants nothing for it.”

“We’ve already had the honor,” Richard said, giving her a reassuring smile.

Klára looked at him fearfully. She hadn’t told her father a single word about the previous night’s encounter. “Yes... last night,” she stammered quickly. “After we said goodbye to Frank. He was looking for a place to stay.”

“She directed me to the Inn,” Richard covered for her smoothly. “Well, I’ll be off then. I’ll be back here first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Kristof, I really have no way to pay you,” Jonas called after him.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said and left them.

Richard returned to the Inn briefly, but as soon as twilight fell, he made his way through the secret paths back to the palace to confide in his father. The King listened to his son's report with a heavy, sorrowful heart.

“Richard, you must be careful.”

“Father, why don’t you stand up to the Advisor?” Richard demanded, his frustration bubbling over.

“I tried once, and I paid the price,” the King whispered, his voice trembling. “The Advisor bribes everyone around him, and those he cannot buy, he blackmails. The last time I tried to stop him... your mother paid for it. They poisoned her, Richard. And the Advisor made sure to remind me that something similar could easily happen to you. An 'unexpected accident'.”

Richard's hands clenched into tight fists, fury burning in his chest. “I won’t just let this be! Why didn’t you tell me sooner? He won’t get away with this, father. Even if I have to stay among the people and defend them until my last breath.”

“The Advisor will come after you sooner or later,” the King warned, looking at him with old, tired eyes. “Did anyone recognize you?”

“Only the miller’s daughter.”

“It won’t be easy for you. Take care of yourself, Richard.”

He promised his father he would be careful, took a heavy pouch of gold from his personal funds, and returned to the Inn. The innkeeper was slowly closing up for the night when he walked through the door.

“How did you like the town?” the old man asked.

“You were right,” Richard replied quietly. “Life is hard here, but I’ll be staying for a while nonetheless.”

As he approached the mill the next morning, the sound of arguing cut through the mist. He saw Klára struggling against Frank. It was entirely clear she had no interest in him, but he was aggressively trying to pull her close and kiss her anyway.

“Good morning, Klára,” Richard greeted loudly, stepping into the clearing with a cold smile.

Frank let go of her arm, shooting the newcomer a hard, disdainful look. “And who the hell are you?”

“Kristof. And you?”

“That’s none of your business,” Frank snapped, turning back to the girl. “Klára, we need to set a date. You can’t keep stalling me forever.”

Klára wrenched her hand from his grip completely. “I don’t have time today, Frank. I must get back to my father.”

“Don’t forget that I paid for that mill!” Frank shouted after her as she retreated. “And it wasn’t a small amount!”

Klára ran toward the mill, tears streaming down her face.

“Hey! What did you say to her?” Richard shouted, his patience wearing thin.

Hearing the tension, Klára turned back, running between them. “Kristof, leave it, please. Nothing happened.”

Richard ignored the plea, keeping his eyes locked on Frank. “How much does the miller owe you?”

“More than a peasant like you will ever see.”

“How much?” Richard asked again, his voice dropping an octave.

“Three thousand, five hundred gold pieces.”

“Three thousand, five hundred,” Richard repeated. He pulled the heavy leather pouch from beneath his cloak and slammed it into Frank’s chest. “Take it. And I don’t want to see you anywhere near this mill, or near Klára, ever again.”

Frank stumbled back, catching the heavy pouch. He opened it, his eyes widening at the glittering coins, but then his face twisted into suspicion. He shook his head. “This is royal currency. Pristine minted gold. If I try to pay with this anywhere, the local magistrate will say I stole it.”

“Not if you have a receipt,” Richard said calmly, pulling a folded piece of parchment from his tunic and handing it over.

Frank unfolded it, scoffing as he read the signature. “I’m supposed to believe this? You have a stamped document straight from Prince Richard himself?” he asked mockingly.

“Believe what you want. Take the gold and disappear.”

Frank spat on the ground, clutched the gold and the paper, and hurried away.

Klára walked up to Richard, her voice trembling. “You shouldn’t have done that. Now we owe *you* an impossible debt.”

“You owe me nothing, Klára. It’s time to fix what’s happening in this kingdom. That is why I am here.”

Before she could answer, Jonas stepped out of the mill. “Is everything alright out here?”

“Everything is fine,” Richard said with a smile, immediately rolling up his sleeves. “Let's get to work.”

About two hours later, the sound of heavy boots echoed outside. Frank had returned, and he wasn't alone. He was accompanied by four armed royal guards.

Richard stepped outside the mill to meet them, with Jonas following anxiously behind.

“Frank,” Richard said, crossing his arms. “Why did you bring the guards? I thought we had a closed deal.”

“I brought them because you're a thief!” Frank yelled, pointing an accusatory finger. “This man here stole money directly from the royal treasury and forged the Prince’s signature on an official document!”

Jonas turned pale, looking at Richard. “Kristof... what money?”

“I paid Frank for the mill, Jonas. So you owe him nothing anymore.”

“But that was three thousand gold pieces!” Jonas muttered in shock.

“Guards, arrest him!” Frank ordered, puffing out his chest.

But the guards didn’t budge. They didn't look at Richard; instead, they stepped closer to Frank, their spears lowered. The lead guard looked directly at the "peasant" in the hooded cloak and saluted.

“Your Highness,” the guard said firmly. “What should we do with him?”

Frank’s jaw dropped. The color drained from his face as he looked from the guard to Richard.

“Let him go, Patrick,” Richard said quietly to the captain. “He’s harmless. And keep this assignment entirely to yourself.”

“As you command, sir.” Patrick nodded.

The guards stepped back, releasing a trembling Frank. The man didn't wait around for an explanation; he turned and vanished into the woods so quickly that he was gone before the guards even turned around to head back to the palace.

Jonas stared at Richard in sheer terror, his knees buckling. He fell to his knees and bowed deeply, his forehead nearly touching the dirt. “Forgive me, Your Highness... I had no idea it was you.”

Klára stood just behind her father, looking down at the ground, biting her lip.

“Jonas, come now. Stand up,” Richard said gently, reaching down and offering his hand to help the old miller to his feet. “I only ask that you keep this to yourself. To the town, I am Kristof. And if I'm not mistaken, there is still a lot of flour to grind by evening. The baker won’t wait.”

“But Your Highness... that’s impossible. We cannot simply accept such a gift,” Jonas hesitated, his voice shaking.

Richard looked over at the girl, a silent plea in his eyes. “Klára, please.”

Klára placed a hand on her father’s shoulder. “Father... it’s alright. And you can call him Kristof.”

“But so much money...” Jonas muttered, still shaking his head as they walked back inside the mill house. Finally, he sat down on a stool, looking up at the Prince. “You... you really didn’t want me to sell Klára to that fool, did you?”

“No,” Richard said softly, looking Jonas in the eyes. “I never wanted that for her. Or for anyone. You don’t have to worry about the debt anymore, Jonas. Just don’t give me away. The whole Kingdom is under the Advisor’s thumb, and I intend to put an end to it. But first, I must know the full extent of what is truly happening to our people.”

“Thank you,” Jonas said, his eyes tearing up with gratitude.

“No,” Richard smiled. “Thank *you* for letting me help.”

When he returned to the Inn late that evening, exhausted and covered in a fine layer of flour dust, the innkeeper was already waiting for him with a hot dinner. The common room was empty as usual, so the old man pulled up a chair and sat down across from him.

“You look completely exhausted.”

“Working in a mill takes its toll,” Richard said, taking a spoonful of stew.

“Are you sure that’s the right job for you?” the innkeeper asked, leaning forward, his eyes narrowing slightly. “And tell me, is staying at a run-down Inn like this really enough for you?”

Richard paused, his spoon halfway to his mouth. “Why do you ask?”

“Frank was drinking in the tavern down the street today. Bragging to anyone who would listen that he saw Prince Richard himself at the mill, and that the Prince paid off the miller’s entire debt with a pouch of royal gold.”

“It must have happened before I arrived for my shift,” Richard said smoothly, continuing to eat.

“I see. And you didn’t happen to see any royal guards around the river?”

“I didn’t meddle in the miller’s business.”

“Hmm... and on your very first night here,” the innkeeper persisted, his voice dropping to a whisper, “you didn’t happen to hear someone walking out on my roof?”

Richard slowly set down his fork and looked the innkeeper dead in the eye.

The old man didn't back down. “It just seems too suspicious to me, stranger. You save the miller’s daughter from a drunkard in the middle of the night, you suddenly take an unpaid job at that exact mill, and the Prince magically shows up to pay his debt. I don’t know, Your Highness... what am I supposed to think of it?”

Richard kept his composure. “Do you honestly think a crown prince would spend his days hauling sacks of grain in a dusty mill?”

“Stop playing innocent,” the innkeeper countered, a small smile breaking through his serious demeanor. “Frank is an idiot, true, but you can’t fake the loyalty of the royal guard. They don't take orders from peasants.”

Richard let out a long, slow sigh, leaning back in his chair. “Hmm... those specific guards don't. But you should know that the Advisor has placed his own corrupt people among the ranks as well.”

The innkeeper’s face went entirely pale. The realization of what he was mixed up in finally hit him.

Seeing his fear, Richard's tone softened. “Did something happen? Are you alright?”

“I think... I think I’ve gotten myself into real trouble...” the old man whispered.

Richard chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Why does everyone think they're in trouble the moment they find out who I am? Who knows what kind of rumors people spread about me in the palace. Probably that I’m the biggest tyrant in the world. But you see me here. I’m only human, not a monster. Just like you.”

The innkeeper looked at the young man, seeing the genuine tiredness in his eyes.

“I would like the people to see me that way eventually,” Richard continued. “So, I’d like to ask you to keep this between us. It will be much easier to find the truth if I’m just Kristof. At least for a little while longer.”

“Frank won’t keep his mouth shut about what he saw,” the innkeeper warned.

“Perhaps. But given his reputation, not everyone will believe a drunkard's ramblings.”

The innkeeper took a moment to process everything. “So... you really are Prince Richard. And you don’t mind what I said to you yesterday? Calling this place a dump?”

“On the contrary,” Richard said, his expression turning grim. “I needed to hear it. I’ve seen what’s happening out there with my own eyes now. Children are forced to steal fruit because their parents can’t afford basic food. They have to work the fields instead of being in school or just playing. Neighbors no longer help one another because everyone is starving. The Advisor collects taxes that reach the sky, and those he hasn’t bought, he poisons or blackmails. And am I supposed to just sit on a throne and rule over this ruin one day? If I don't change things now, the people won’t believe a single word I say when I wear the crown.”

The innkeeper looked at the prince for a long time, the scepticism completely gone from his eyes. He bowed his head respectfully from his seat. “I must say, Your Highness... you will be a very good king.”

Richard only sighed, the weight of the entire kingdom resting heavily on his shoulders. He finished his dinner in silence, and the moment his head hit the pillow that night, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 3 The Payment Day

Every day he worked at the mill, and every evening he carried heavy sacks of flour to the baker so that bread and pastries could be baked overnight. Thanks to him, the townspeople could buy fresh, warm loaves and rolls every morning.

The locals quickly grew fond of him. He was always gracious to everyone and tried to help wherever he could. On his way to the mill, he routinely stopped by the school yard, always bringing a fresh apple for Filip and his little sister.

Because of Kristof's help, Klára had more time for her siblings now. She began going to help at the castle three times a week, which brought their family a little more much-needed money. Richard grew incredibly fond of her, but he respectfully kept his distance, never wanting to compromise her position. After two weeks in the town, everyone knew Kristof from the mill.

And then came the day for paying taxes.

It was the Royal Advisor’s favorite day of the year. He never missed an opportunity to come down from the palace and collect them himself, sneering at the locals and threatening that if they didn’t pay every single groschen, he would have them thrown into the deepest dungeon or sentenced to thirty lashes with a cane—or a whip, depending on his mood.

Richard noticed how the atmosphere changed the moment dawn broke. Everyone was somber, silent, and terrified. When he arrived at the mill, he asked Jonas what was happening. As soon as he learned the Advisor was on his annual “hunt,” Richard turned on his heel and headed straight toward the marketplace.

At the square, the royal guards were already preparing a heavy wooden table for the Advisor. Richard hid himself in the crowd. It wasn’t an easy task, since most of the townspeople only reached his shoulders or, at most, the top of his head.

Then, the Advisor appeared in all his pompous splendor. He smoothed down his velvet coat and looked over the trembling crowd.

“Now, citizens, you know how this works,” the Advisor began, his voice echoing across the square. “I want no trouble today. It is time to pay your taxes into the royal

treasury so that His Majesty can care for you and have the means to maintain this realm. And, of course, so that Prince Richard can spend more on his... personal amusements. Yes, exactly. He is out there right now, somewhere, enjoying himself and squandering your hard-earned taxes."

Richard felt a cold fury rise in his chest as he saw the people begin to grumble, quietly cursing the Prince's name under their breath.

The Innkeeper was the first to step forward to pay. He placed his leather pouch heavily on the table. "The taxes are going into someone's pocket, alright, but it won't be the Prince's," the old man muttered defiantly before walking away.

One by one, the townspeople came forward. Jonas paid his share, and finally, Hana stepped up to the table. Hana was a talented seamstress, but people in the town only replaced their clothes when the old ones were completely ruined and torn.

"Is that all?" the Advisor sneered, counting the few meager gold coins she placed on the table.

Richard watched everything closely from the shadows of a fruit stall, his eyes narrowing.

"Forgive me, my lord, I have no more," Hana pleaded, her voice trembling. "It's all I have left. People don't need new clothes every day."

"That is not my problem," the Advisor said coldly. "If you have no more, you go to the dungeon."

"No, please! What about my children?" Hana cried out, dropping to her knees. "I will pay the rest in a week. Please, I beg of you!"

The Advisor ignored her prayers, waving a dismissive hand. "Guards, take her away."

Richard straightened his back and pushed aggressively through the crowd, his tall frame cutting through the peasants like a wave.

"Let her go," he commanded.

The guards froze. They turned and looked at the cloaked figure in absolute surprise.

"Now!" Richard barked, using his full commanding voice.

The guards immediately released their grip on Hana, stepping back.

"Kristof, what are you doing?" Hana whispered, terrified for his safety.

Richard ignored her, keeping his eyes locked on the Advisor. "How much does Hana owe you?"

The Advisor scoffed, looking at the dusty laborer. "You know this money isn't for me, boy. As I just said,"

Yeah, yeah, yeah. It’s for the Prince, so he can enjoy his luxuries. So, how much?” Richard cut him off.

“Twenty gold pieces.”

“Twenty gold pieces,” Richard repeated, his voice dangerously calm. He stepped closer to the table, leaning in so only the Advisor could hear his next words. “Well, you know what? Hana’s taxes are forgiven. And not just this time, but for the next three turnings as well. Is that clear?”

The Advisor looked into the stranger's eyes beneath the hood, and suddenly, the color drained from his face. He recognized those royal blue eyes instantly. “Perfectly... perfectly clear, sir,” he stammered, his arrogant posture collapsing.

“Excellent,” Richard said loudly for the crowd to hear. “Now note it down in your ledger and don’t you dare forget. If I find out you asked her for another coin, you’ll be the one testing the security of the dungeon.”

The Advisor’s eyes flashed with malice. He leaned forward, hissing under his breath, “You know... something unexpected could happen to your father at any time.”

Richard didn't flinch. He leaned in closer, his whisper cold enough to freeze water. “You certainly don’t want that to happen, Advisor. Because if he falls, I would take my father’s place on the throne much sooner than you’d wish. And my first decree would be your execution.”

Without waiting for a response, Richard turned and disappeared back into the crowd. The marketplace stood in stunned, absolute silence, no one understanding what had just transpired. The Advisor hurriedly packed his ledgers, ordered his guards, and retreated back to the palace.

When Jonas returned to the mill later that afternoon, he found Richard already back at work, quietly hoisting heavy sacks of flour onto his shoulders.

“Kristof,” Jonas said softly, his face unreadable. “They are waiting for you outside.”

Jonas turned and went into the mill house. Richard looked after him in surprise. He set down the sack, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and stepped out into the yard. Dusting the fine white flour off his tunic, he approached the gathering townspeople.

“Did something happen?” Richard asked, looking at their solemn faces. “Did the Advisor return? Did he arrest someone else?”

The people only stared at him in silence. Richard shifted his weight, suddenly not knowing what to say or do.

Breaking the tension, little Filip pulled his hand away from Hana and ran straight to Richard. He stopped at his boots, stared up at the tall man, and reached his little arms up, demanding to be picked up. Richard smiled, bending down to lift the boy into his arms.

As soon as he was up, Filip reached out, tugged firmly on Richard's ear, and then playfully squished his nose.

“Filip, what are you doing? You mustn’t! Come here right now!” Hana called out, her voice frantic with panic.

Filip shook his head stubbornly, looking at his mother. “He can’t be a prince, mom. If he were a prince, he wouldn’t be covered in flour, and he wouldn’t let me grab his nose.”

Richard burst into a warm, genuine smile, looking at the boy. “And why not, Filip?”

“Because he’s a prince,” the boy said simply, as if stating a fundamental law of nature.

“A prince can’t be covered in flour? Or have his nose and ears pulled?” Richard chuckled.

Filip shook his head vigorously.

“Why not?” Richard asked softly. “A prince is made of flesh and blood, just like you.”

“But he wears nice shiny clothes and doesn’t play with children,” Filip protested.

“And what if I told you,” Richard whispered conspiratorially, “that this prince loves to wear a dusty apron and play with children? And his absolute favorite thing in the whole kingdom is the Innkeeper’s scrambled eggs?”

Filip’s eyes went wide, and he burst out laughing. “But that’s not a prince. That’s just you, Kristof!”

Hana stepped closer, her eyes wide with reverence, and bowed low. “Forgive us, Your Highness. I couldn’t convince him otherwise.”

Richard smiled warmly at her, gently letting Filip down so he could run back to his mother's skirts. He wanted to address the crowd, but the local baker beat him to it.

“Is it... is it really you, sir?” the baker asked, his voice shaking. “We all saw how the royal guards obeyed your every word instantly. And no one has ever dared to speak to the Advisor like that. But... I still cannot believe a crown prince would willingly carry sacks of flour for my bakery.”

Richard looked around at the gathered faces. “You, the baker, and Jonas have done it your whole lives. I wanted to know whom I owe thanks for the fresh breakfast on my table every morning. And more than that, I wanted to know what is truly happening to the people of this country.”

The crowd remained entirely still, hanging on his every word.

“I’ve known about the Advisor's corruption for a long time,” Richard continued, his tone turning serious. “But I had no idea it was this severe. There is so much to fix,

and I want to do everything in my power to make your lives easier. But I wouldn't have known *how* to help if I hadn't lived among you first. I didn't want you to know who I was, because no one would openly tell a prince that his kingdom is a dump and that they are being robbed blind—you would be too afraid of the crown. And honestly, when the Advisor tells you those grand stories about how I spend your tax money for my own pleasure... well, hearing that, I'd want to punch myself too."

A few light chuckles broke through the crowd's tension.

"It won't be easy, and it won't happen overnight," Richard promised, looking at them with determination. "But together, we can change this kingdom for the better."

Filip's jaw dropped as the reality finally sunk in. "So you're really Prince Richard?"

Richard looked down and gave him a playful wink. As if everything finally clicked in the boy's mind, Filip squealed and hid entirely behind his mother's apron.

Richard looked toward Klára, feeling suddenly self-conscious. She stepped forward from the edge of the crowd, walked up to him, and placed a gentle, reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"They know Kristof," she whispered softly, a warm smile on her lips. "Who Prince Richard is... they still don't know."

"And you?" he asked her, his voice low, a flicker of genuine hope in his eyes.

Before Klára could answer, Jonas's booming voice cut through the yard.

"I know who you are," the old miller said, stepping out of the mill. He looked out at the crowd. "You are Prince Richard, who helped me fix my broken mill wheel. Prince Richard, who paid off my impossible debt and stayed to work the grindstone in return."

Jonas turned fully toward the townspeople, his chest swelling with pride. "It is Prince Richard who stays at our run-down Inn and helps us all daily. He buys apples for Filip and his sister, carries heavy flour sacks to the baker, and lets us call him Kristof instead of bowing to a title. He is a good man, and one day, he will be a wise, just king, exactly like his father. You all heard what the Advisor said on the square—threatening that something might happen to the King just to silence the Prince. I am certain he has been telling the King the exact same lies about his son."

Richard looked at the old miller with deep gratitude. "And my mother," Richard added, his voice dropping with sorrow. "When my father first tried to strip the Advisor of his control, they poisoned the Queen... just to show my father they would stop at nothing."

A dark, angry murmur rippled through the crowd. Everyone in the valley had loved the late Queen, and looking at Richard now, they could see he was very much like her—not just in his face, but in his heart.

No one said anything more. The weight of the truth settled over them, and they all slowly, respectfully, began to go their separate ways. Jonas walked over and patted the young prince on the shoulder.

“Come inside, lad. It’s time for lunch.”

“I’m not hungry,” Richard said sadly, staring at the empty yard.

“Please, come,” Klára said gently from the doorway. “There is something you should know.”

Richard paused, looked at her, and followed her inside the quiet mill house. Klára served a simple lunch to her father and younger siblings, and then sat down at the wooden table across from Richard.

“What should I know?” he asked once the children had run off to play.

“The Advisor has lied to us about you for years,” Klára explained, her eyes soft. “And since no one from the lower town had ever truly seen you, we believed every word. He claimed you were hot-headed, easily angered, that you didn’t care about the common people at all, and only spent your father’s gold on grand galas. The people here... they are either terrified of you, or they hate you. Or both.”

Richard looked down at the table. “But I was just among them. They saw what I am truly like.”

“You won’t change people’s minds overnight, or even in a week, Richard,” Jonas said calmly from his stool. “Right now, many of them think this was just a game to you. They fear you wanted to find out what they secretly thought of the crown, and that now you will punish them for it.”

Richard stayed silent for a long moment, then turned his gaze back to the girl. “You still haven’t told me what *you* think of me, Klára.”

Klára took a breath, looking at his face. “When I first saw you with my father at the mill, after we met in the alley that night... I thought it might be the last time I’d ever see my home. I thought you were going to have me dragged to the castle prison for knowing your face. I didn’t believe a prince would want to help a poor miller, just like that.”

She reached across the table, her fingers lightly brushing his forearm.

“It wasn’t until you paid Frank, looked me dead in the eye, and told me you wanted to make things right that I truly began to believe you. And then I watched you come to this mill every single day. Working with my father from dawn till dusk, playing with the village children, and never once complaining of fatigue or pain. I saw your hands, Richard. Working the heavy ropes and wood with blisters like those certainly wasn’t easy for someone raised in a palace.”

Richard instinctively pulled his hands back, trying to tuck his calloused, blistered palms into his sleeves. He gave a small, sheepish smile. “I tried to hide them. Clearly, I didn’t succeed.”

Jonas smiled warmly, leaning back against the wooden wall. “They will believe you, Your Highness. Just give them time.”

Chapter 4 Time to move on

Richard returned to the Inn late that evening. The Innkeeper looked up from the counter, his eyes widening in surprise.

“May I stay?” Richard asked quietly, pulling back his hood.

“As long as you like, sir,” the Innkeeper replied, immediately reaching for a clean glass. “I’ll admit, I thought you would be returning to the palace after today.”

“Not yet.”

“Does it bother you that they finally know who you are?”

Richard let out a tired sigh, sitting down at his usual table. “It bothers me that they don’t believe *who* I am. They believe in Kristof. They would rather Kristof were the prince, than the prince being Kristof. You yourself thought I only came down here to punish everyone and throw them into the dungeon.”

“At first? Yes,” the Innkeeper admitted, walking over with a dusty bottle of red wine. “Because that’s exactly what the Advisor always claimed about you. But today... today I saw a man of true character. I tell you, Your Highness, when you stood up for Hana on that square, it sent shivers down my spine. Seeing the Advisor’s face change color was absolutely priceless. And the way those guards froze before you? That was something. You don’t see that every day.”

“Do you think the others will believe me eventually?”

“That depends entirely on you. But the fact that you’re still sitting in this dump instead of a velvet parlor is a very good start.”

Richard nodded, his eyes fixed on the wooden grain of the table. He started to rise to head toward his room, but the Innkeeper gently held up the bottle.

“Have a glass of wine with me first. As regulars do.”

Richard looked at the old man for a moment, a small smile appearing on his face. “And why not,” he finally said, sinking back into his chair. “Ask whatever you like.”

“Did you serve in the army?” the Innkeeper asked, pouring the dark liquid.

Richard laughed, a rich, genuine sound. “Yes. I served two years at sea and then a full year in the infantry. Why do you ask that specifically?”

“Because you’re rarely seen, sir. Here in the lower town, we never caught a glimpse of you, and even the people serving at the castle said you were vanished. The Advisor claimed you were wandering the world, squandering royal coin on loose living. But when you arrived here, you didn’t look or act like a spoiled brat. And climbing down a sheer tavern roof in the dead of night isn’t as easy as it looks. You have stamina, discipline. Mill work isn’t for weaklings. It just didn’t add up.”

“Hmm... I can’t say the academy or the ships were easy,” Richard mused, taking a sip of the wine. “But I’m glad I went through it. It taught me to see the world differently. Hard training and absolute obedience forged my character. During the first week on the vessel, I wanted to run away every single day. Instead of encouraging words from the captain, I just got an extra ten-kilometer run in full gear.”

“My word!” the Innkeeper exclaimed, shaking his head.

He showered the young prince with questions about the open sea and the barracks until the bottle of wine was completely empty, and a comfortable warmth settled over them before they both went to bed.

In the morning, as he did every day, Richard stopped at the market, bought two crisp apples, and walked over to Hana’s small house. He could feel the shift in the air as he walked through the streets—people looked at him differently now. The fear was fading, replaced by a quiet, blinking wonder.

Hana opened the door and sighed when she saw the fruit in his hands. “You really didn’t have to do this, Your Highness.”

“I wanted to,” Richard said gently. “Is Filip still angry with me?”

Hana shook her head in disbelief, her eyes tearing up. “I didn’t even thank you properly for yesterday. Thank you... I don’t know what would have happened to my children if the guards had dragged me away to the cells.”

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly turned her face away to hide her emotion. Richard stepped forward, placing a steady, comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Everything is going to be alright now, Hana. I promise you.”

Just then, little Filip peeked out from behind the wooden doorframe, his lower lip trembling. “Do you... do you want to take my mama away?” he asked sadly.

Richard immediately knelt down on the dusty floor to bring himself to the boy's eye level. “Why would I ever do a thing like that? Of course not, Filip. Look, I brought you a fresh apple. And one for your sister.”

Filip looked down, a bit ashamed of his fear.

“Are you angry with me?” Richard asked softly.

Filip shook his head.

“Phew, that’s a massive relief,” Richard breathed, wiping imaginary sweat from his brow. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a prince. It just happened that way. I was born into the palace, and there wasn’t much I could do about it.”

“Why don’t you want to be a prince?” the boy asked wonderingly, stepping out from behind the door.

“Because when I wear that title, no one wants to be my friend,” Richard said honestly, his voice dropping. “Everyone becomes afraid of me. And yet... inside, I am just as lonely, just as hungry, and sometimes just as grumpy and scared as anyone else.”

Hana watched the crown prince from the shadows, her breath catching at his vulnerability.

Filip stepped closer, hesitating for a second, before poking Richard in the knee with a small, curious finger. Richard only smiled warmly. Suddenly, Filip lunged forward and threw his small arms tightly around the prince's neck.

“You look sad,” the boy whispered directly into his ear. “When I’m sad, my mama always hugs me until it goes away.”

Richard froze for a fraction of a second, a lump forming in his throat, before he wrapped his large arms around the boy and lifted him up. “I feel much better now, Filip. Thank you.”

He set the boy back down and looked up at Hana. “I meant what I said when we met the first time, Hana. It’s time for us to start looking out for one another again.”

Hana nodded, a genuine smile breaking through her tears. Before he left, she stepped forward and gave him a warm, hesitant hug of her own.

Several days passed, and the townspeople fully grew accustomed to the incredible fact that Kristof from the mill was their Prince. They learned they didn’t have to bow or fear his presence, and that his only desire was to help rebuild what had been broken.

The Royal Advisor, however, was far from thrilled by the reports coming from the lower town. He searched desperately for a way to silence Richard, terrified of the rebellion the young prince might incite among the peasants. Finally, he found a weak spot.

Klára was walking home from her shift at the castle when a group of corrupt guards ambushed her, seizing her by the arms.

An hour later, the Advisor appeared at the gates of Jonas's mill, a cruel smirk plastered across his face.

“Your Highness,” he addressed Richard, who was carrying a heavy beam across the yard. “I believe I have something in my possession that you might want back.”

Behind the Advisor, two guards stepped forward, dragging a struggling Klára.

A dangerous, terrifying anger flared in Richard’s eyes. He dropped the beam with a heavy thud and stepped directly into the Advisor's personal space, his tall frame looming over the older man.

“Let. Her. Go,” Richard said, his voice dropping to a register of absolute ice.

“Only if you put on your proper clothes and return to the palace where you belong, boy,” the Advisor sneered, leaning in.

Richard didn't back down. Instead, his hand subtly moved, and the metal of a heavy logging knife glinted in the sunlight. He pressed it lightly against the Advisor's ribs beneath his velvet doublet. “Release her this second,” Richard whispered, his breath hot against the Advisor's ear, “or the blade that was behind your belt will soon feel the warmth of your body from the inside.”

The Advisor’s smirk vanished instantly. He swallowed hard, feeling the sharp point pierce his outer coat, and frantically waved his hand to the guards. “Let her go! Let her go!”

The guards immediately released her.

“Go to your father, Klára,” Richard ordered without breaking eye contact with the traitor. Once she was safe inside, Richard gripped the Advisor's shoulder with a iron fist. “Let’s go. We’re taking a walk.”

Richard prodded the Advisor forward, marching him through the center of the town in broad daylight, all the way up the winding stone paths to the castle gates. He marched him straight into the throne room, shoving him down onto the cold marble before the King.

“Father,” Richard announced, his voice echoing off the high stone walls. “Your Advisor arrested the miller’s daughter without a single shred of cause or reason. He threatened the people and used your name to rob them. What shall be done with him?”

The King, looking stronger than he had in years, stepped down from the dais. He walked over to the kneeling Advisor and looked deep into his treacherous eyes.

“Throw him into the well,” the King said without a single second of hesitation. “And I want to see it done myself,” he added coldly.

The palace guards, who had secretly despised the man for a decade, grabbed the Advisor by his velvet lapels and dragged him out to the stone courtyard.

In the center of the courtyard sat an ancient, deep well. It had once served as the main source of drinking water for the fortress, but it had long been emptied after a modern water system was built for the town below. The Advisor didn't believe the King would actually follow through; he screamed and cursed, thinking it was a mere scare tactic.

But when they reached the stone edge and the guards pulled back the heavy iron grate, absolute panic set in.

"You cannot be serious, Your Majesty! After all these years of faithful service!" the Advisor shrieked, clawing at the stone.

"Precisely because of all those years," the King replied evenly. "Throw him in, please. I've finally had quite enough of his voice."

The guards hoisted the Advisor over the edge, tossing him down as if he were as light as a feather. A long, echoing scream faded into the depths, followed by a distant, echoing *splash* as he hit the shallow puddle at the absolute base.

The King ordered that he be left there for three days to think about his crimes before pulling him out to be locked in the lowest dungeon, where he would remain until he crumbled to dust.

With the Advisor gone, the King immediately began to undo all the damage that had been caused, lowering the sky-high taxes and restoring order to the realm. Richard, however, knew his work wasn't finished. He packed a simple traveling bag, preparing to set out on a journey to the neighboring villages to see how the rest of the kingdom lived.

Leaving the valley, however, proved to be the hardest thing he had ever done.

"Will we see you again?" Klára asked softly, standing by the mill wheel as he came to say his goodbyes.

Richard looked at her, his eyes soft. "The moment I return from my journey, Klára... I am coming straight back here for you."

Klára smiled, a flush creeping up her neck, and curtsied deeply. "It was an absolute honor, Your Highness."

Richard stepped forward, gently taking her hands to lift her up. "Klára, to you, I am forever just Richard. And believe me, the honor is entirely mine."

"Oh, stop with the endless goodbyes already and just come back quickly!" Jonas interjected, stepping out of the mill with a flour sack over his shoulder. He looked at the two of them with a smirk. "I won't be chasing away royal princes from my doorstep forever. Besides, I'd quite like to see my daughter in a proper wedding dress one day."

Both Richard and Klára froze, their faces turning a bright, matching shade of crimson.

Jonas laughed, a booming sound that echoed over the river. “I may be an old miller, children, but I’m not blind or stupid just yet.”

Richard let out a breath, a wide smile breaking across his face. He stepped over to the old man, and the two of them embraced in a strong, tight hug. “Jonas... thank you for everything. For the work, and for the trust.”

“No,” Jonas said warmly, patting his back. “Thank *you*, lad. Now move your royal boots and return to us quickly.”

Chapter 5 That’s how you know me

Richard arrived at the neighboring village around noon. The streets were entirely deserted. He walked through the dusty settlement, but met absolutely no one.

He returned to the center, which consisted of nothing more than a tiny, cobblestone square and a modest stone church. Hoping to find a living soul, he stepped inside. In the quiet, cool nave, he came across the local priest.

“Good day,” Richard greeted him. “I was honestly afraid there was no one left alive in this village.”

“Greetings, traveler,” the priest replied, looking up from the altar. “You must be from very far away, aren’t you?”

“It would seem so lately,” Richard agreed.

“Everyone is out working. Most are in the fields, and the rest are at the main farm tending to the livestock or packing food rations.”

Richard gave him a puzzled look at first, but then everything he had learned down in the town clicked together. “Ah... I assume all of this forced labor is happening because of the Royal Advisor. Or the King.”

The priest raised an eyebrow. “So, you aren’t from that far away after all.”

“I spent the last few weeks in the town below the castle,” Richard admitted, stepping closer. “Tell me, is the situation very bad here?”

“It is not good, my son. People work every single day on the manor’s lands and have absolutely nothing left for themselves. They live in constant fear of the guards and the Advisor. They only pray that the King and the Prince are satisfied with the quotas, so no one ends up behind bars.”

Richard rubbed his forehead and eyes, feeling a familiar weight pressing down on him. “Is there a place to sleep nearby? Tomorrow morning, I would like to join them in the fields.”

The priest smiled warmly. “You can sleep at the rectory. Every single helping hand is welcome here.”

“Thank you. I’d like to look around a bit more first.”

“Go ahead. I will wait for you here this evening.”

Richard nodded and headed back out. He was walking down a long, narrow lane in the middle of the village when the sound of quiet crying caught his attention. He quickened his pace and soon spotted a little girl sitting on the ground, weeping.

He knelt down beside her, trying to keep his voice as gentle as possible. “Hello, little one. Are you alright? What happened?”

The girl looked up at him in surprise, her tear-stained face turning red, but she didn’t answer. Richard noticed her bloody, badly scraped knee. She must have tripped over the uneven stones.

“It’s okay,” Richard reassured her. “I’ll take you back to your parents, but you have to tell me which way to go.”

“They are at the farm... That way,” she whispered, pointing toward the far side of the village with a trembling finger.

Richard looked into her small wicker basket and noticed a woven scarf. He gently took the scarf and used it to bandage her bleeding knee. “Come then.”

He lifted her carefully from the ground and carried her in his arms.

“Mama and Papa will be so angry,” she sobbed against his shoulder.

“Certainly not. Why would they be angry? It was just an accident. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

“But we won’t be able to send the eggs to the castle today,” the girl cried harder. “They all broke when I fell. The guards... the guards will surely take my parents to prison now.”

Richard felt a cold chill run down his spine. “What is your name, little one?”

“Rubi.”

“Rubi, I promise you, with everything I have, that today the guards won’t take anyone to prison. Not your mother, and not your father.”

It wasn’t long before they reached the gates of the village farm. Richard knocked firmly on the wooden door of the house. A tired-looking man opened it.

“Rubi!” he gasped. “What happened? Are you alright?”

Immediately, a worried woman appeared behind him.

“I think it’s just a scraped knee,” Richard said reassuringly, carefully handing Rubi over to her mother's arms.

“Oh, Rubi! Come, let me wash it for you right away,” the mother cried, rushing inside.

The man turned back to Richard, extending his hand. “Thank you for bringing her back safely. I’m Marek.”

Richard hesitated for a fraction of a second, adjusting to his alias. “Kristof,” he said finally, shaking the man's calloused hand. “I hope she’ll be alright.”

“She will be,” Marek sighed, his shoulders slumping. “But it will be much worse when the collection wagon arrives and we haven’t delivered the full quota. The entire egg delivery is lost.”

Just then, Rubi returned from the kitchen, her knee washed, holding the blood-stained cloth. Her mother followed close behind. “And the scarf too... Oh, hello, I’m Rebeka.”

“Kristof,” Richard introduced himself again, looking at the cloth. “Forgive me, but... does the castle really care that much about a single stained scarf?”

Rebeka gave him a sad, knowing smile. “You really are from far away, aren’t you, Kristof? It matters to them. Every single thread belongs to the crown. Though, word has been going around the valley lately that the Advisor was thrown into a dungeon.”

“Is that so?” Richard murmured.

“Yes, but the Prince is still up there,” Rebeka said bitterly. “And he doesn’t care what happens to us down here. I certainly don’t believe those ridiculous fairy tales the traders brought from the lower town—about the Prince working in a dusty mill. A spoiled tyrant like him? Never.”

Richard said nothing, but the words cut him deeply. He swallowed the bitterness in his throat.

“How can we ever thank you for helping Rubi?” Rebeka asked.

“I did nothing extraordinary. Please, don’t trouble yourselves at all.” He gave them a polite nod, turned around, and walked back toward the stone church.

“You’re back,” the priest called out from the shadows of the pews as Richard walked in.

“Hmm...” Richard muttered, his mind racing.

“Come, I’ll show you the room where you can settle in,” the old man said.

Richard followed him into the modest rectory next door. The priest offered him a simple dinner, but Richard could barely eat, mostly just picking at his food with his fork.

“Tell me, Father,” Richard finally broke the silence. “Do the royal guards come every single day to take the harvest and the meat from the farm?”

The priest paused, taken aback by the intensity of the question. “Yes. That is how the system has worked here for years.”

“And how do the guards treat the people when they arrive?”

“I must admit,” the priest mused, scratching his chin, “in the last few days, they have been much more lenient than ever before. They definitely aren’t threatening anyone with the cells or the whip.”

Richard let out a long, quiet sigh of relief. “At least there’s that... And when do they usually arrive for the collection?”

“In about half an hour.”

“Can I go watch?”

“Hmm... I think so. The townspeople always gather inside the church to turn over their goods.”

An hour later, Richard sat quietly in the very back pew, hidden in the shadows, waiting to see how the interaction would play out. Gradually, the exhausted villagers entered the church, carrying baskets of grain, bundles of wool, and cured meats. He saw Rebeka, Marek, and little Rubi arrive as well, looking terrified.

After a few minutes, the heavy oak doors opened, and four royal guards walked in. Richard sharpened his attention immediately—he recognized the lead guard. It was Adam, a man who used to be the Advisor’s right-hand enforcer.

One by one, the villagers turned in what they had gathered. Finally, Marek stepped up to the table. Adam looked at the ledger and then at Marek's empty hands.

“Where is the egg quota, Marek?” Adam asked, his voice firm but notably lacking his old malice.

A trembling Marek swallowed hard, stepping back. “There... there was an accident, sir. My daughter fell on the stones. The entire basket was smashed. The eggs are gone.”

Richard gripped the wooden pew in front of him, tense and ready to spring forward to intervene if the guard drew his cane.

Adam stared at the terrified father intently for a long moment. Then, he let out a sigh and closed the ledger. “I am sure the King and the Prince will understand an accident. Step back.”

The relief in the church was palpable. The people slowly began to disperse, murmuring in hushed tones, until only Richard, the priest, and the guards remained in the quiet sanctuary.

Richard rose from the shadows and approached the altar.

“Did you forget something, traveler?” Adam asked, his back still turned as he lifted a crate.

“No,” Richard said smoothly. “I just wanted to personally thank you for your leniency regarding the broken eggs.”

Adam froze. He knew that voice all too well. He turned around slowly, his eyes widening in shock. “Your High—”

“Kristof,” Richard interrupted him firmly, casting a quick glance toward the priest.

Adam swallowed hard and nodded quickly. “Kristof. Of course.”

“I want to ask you something, Adam,” Richard said, dropping his voice. “Will anything be left for these people to eat, or are we actually paying them for the labor they provide for our kingdom?”

Adam looked around nervously, then stepped closer to the prince. “High... Kristof. There is something vital you should know. While the Advisor was still running the palace, he always ordered us to divert a large portion of this village's harvest to a private manor house just beyond the eastern fields.”

Richard’s eyes narrowed. “And who lives in that manor?”

“I believe his son lives there,” Adam whispered. “Since the Advisor was thrown into the dungeon, we stopped delivering the stolen food there. But I fear the son will soon appear in the village to demand his share. Knowing that family, he won’t be afraid to impersonate you, sir. He might have even done it before to keep the people compliant.”

A realization washed over Richard, making his stomach turn. *The Prince who came with the Advisor and ordered the lashings... it wasn't me.*

“Thank you, Adam,” Richard said, his jaw tight with controlled fury. “You’ve done well. You can send word to my father that I am investigating the matter personally. From this day forward, we will either leave the villagers a significant portion of their own harvest, or the crown will start paying them fair wages.”

Adam looked sheepish, shifting his weight. “If I may speak freely, sir?”

“Go on.”

“I think leaving them a portion of the harvest would help them much more than gold at first,” Adam said softly. “Most of them are genuinely starving.”

Richard looked at the guard, a small smile returning to his face. “Thank you, Adam. If I'm not careful, I might just make you my new Royal Advisor.”

Adam grimaced playfully. “I’d rather you didn’t, Your Highness. I prefer keeping my head.”

Richard laughed, and Adam gave a respectful nod before loading the last basket onto the wagon and leading his men out into the night.

The priest, Rafael, had been watching the entire exchange from a safe distance near the sacristy. He slowly walked over to Richard.

“Is everything alright, Kristof?” the old priest asked.

“Yes. They are leaving,” Richard replied, watching the heavy doors close.

The priest turned off the main lanterns, locked the heavy church doors, and the two of them walked back to the rectory in the dark. Richard remained completely silent, his thoughts consumed by the Advisor’s son.

“For someone who claims to have only spent a few days in the lower town,” Rafael said, breaking the silence as they walked, “you seem to know the elite royal guard remarkably well. Usually, common folk flee from them. But these ones... they seemed almost afraid of you.”

Richard blinked, shaken out of his thoughts. “What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing, Your Highness,” the priest replied smoothly.

Richard nodded instinctively to the title, then froze in his tracks, his eyes widening. “Your Highness?”

But the priest was already casually opening the door to the rectory, a knowing smile on his face. “I am Rafael, my son. And you would be Prince Richard, if I am not mistaken.”

Richard let out a long, defeated laugh. “Being a stranger in my own country is turning out to be an impossible task. But please... I would like to remain just Kristof here.”

“As you wish.”

“It’s not a royal command, Father. Just a request from ordinary Kristof.”

“Then to you, I am just Rafael,” the priest countered warmly. “Will you have a glass of wine? You look like you desperately need it. So... I suppose those incredible rumors traveling up from the lower town about you are actually true.”

“Depends on which rumors,” Richard said grimly, taking a seat by the hearth. “When I found out what the Advisor had been claiming about me to the people, I wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out. He clearly spread the same lies here. Perhaps even worse.”

“The people here believe you are cruel, greedy, and utterly merciless,” Rafael said gently, pouring the wine.

Richard stared at the red liquid. “Tomorrow morning, I am going to the fields with them.”

“Are you entirely sure that is wise, Your Highness?”

“I managed to survive working a broken mill grindstone, Rafael. I think I can handle a hoe. It’s time to try something else.”

The next morning, Richard woke up before the sun had even cleared the horizon. When he stepped out of the rectory into the misty morning air, he immediately spotted Marek, Rebeka, and little Rubi heading toward the eastern path.

“Kristof! Good morning,” Rebeka called out in surprise. “What brings you out so early?”

“I just thought it was time to get to work,” Richard smiled, adjusting a heavy wooden tool over his shoulder. “Father Rafael told me every single hand is needed for the harvest.”

“Then come with us!” Marek invited warmly. “We’re headed to the main plot right now.”

Richard fell into step beside them, looking down at the little girl. “And what about you, Rubi? Are you going to the fields too? Is your knee feeling any better today?”

Rubi sheepishly lowered her head, a small blush forming on her cheeks, and nodded quickly.

When they reached the eastern valley, the field looked as if it had no end, stretching out to the horizon in massive, daunting rows. Marek took Rubi to the far side to gather greens, while Rebeka stayed in the main row with Richard. Every single line of crops had to be hoed, watered, and weeded by hand under the rising sun.

“Do you really have to do this every single day?” Richard asked, his back already aching as he hacked at the dry earth.

“Almost every day,” Rebeka replied, wiping sweat from her brow. “If we aren’t working this field, we are at the dairy farm, or in the orchards, or tending the vineyards. We rotate the labor through the seasons.”

“At least the crown allows you to keep a fair portion of the harvest for your own tables?” Richard inquired, testing her.

Rebeka paused her hoe, bursting into a loud, bitter laugh. “Oh, Kristof... now you’ve really amused me. Keep a portion of the King’s sacred harvest? No one in this valley would ever dare.”

“Then what do you live on?” Richard pressed, his jaw tightening. “It didn't look like the guards paid you a single groschen for the crop last night.”

Rebeka sighed, leaning heavily on her wooden tool. “Life in the village is a slow starvation, Kristof. We aren’t allowed to keep anything we harvest for the palace. We only survive on the tiny garden plots we manage to grow for ourselves at night—which isn’t much, because we spend all our daylight hours sweating here. Once a month, the overseers allow us to keep the rotten leftovers from the wagons. That is our grand reward.”

Richard hacked forcefully at a weed. “But no one can know exactly how many potatoes are hidden in this earth, or exactly how many eggs a hen lays every morning.”

“A few years ago, we tried,” Rebeka whispered, her voice dropping as she looked around fearfully. “We practically fell to our knees and begged the Advisor and the Prince to let us keep just a small fraction. Just enough to feed our children and save a little for the winter. But the Prince... he got incredibly angry. He ordered the guards to take absolutely everything we had stored. We ended up with nothing but starvation and thirty lashes from a cane. No one ever dared to ask again.”

Richard froze, his grip tightening on the wooden handle until his knuckles turned white. “The Prince... the Prince was actually here? In this village?”

“Yes,” Rebeka nodded grimly, turning back to her row. “It doesn’t happen often, but he appears occasionally to enforce the quotas. Always riding a white horse right beside the Advisor.”

Richard’s blood boiled with a pure, white-hot fury. His chest heaved as he looked across the endless field, spotting little Rubi. With her tiny, scraped hands and her bandaged knee, the child was diligently pulling stubborn weeds from the dirt, waiting patiently for a meager piece of stale bread at lunch.

The Advisor's son had not just stolen food; he had stolen Richard's face to commit atrocities against his own people. And Richard was going to make sure he paid for every single lash.

Chapter 6 Have a Diner with us

When the guards arrived at the church that evening, Richard immediately caught Adam’s eye and subtly gestured for him to step aside into the shadow of the stone pillars.

“My father sends word,” Richard whispered, his voice steady and authoritative. “You are to do everything in your power to ensure these people have enough food and everything they need to survive the winter. The King was deeply, genuinely saddened to hear how brutal life has become in this valley.”

Adam bowed his head respectfully. “Thank you, Your Highness. I will ensure the men understand.”

“When you are finished collecting the tallies tonight,” Richard instructed, “leave a full third of everything here for them.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The guards went about their duties, collecting the day’s harvest as they always did. But before departing through the heavy oak doors, they quietly set aside several large, overflowing wicker baskets near the altar. They loaded the remaining two-thirds onto the heavy transport wagon and drove away into the dusk.

Father Rafael was the first to notice the left-behind bounty. He glanced back toward the shadows, immediately suspecting that Richard was behind this sudden miracle. The weary villagers were already turning to disperse to their cold homes when the priest’s voice echoed under the stone vaults.

“Wait a moment, everyone! Please, come back.” Rafael called out, gesturing to the altar. “The guards left several baskets here. I think it is only right that you divide the food among yourselves tonight.”

A heavy, distrustful silence fell over the church.

“What?” someone from the crowd called out, stepping forward. “No way, Father. We aren't stupid. I remember only too well what happened the last time we touched a single grain that belonged to the palace.”

Richard broke his silence, speaking up calmly from his hiding place in the very back pew. “The royal guards wouldn’t just carelessly forget to take a third of the harvest, my friends. They must have received a direct, sovereign order from the King himself to leave them here. I am absolutely certain it is meant for you.”

Leonard, one of the oldest and most respected men in the village, turned around, squinting through the dim candlelight. “And who are you to be so certain, young man?”

“I am Kristof,” Richard replied, stepping into the faint light. “I used to be a guard at the palace. I know exactly how these logistics work.”

Leonard narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “And why aren’t you wearing their armor anymore? What did you do to end up hiding out in a place like this?”

“I left of my own accord,” Richard said evenly. “Because I chose to.”

“Kristof is right,” Rafael intervened quickly, trying to defuse the growing tension. “The guards only follow orders from above. It must have been a direct command from the King... or perhaps the Prince.”

“Pah, the Prince,” a bitter voice muttered from the middle of the crowd. “A spoiled wolf who doesn't even know we exist.”

Richard’s eyes flashed, a dangerous edge creeping into his tone. “Isn’t it at least a feeling of pure justice to take something that he claims is his? If this Prince is truly as arrogant, cruel, and indifferent as you all say, then he deserves nothing less than to lose it. Simply take what is yours by right of your sweat. He cannot throw an entire village into the dungeon. If the people rise up together, what can he possibly do? You must stand as one and fight for what is rightfully yours.”

Marek stepped forward, his face pale as he looked back at his wife and little Rubi. “Maybe that works in a traveler's fairy tale, Kristof. Here in the real world, he has everyone broken. And forgive me, but the absolute last thing I ever want to see again are our children and our elders with the bloody marks of a whip across their backs.”

Richard felt a sharp pang in his chest, but he locked eyes with Marek. “I’d like to see that coward try to issue an order for a whipping while the cold edge of a steel blade tickles his throat. You earned this food. Take what you need.”

Without waiting for a reply, Richard stepped backward and vanished completely into the deep shadows of the church corridors. The villagers hesitated for a long time, murmuring nervously. But hunger eventually won. One by one, they stepped up and took what they needed to feed their families. Yet, even after everyone had taken a share, half of what the guards had left still remained untouched by the altar.

When Rafael finally returned to the quiet rectory later that night, he found Richard sitting alone in the dark kitchen. The young prince was staring blankly at the fading embers of the hearth, clearly waiting for him.

“You know you’ve turned the people against your own name today, don't you?” Rafael said softly, pulling up a wooden stool.

Richard didn't look up. “Do they have what they needed tonight?”

“Yes,” the priest sighed, a gentle smile touching his lips. “It took a great deal of convincing, but in the end, they took what they required. I believe you’ve managed to return a flicker of hope and life to their veins, Your Highness.”

“That is good,” Richard muttered, his jaw tight. “It is past time they received what they deserve.”

The guards left another generous portion of the harvest the following evening, but this time, a thick wave of anxiety washed over the church. The people gathered around the baskets, but no one reached out a hand.

“We shouldn’t do this again,” Leonard spoke up firmly, his voice echoing in the quiet sanctuary after the wagon had gone. “We don’t know for certain if this was truly the King’s mercy. The guards said absolutely nothing to us. Yesterday we took what we needed, and our pantries have enough for a few days. If someone is still lacking, let

them take a handful, but we shouldn’t keep taking blindly. If it’s a trap, we are ruining ourselves.”

Richard sat in his usual spot in the last pew, watching the scene unfold with a heavy heart. True to Leonard's words, no one touched a single potato. The villagers quietly filed out into the night.

Rafael eventually walked down the aisle and sat down heavily beside the silent prince. The church was dark; the old priest had almost locked the doors, thinking Richard had already left.

“Is it because they are simply too afraid,” Richard murmured into the darkness, “or do they truly not need any more?”

“There is likely only one way for a prince to find out,” Rafael replied wisely, placing a hand on Richard's shoulder. “You must go out and see the reality for yourself.”

Richard nodded slowly. They rose and walked out of the church together.

“I’m going for a short walk to clear my head,” Richard said, turning down the main path through the settlement.

The village looked completely different tonight compared to the bleak, silent ghost town he had encountered on his first day. Warm yellow light flickered through the windows of the small stone cottages. For the first time, the faint, beautiful sounds of casual conversation and genuine laughter drifted through the evening air.

“Kristof?” a voice called out from behind him.

Richard turned on his heel and saw Leonard standing by a small wooden gate.

“Good evening, Leonard,” Richard greeted him.

The old man walked over, inspecting him. “Are you alright, lad? You look like you’re carrying the weight of the castle on those shoulders.”

“Depends on how you look at it,” Richard said with a faint, tired smile. “But I will be.”

Leonard patted his arm. “Then come inside with us for a moment. Don’t walk the dark roads alone.”

Richard stepped into Leonard's house. It was small, humble, and crowded, but it felt incredibly cozy and warm. Leonard’s wife, Sabína, was busy by the hearth preparing dinner. Just then, their young son, Oli, rushed in from the yard, carefully holding three fresh eggs, a handful of potatoes, and a small onion.

“Good evening,” Richard said politely, dipping his head under the low ceiling.

“Kristof! Welcome to our home,” Sabína welcomed him with a bright, maternal smile. She took the ingredients from her son and glanced at the pot. “Oli, run back out and bring two more potatoes from the bin, please. We have a guest.”

“Come now, don’t be shy, lad,” Leonard urged, pulling out a rickety wooden chair. “Sit with us. It’s not a grand parlor like the rectory, but we’ll fit comfortably.”

Richard froze, an intense wave of guilt washing over him as he looked at the modest kitchen. “I... I don’t want to trouble you, truly. I only went for a walk to clear my head. I shouldn't impose on your dinner.”

“No arguments in this house!” Sabína said cheerfully, waving a wooden spoon. “Just stay right there. Dinner will be ready in a single moment. We have more than enough to go around tonight.”

Richard nodded slowly, sitting down. He didn’t want to offend her deep hospitality, but the food felt like ash in his mouth before he even tasted it. Every comfort they had was built on the back of his family's failure to protect them.

“I’ll tell you true, lad,” Leonard began, shaking his head as he leaned over the table. “You certainly have an unbelievable amount of courage. What you shouted out in the church yesterday...” He let out a low whistle. “I’m not saying I wouldn’t want to see that arrogant Prince get his throat tickled with a blade, but it was properly reckless. If any other guards had heard you, you’d have ended up on the gallows or a head shorter by sunrise.”

Richard’s expression darkened. “It angers me to my core, Leonard. How you are forced to live here. Working every single day from dawn until dusk, bleeding for the land, and having absolutely nothing to show for it but threats and terror. And all because of a traitorous Advisor who lied to the entire kingdom.”

“It’s very kind of a stranger to care so much,” Sabína mused aloud, setting down wooden bowls. “But you’ll never get anywhere near the Prince to change things, Kristof. The royal guard would catch a commoner before you even got within ten meters of the palace gates. What are we even dreaming about? You cannot defy the crown without bloody consequences.”

She paused, looking at Richard intently. “And why would a young man like you even care so much? You don't belong to this dirt. You can pack your bags and leave at any time; you don’t have to stay here and slave away in the fields. This isn’t a place where a man earns a better life. You’d have far more success finding your fortune in the trading town below the castle.”

Sabína leaned in, her eyes sharp. “I don’t know... it seems to me that you are here for a very specific reason. As if you deliberately wanted to taste what a hard, miserable life feels like. You must truly be from very far away, Kristof. A place of great prosperity. Perhaps a land where there isn't even a kingdom, and the common people rule themselves.”

Richard stared into his empty bowl, his chest tightening. “Maybe... maybe I should just go up there and have a serious talk with your Prince.”

Leonard let out a loud laugh, patting his rough hand on the table. “Just leave that dagger of yours at home if you do, lad!”

“It’s served!” Sabína interrupted, lifting a steaming pot of simple vegetable soup to the table. “And after that, we actually have a small plate of potatoes and meat.”

Richard ate the dinner with them, forcing down every bite as the crushing sense of guilt refused to leave his mind. These people were sharing their meager celebration with the very man whose name had been used to terrorize them.

After the meal, Leonard kept Richard a bit longer. The two men stayed by the dying fire in the kitchen, slowly sipping hot herbal tea.

“I’d like to help this village layout a permanent solution,” Richard sighed, rubbing his temples. “But I truly have no idea how to make you see that things can change.”

“You are already helping us, Kristof,” Leonard said warmly, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper. “You work the heavy rows with us without a single complaint. You clearly have grit, and for some strange, beautiful reason... you actually care about the fate of ordinary people. That alone is a rare gift.”

“But you must stop letting the fear rule you, Leonard,” Richard pressed, leaning forward. “You have to stand your ground when the time comes.”

Leonard gave a sad, cynical shake of his head. “We are only subjects, lad. We are the dirt beneath the boots. No one of royal blood will ever concern themselves with the plight of a starving farmer.”

Richard looked directly into the old man's eyes, his voice ringing with absolute, undisguised royalty. “But the entire kingdom stands on your shoulders, Leonard. A good king is made solely by happy, prosperous people and peace in the land. Not by misery, terror, and systematic fear. Without you, the castle is nothing but an empty stone shell.”

Leonard stared at him, caught off guard by the sheer power behind the traveler's words. A slow smile crept onto the old man's face. “You have an incredibly wise heart, Kristof. If only our true Prince had a heart like yours... the world would be a very different place.”

Richard swallowed the lump in his throat and stood up, adjusting his cloak. “Thank you for the dinner, the hospitality, and the kind words, Leonard. Good night to you all.”

He said his goodbyes and headed back out into the cool night air, walking quickly toward the rectory. Rafael had left the heavy wooden door unlocked, just as he promised, so the prince could enter even after the midnight hour.

As Richard stepped into the dim hallway, he met the old priest, who was just carrying a candle on his way to his quarters. Richard gave him a silent, weary nod, and the

two men walked toward their rooms in the quiet house, the weight of the coming confrontation hanging heavily in the air.

Chapter 7 Arrest me

The next day, Richard spent long, quiet hours working in the orchards, reaching up into the heavy branches to pick fruit alongside the villagers. He kept his distance, respecting their fear, but his eyes never stopped watching them.

In the evening, as the shadows lengthened across the stone square, the royal guards returned for the collection. This time, however, they didn't wait for him to step into the dark corners. Adam and two others actively sought him out behind the church.

“Kristof,” Adam said quietly, tipping his helmet. “Your father sends his word. He asks how you are faring out here, and if you are entirely alright.”

“Thank you, Adam. Tell him I am fine,” Richard replied, wiping the dirt from his hands. “But the people here... they are not at their best. They are paralyzed by fear. Perhaps if the King came here himself, looked them in the eyes, and spoke to them directly, the weight would finally lift from their chests.”

Adam nodded seriously. “I will pass on the message tonight. Tell me, should we leave a portion of the food again? We found yesterday’s baskets still sitting by the altar, completely untouched.”

Richard thought for a painful moment. “Leave them again. But this time, don’t just walk away in silence. Tell the people explicitly that it is a gift from the King himself, a reward for their grueling work and effort. Tell them to take what they need for their homes, and take the rest away with you on the wagons. Even with those words, I fear they will be too terrified to touch anything extra.”

Adam bowed his head. “It shall be done.”

As the guard withdrew, Richard turned around and noticed little Rubi watching him from a distance, her small fingers gripping the edge of a wooden cart. He walked over to her, kneeling down.

“Hey, little one,” he said softly. “How is that knee treating you today?”

“It’s almost completely healed!” she said, a small, proud smile breaking through her shyness.

“I’m very glad to hear that. Are your father and mother nearby?”

“They’re coming right behind me. They have a mountain of work to finish today.”

Richard stood up and walked down the path to meet them. Both Marek and Rebeka were heavily laden, their arms full of overflowing baskets filled with fresh peppers and autumn fruit.

“Here, let me take that load,” Richard said smoothly, stepping in front of Rebeka and gently lifting the heaviest basket from her arms.

“Oh, thank you, Kristof,” Rebeka breathed, offering him a grateful smile as she wiped her brow. “One wouldn’t believe how heavy a simple harvest of peppers can feel by sunset.”

Marek, however, walked beside them in total silence, his jaw set and his eyes fixed firmly on the ground. The warm, conversational mood from the previous night was entirely gone.

“Are you alright, Marek?” Richard asked him gently.

Marek didn't look at him. He merely gave a stiff, tight nod.

When they entered the church, the atmosphere was suffocating. True to Richard's instructions, Adam announced the King's gift, but when the guards offered the overflowing baskets, the villagers stood like statues. No one stepped forward. No one took a single piece of fruit.

“Marek, please, may I ask you something?” Richard stopped the man in the aisle as the crowd began to file out of the church in a hurry.

Marek stopped in his tracks, looking at him with a mixture of sorrow and deep apprehension. Rebeka took Rubi’s hand, giving Richard a worried glance, and walked ahead to leave the two men alone.

“Why does no one want to take the food, Marek?” Richard pressed quietly. “Your children are starving.”

Marek let out a bitter, exhausted breath. “You used to be a guard, Kristof. You know how their minds work. And we... we aren't blind. We know you asked them to leave those baskets. We’ve seen you talking to them in the shadows more than once.”

Marek stepped closer, his voice trembling with a father's desperation. “Look, lad... we know you mean well, though I have absolutely no idea why a stranger is risking his skin for us. You might have the unbelievable courage to stand up to the executioners and defy the Prince. But we? We have families to look after. We have children to keep alive. We cannot afford your bravery.”

Richard opened his mouth to speak, but the words died in his throat. He remained standing in the center of the aisle, silent and hollow, as Marek turned and walked away.

For the next several days, a heavy shroud fell over the village. Richard kept entirely to himself. He went to the fields, worked the dairy farm, and cleared the orchards alongside the folk, but he stayed at a distance, a silent shadow sharing their labor but respecting their wall of fear.

The fragile peace shattered on a Tuesday afternoon.

Richard was at the farm with the others, methodically watering rows of young peppers, when the sharp sound of hooves echoed through the yard. A fine white stallion trotted into the center of the farm, and a young man dressed in rich velvet, flanked by two armed men, dismounted with an arrogant flourish.

Richard didn't pay much attention at first, keeping his back turned as he continued his work.

“Your Highness,” one of the farmhands whispered in sheer terror.

Within seconds, every single villager in the yard dropped to their knees, bowing their heads into the dirt. Richard, however, quietly set down his watering can. He straightened his spine and stood tall, his dark eyes locking onto the visitor.

The young nobleman swaggered forward, but stopped when he noticed the solitary figure refusing to bow. “You clearly don’t know how to behave your peasant self in the sacred presence of a prince,” the man sneered, raising a leather riding crop.

But as Richard stepped out of the rows and the sunlight hit his face, the nobleman’s smirk vanished. He froze, his face draining of all color.

“Ah... so, *Your Highness*,” Richard said, his voice dropping into a dangerous, rhythmic purr. “At last, I have the absolute honor of meeting you.”

The fake prince stumbled back a step, his breath catching. “You...”

“Hmm... we really should have a long, thorough talk about how you treat your beloved subjects,” Richard continued, constantly closing the physical space between them, his towering frame casting a long shadow over the impostor. The fake prince retreated in a panic until his velvet back hit the rough wooden wall of the main barn. He was trapped.

“Because what I hear about your reign, I don’t like in the least,” Richard whispered, standing directly in front of him. Before the guards could even react, Richard lunged forward, slamming his heavy forearm hard against the man’s neck, pinning him brutally to the barn wall.

The impostor choked, his eyes wide with terror as he stared into the eyes of the true heir to the throne.

“Robbing them of every single grain they harvest,” Richard growled, his voice vibrating with white-hot fury. “And then throwing them into the deep cells, or punishing their aching bodies with a cane and a whip. Look at me.” Richard pressed

harder, cutting off his breath. “Listen to me very carefully, boy. If I hear even once more that you so much as looked in the direction of this valley, I will personally have you locked in a dungeon until your bones turn black, just like your treacherous father. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind and call the executioner.”

The moment Richard released his grip, the terrified son of the Advisor stumbled, gasped for air, and scrambled onto his horse. He spurred the animal furiously, fleeing the village at a frantic gallop, his guards scrambling to follow him.

The entire yard was dead silent. Every single worker stood as if they had been struck by lightning, staring at the common laborer named Kristof.

“Kristof?” a terrified Marek whispered from the dirt, his voice shaking.

Richard turned back to face them. They were all staring at him in absolute awe and mounting horror. Rebeka burst into tears of pure fear, pulling little Rubi tightly against her chest as if expecting immediate retaliation.

“That man,” Richard announced clearly to the crowd, “was the Advisor’s son. He was not the Prince.”

Leonard stepped forward, his eyes wide. “How... how could you possibly know that for certain, lad?”

“I grew up with him,” Richard said simply.

“You grew up... in the palace?” Rebeka breathed, her eyes darting to his stance.

Richard didn't answer. He merely picked up his watering can, but the illusion was shattered. The villagers returned to their tasks, but no one dared look him in the eye for the rest of the afternoon.

As evening fell and the people were nervously preparing the baskets for the daily delivery, the sound of heavy hooves echoed at the farm gates once more. This time, a full squad of royal guards rode in. At the front was Patrik, the seasoned Captain of the Guard.

Patrik dismounted heavily, his armored boots crunching on the gravel as he marched directly up to Richard.

“Will I find out what exactly happened here today?” Patrik demanded, his booming voice echoing across the quiet yard. The villagers held their breath, frozen in place.

Richard looked at the captain calmly. “What did they tell you, Patrik?”

“The reports claimed that a dangerous rebel attacked Prince Richard in broad daylight,” Patrik said, looking at him with a piercing, questioningly intense gaze.

“Well, that part would be true. The attack happened,” Richard said evenly. “Except it wasn’t the Prince who was assaulted, but the Advisor’s sniveling son, who has been impersonating the crown to rob these people.”

Patrik stepped even closer, his face inches from Richard's. The tension in the yard was thick enough to cut with a dull blade. The captain stared into the prince's eyes, seeing the absolute resolve there. When Patrik spoke again, his voice dropped to a quiet, rough murmur meant only for Richard’s ears.

“Trying to play the hero again, sir? What exactly do you want me to do here?” Patrik asked, looking at him with the weary affection of a man who had bailed the reckless prince out of trouble a dozen times before. “What’s the play?”

“I suppose you should arrest me, Captain,” Richard whispered back with a faint smirk.

“Or you could just tell them who you are and end this theater,” Patrik grumbled, shaking his head reproachfully. “By the way, your father is arriving in the village tonight... So, it was the Advisor’s son all along. Unbelievable.” Neither man blinked. “Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this?”

Richard simply gave a firm, single nod.

Patrik let out a heavy sigh and stepped back, his voice instantly snapping back into his loud, commanding captain's persona. “Hands!” he barked sharply, drawing a pair of heavy iron bindings.

Richard held out his wrists, and the iron clicked shut with a heavy metallic ring. The villagers watched in stunned, terrified silence as Patrik gripped Richard's shoulder and began to lead him through the center of the village toward the stone church.

“By the way, Your Highness,” Patrik muttered under his breath as they walked down the deserted lane. “What exactly am I officially arresting you for in the logbook?”

“For inciting sedition against the Prince and the King,” Richard replied quietly. “The people are terrified of me anyway, Patrik. There’s no point in revealing my identity right now. They think I am nothing but a magnet for trouble. It is far better for their peace of mind if they believe the crown has simply removed the problem by dragging me away. But... I have one request of you.”

“Whatever you wish, sir.”

“I want to sit in the back. I want to see my father speak to them without my shadow looming over the conversation.”

Patrik nodded understandingly.

When they reached the church, Patrik led the bound prince to the very last pew, sitting beside him in the shadows. A few moments later, the heavy doors opened, and the villagers filed in, their faces pale as they saw the heavy guard presence.

Suddenly, the crowd parted, and the King himself stepped before the altar, dressed in his royal robes but carrying an expression of deep, paternal sorrow.

“My people,” the King's voice rang out, strong and clear under the stone arches. “I have recently learned that every single grain you grow, every animal you raise, has been taken from your tables to fill the royal stores. I am deeply grateful for your hard work, but I also now know that my former Advisor systematically starved you and left you with nothing. That injustice ends tonight.”

A collective gasp rippled through the church.

“When my son and I learned of this betrayal,” the King continued, his eyes sweeping over the crowd, “we ordered the guards to leave a full third of the harvest for your families. You have earned your reward. Furthermore, starting tomorrow, the royal guards will begin paying you fair wages in silver for your labor, so that you may purchase everything you need from the trading towns. I do not want you to live in fear of my name, or the name of the Prince, any longer. If you lack anything, ask. We will do everything in our power to make your lives prosperous.”

Richard smiled faintly from the darkness of the back pew. He leaned over, nudging Patrik with his elbow. “Take me to him.”

Patrik stood up, guiding the bound prince down the center aisle. The villagers shrank back as the prisoner was marched straight up to the altar.

The King looked at the chains on his son's wrists, his brow furrowing in utter confusion. “What is the meaning of this, Captain?”

“We arrested this man for sedition against the King and the Prince, Your Majesty,” Patrik announced with a completely straight face. “And today, he even physically assaulted the Prince at the farm.”

The King looked into Richard’s eyes, seeing the quiet spark of amusement and the silent plea to play along. The King knew his son far too well; he knew there was a brilliant, calculated reason why Richard had allowed himself to be bound.

“Very well,” the King said firmly, masking his smile. “Take him away to the capital. I shall deal with his punishment personally.”

Several weeks passed, and the heavy dust over the kingdom finally began to settle. The new reforms took root, and a peaceful, prosperous calm washed over the valley. Richard spent his days dividing his time between his duties and Jonas's mill, finding every excuse to walk along the riverbanks with Klára.

One crisp afternoon, as Richard was preparing to visit the lower town, Adam rode up to the mill gates, dismounting with a respectful salute.

“Prince Richard,” the guard addressed him.

“Adam,” Richard smiled, shaking his hand. “Are you on your way out to the neighboring village for the weekly tally?”

“Yes, sir. That’s actually the reason I stopped by,” Adam said, shifting his weight. “The village elders have gathered at the church. They requested an audience with the Prince. They say they have a formal petition to present, and they didn’t want to burden the King with it in the capital.”

Richard’s interest sharpened. “Of course. Let’s go.”

He said a tender goodbye to Klára, nodded to Jonas, and mounted his horse, riding alongside Adam back down the familiar dirt tracks.

By the time they arrived at the village square, the afternoon collection was already finished. The townspeople had turned in their shares, received their silver coins, and were slowly dispersing across the cobblestones. Adam hurried ahead to help the men secure the storage wagons, while Richard quietly slipped through the side doors of the stone church.

He walked into the dim sanctuary and took his old, familiar seat in the very last pew.

At the far end of the row, Sabína was sitting quietly, adjusting her shawl. The moment she turned her head and her eyes adjusted to the shadows, she let out a sharp gasp. “Kristof!”

She lunged forward, throwing her arms tightly around his neck in a warm, fiercely maternal hug. “Oh, thank the heavens! They actually released you! We were all so terribly worried when the guards dragged you away in chains. Have you come back to stay with us, lad?”

Richard felt a profound warmth fill his chest as he hugged her back. “Sabína... it is so incredibly good to see you again. But no, I’m only here for a brief moment. Tell me, how are you all doing? Does the village have everything it needs?”

“Oh, it’s a crying pity you won’t stay,” Sabína sighed, letting him go but keeping a hand on his arm. “But yes, we have everything we could ever ask for. The very night you were arrested, everything changed for the better. The King's mercy saved us.”

Just then, Adam marched down the center aisle, stopping at the end of the pew. He straightened his spine and bowed deeply to the young man sitting in the dust.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” Adam said clearly, his voice echoing off the stone walls. “The village elders would like to speak with you now. They are waiting near the altar with the guards.”

Richard offered Sabína a soft look. “I’m coming, Adam.” He turned back to the stunned woman. “I was truly glad to see you again, Sabína.” He gave her another gentle squeeze, stood up, and followed the guard down the aisle.

Leonard, Marek, and a handful of the senior farmers were waiting anxiously by the steps of the altar. As Richard approached, his hood falling back, he offered them a warm smile.

“Leonard, Marek,” Richard greeted them gently. “Did something happen? Do you need royal assistance with the winter stores? Is little Rubi alright?”

The men froze, their mouths dropping open as they stared at the tall, broad-shouldered man standing before them.

“Kristof?!” Leonard exploded, his voice cracking with utter disbelief. “It’s... it’s you!”

“Yes, Leonard, it's me,” Richard smiled. “And I’m thrilled to hear Rubi is doing well. I’m glad you’re all safe. Actually, Adam told me you were waiting here to speak with the Prince. You had a petition?”

Marek swallowed hard, looking around the empty church in confusion. “We... we were waiting here for the Prince because we wanted to beg him for your release from the dungeon, lad. We felt terrible about what happened. But as I see, you’re already free. And the Prince... well, the lazy royal probably didn’t bother to show up anyway.”

Just then, another armored royal guard stepped up to Richard's side, bowing low. “Your Highness, do you require any further assistance from the squad? Should we bring the ledger or horses?”

“No, thank you, Thomas,” Richard replied smoothly. “Everything is perfectly in order here.”

“We will wait outside the gates then, sir.”

“Thank you. And you don’t have to wait to escort me back. Just leave me a fresh horse by the post.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” the guard said respectfully, turning on his heel and marching out of the church.

The village men stood in a dead, suffocating silence. They looked from the departing guard back to the young man in the simple travelling cloak.

“Kristof!” a high, joyful voice shattered the silence.

Little Rubi came sprinting out from behind the pews, her face glowing. Richard didn't hesitate—he immediately knelt down on the stone floor, catching the little girl in his arms and lifting her high into the air.

“Rubi! I think you’ve grown a whole inch since I left!” Richard laughed, holding her close as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Rubi, darling... wait, stop, that’s...” Marek stammered, his face turning a ghostly shade of white as his mind frantically pieced the puzzle together.

Rebeka hurried up the steps to join them, her breath catching as she stared at the scene. “Kristof! You’re truly alright,” she breathed, clutching Marek’s arm. “So you didn’t even have to face the wrath of the Prince for the assault? Did the Prince even

bother to come to the valley today?” she added, looking around the empty sanctuary curiously.

Richard gave her a remarkably kind, soft smile.

Marek’s hands began to shake as the terrifying, beautiful truth finally washed over him. He gently reached out, touching his wife’s shoulder. “Um... Beki... Beki, darling... stop looking around. The Prince... he’s standing right in front of you.”

Rebeka blinked, her eyes darting from Marek to the young man holding her daughter.

Richard stepped forward, extending his right hand with a genuine, humble smile. “It is an absolute pleasure to properly meet you all. I am Prince Richard.”

Rebeka’s face flushed with a mixture of profound wonder and intense embarrassment. She quickly hid her face in her hands, unable to look him in the eye.

Little Rubi looked at him from his arms, her eyes wide as saucers. “So... you’re the Prince? A real, true one from the stories?”

Richard nodded down at her, tapping her nose gently. “A real one, Rubi.”

“Wow!” she whispered in pure awe.

“Your Highness... please, forgive us,” Marek spoke up, his voice thick with emotion as he bowed his head low. “You spent weeks helping us bleed in the fields, you saved our daughter, and we... we turned you over to the executioners without a fight. We believed you were a monster.”

Richard immediately set Rubi down and stepped forward, placing a firm, reassuring hand on Marek’s shoulder, forcing the man to look up. “Marek, stop. You were defending your families against what you thought was a tyrant. You were being a good father. You never have to apologize to me for that. And absolutely no ‘Your Highness’ under this roof. To you, I am just Richard.”

He turned to the blushing woman, gently pulling her hands away from her face. “Rebeka, come now, stop hiding your face from me. You know me. We pulled stubborn weeds together in the hot sun for days. Remember?”

“You said absolutely nothing to us,” Leonard said softly, his old voice trembling with shame as he stepped forward. “The entire time you stayed at my table... when I think of all the terrible, treasonous things I told you to your face. And we let a crown prince slave away cleaning our stables.”

“Leonard, look at me,” Richard said earnestly, looking at the men gathered around him. “That is exactly why I came to this valley in secret. The Advisor spent ten years spinning horrific lies to you about my character, using my name to enforce his cruelty. I needed to know exactly how deep the rot went, so I came to you as Kristof, a simple traveler.”

Richard’s voice grew soft, filled with deep emotion. “Richard or Kristof... I am still the exact same man who sat in your kitchen. The hardest part of this journey wasn't the heavy labor, my friends. It was seeing you all so terrified, starved, and enslaved by fear in your own homes. I tried to find a way to help you stand up, but the fear was too deep. So, I asked my father to come down himself, so you could hear from the King's own lips that the nightmare is over.”

The men stared at him, tears welling in more than one pair of weathered eyes.

“I still can’t believe it,” one of the older farmers murmured, as Rubi happily ran back to her mother’s side. “We cleared the animal stalls together, man to man. You never once complained, and you never said a piece of work was beneath your station. Every single day you spent here, you had the perfect opportunity to intimidate us, to arrest us, to punish us, or to show your royal power and demand our submission. But you didn’t. Instead, you worked until your hands bled, you ate our meager soup, and you interceded for us—first with the guards, and then with the King. And we believed the worst about you. I only hope you can forgive our blindness one day, sir.”

Richard smiled, a brilliant, warm expression that filled the quiet stone church with light.

“There is absolutely nothing to forgive, my friends,” Richard said clearly, his voice echoing with the true majesty of a leader who loved his people. “You didn’t know me. You had never seen my face, and evil men lied to you for their own gain. But today, the truth is out. Now you know exactly who I am, and you know you no longer have to fear the crown. And if anyone ever tries to lie to you about your Prince again... I know you won’t believe them.”

Leonard stepped forward, his eyes shining as he extended his hand. “Thank you for everything, Richard.”

Richard gripped the old man's hand firmly, looking at the gathered faces of the village. “It was my absolute honor. Whatever you need from this day forward—whether it is grain, protection, or a fair ear—send word to the palace, and I will be there to help you.”

He gave little Rubi one final, playful wink, said his warm goodbyes to Sabína and the families, and walked out of the church into the bright evening sun. As he mounted his horse and trotted out of the square, the villagers stood at their gates, no longer bowing in terror, but waving with smiles of genuine love and hope.

The Prince had finally found his people, and the people had finally found their Prince.

Chapter 8 The King Richard

Several years passed, and the Prince became a wise, just King. Rumors of his humility, his time spent working at the mill, and his deep kindness spread far and wide into neighboring lands. It was no longer unusual for foreign rulers, emperors, and aging kings to frequently seek Richard’s advice on how to handle their own realms.

One sunny afternoon, royal messengers arrived from a nearby kingdom, requesting Richard’s urgent help in the name of their sovereign. As was common for the young ruler, they didn’t find him sitting on a golden throne at the castle, but rather covered in flour at Jonas's mill, helping to lift heavy sacks.

However, their formal request was even more unusual than the King's chosen location. King Tomáš was facing an internal crisis: he had three daughters. The eldest, Adela, was eighteen, and her twin sisters were currently enjoying their sweet, chaotic sixteen. The poor King didn’t know what to do with their reckless rowdiness and utter lack of discipline. Tomáš had been a close, loyal friend of Richard’s late father, and Richard fondly remembered the girls since they were wrapped in swaddling clothes. He immediately sent word back with the messengers that he would do everything in his power to assist and would personally arrive in their kingdom in the coming days.

When the messengers left the valley, Richard turned to Klára, wiping his dusty hands on his apron.

“It seems you’re heading out on a wild journey again, my love,” Klára said with a knowing smile, leaning against the wooden beam. She knew him inside out; she knew that if she asked him to stay, he would remain by her side without a word, but his mind would wander far away to his duty.

“I am,” Richard sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. “But I truly have no earthly idea what to do with three rowdy princesses, Klára. I barely know what to do with our own little one at home.”

Richard and Klára had a magnificent little treasure at the palace at that time—their beautiful, nine-month-old daughter, Eliza.

Klára laughed and stepped into his arms. “I’m sure you’ll manage perfectly. Just follow a simple rule: be slightly arrogant, aloof, and haughty. Show absolutely no interest in their royal status, and they’ll instantly love you. With your natural charm, it won’t be a problem at all.”

Richard raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Klára, I am twice their age.”

“Well, that’s even better,” she teased, fixing his collar. “A cold, experienced aloofness is highly attractive to young girls who think they own the world. Just make sure to actually dress like a proper king should for once.”

Richard looked down at his rolled-up sleeves. “What’s wrong with my regular shirt?”

“You won’t win over a rebellious princess in a miller's rags, Richard,” she whispered, kissing his cheek. Richard looked at himself in the mirror and simply shrugged.

The next day, Richard arrived in the capital of Tomáš's kingdom. In the bustling lower town beneath the fortress, a vibrant trade was under way. The cobblestone streets were lined with colorful stalls selling everything imaginable.

Klára had personally dressed him according to the latest noble fashion: a tailor-made, dark blue suit that accentuated his broad shoulders, a crisp white linen shirt, and a dark vest. True to his stubborn nature, however, the very top button was carelessly undone, giving him a relaxed, slightly dangerous air.

Richard walked casually among the crowds, taking in the sights—stalls overflowing with woven wicker baskets, hand-carved wooden spoons, intricate clockwork toys, ribbons, silver pendants, rings, and heavy wheels of mountain cheese.

Suddenly, the rich, buttery scent of fresh pastries wafted through the morning air. His stomach rumbled, and he immediately followed his nose toward a small, stone bakery stall. A short queue of townspeople stood ahead of him. At first, Richard couldn't decide what he wanted from the display, but his eyes eventually settled on a tray of golden, savory crackling biscuits—*oškvarkové pagáčiky*.

“Excellent choice, sir!” the baker said, noticing the well-dressed stranger. “You won’t regret a single bite. But I must warn you, two are never enough for a man of your frame. Tell you what: take four for the price of three.”

Richard smiled warmly. He always liked merchants who valued their customers and knew how to close a good deal naturally without being pushy. “You have a deal, my friend.”

Richard left the stall carrying a small paper parcel with four piping-hot biscuits. He immediately bit into one as he walked out onto the street. The pastry was perfectly flaky, rich, and savory. He truly didn’t regret the purchase and was immensely glad he had taken four.

He continued down the narrow lane, enjoying his food, when the loud sound of girlish laughter and arrogant shouting caught his attention. Richard grew alert, his royal instincts kicking in.

It wasn’t long before the sharp voices were joined by the faces of three striking young women cutting through the crowd. Two were identical twins, and the third, the eldest, carried a very similar regal posture. They stopped abruptly at a high-end jeweler's stall filled with silk ribbons and silver rings. Paying absolutely no heed to the older citizens waiting patiently in line, they shoved their way to the front, loudly taking whatever pieces caught their fancy—without even glancing at the merchant to pay, of course.

Richard was standing nearby, leaning against a mead stall, watching the scene unfold with narrowing eyes.

“Tell me,” Richard asked the mead vendor quietly, “are those by any chance the King’s daughters?”

The vendor let out a heavy, tired sigh and nodded. “Aye, sir. Those are the princesses.”

“And do they really just leave without paying for the craftsmanship?”

“Always,” the vendor murmured, cleaning a glass. “But when the monthly ledger is sent to the palace, King Tomáš always pays extra out of his own coin to cover their mess, so we vendors aren’t left at a loss. The King and Queen aren’t bad people, sir; they have golden hearts. They just have incredibly rowdy, spoiled daughters. To be honest, the whole town is a bit worried about what will happen to our lives when those girls start to rule the realm.”

“I would be deeply worried too,” Richard muttered, his blood beginning to simmer with that familiar, righteous anger. He looked at the bottles on display. “May I have a taste of your brew?”

“Of course, traveler. Here you go,” the vendor said, handing him a small, amber glass.

Richard took a sip, swirling the liquid. “Hm... a peculiar, deep taste.”

“I added a secret blend of winter spices,” the vendor smiled proudly.

“Very good. I’ll take a full bottle,” Richard said cheerfully, handing over a silver coin. He carefully tucked the bottle under his arm, wiped his mouth, and decided it was past time to introduce himself to the royal daughters.

Richard stepped through the crowd, positioning himself directly behind the eldest princess, Adela. He watched silently as she turned a heavy silver ring over in her fingers, slid it onto her thumb, and casually turned on her heel to walk away from the trembling jeweler.

Richard smoothly stepped around her, completely blocking her path with his tall, imposing frame.

“Now, now, young lady,” Richard said, his voice smooth but firm as iron. “Isn’t the lady forgot something? Like paying for the vendor's hard work? Walking away like that is simply not done.”

Adela paused, looking up at the stranger in sheer disbelief. She scoffed, her eyes narrowing. “Hm. Perhaps the gentleman has no idea who I am,” she replied imperiously, tossing her hair.

“I don't,” Richard said honestly, staring directly into her flashing eyes without blinking. “And to tell you the absolute truth, I’m not very interested. But common politeness dictates that one should always pay for good, honest craftsmanship.”

Her twin sisters peeked over her shoulders, their jaws dropping at the stranger's sheer audacity. The terrified jeweler frantically waved his hands behind Adela's back, signaling to Richard that it was fine, that he didn't want any trouble with the castle. But Richard completely ignored him. He reached into his vest, pulled out a heavy silver coin, dropped it onto the jeweler's counter, and then turned his gaze back to the furious princess.

“And so,” Richard asked with a mockingly polite smile, “who exactly is this beautiful young lady who somehow missed the basic lesson that goods must be paid for?”

“I am the King’s daughter!” she said proudly, drawing herself up.

Richard slowly shook his head, a look of profound disappointment crossing his face. “No. I cannot believe that. Only good, honorable things are said about King Tomáš across the borders. He is a man of true character. He would never allow his own flesh and blood to grow into such a disrespectful, arrogant young lady. If you truly are the Princess, you should be deeply ashamed of giving your father such a bad name in his own streets.”

“How dare you?!” Adela shrieked, her face turning a bright, furious crimson.

“Ah, so the little lady is angry because someone finally told her the naked truth,” Richard countered smoothly, his voice cool and entirely unbothered.

Adela realized instantly that she couldn't win this war of words without causing a massive public scene. With a sharp gasp of fury, she turned away in a huff, dragging her sisters behind her as she stormed back toward the castle gates.

“Man... I don’t know who you are, sir,” the jeweler breathed, wiping sweat from his forehead as the crowd cheered quietly, “but you really gave her a proper lesson. No one has ever dared to speak to her like that.”

Richard smiled faintly, giving the man a polite nod. “She needed to hear it.”

Nearby, Richard found a large, respectable-looking inn with a carved wooden sign. He stepped inside and approached the counter. “Good day, host. Would you happen to have a clean room available for the week?”

The innkeeper looked up, his eyes widening as he took in Richard's dark blue suit and undeniable presence. “You’re in incredible luck, sir. I still have a few vacancies. In fact, one of them is our grand royal suite. How long will you be staying with us?”

“An ordinary, quiet room will suffice,” Richard said with a smile. “A week for now. Maybe longer, depending on business.”

“As you wish, sir. What name shall I write down in the registry?”

“Kristof,” Richard said automatically.

The innkeeper froze, the quill slipping from his fingers as he stared at Richard’s face, tracing the sharp jawline and the commanding eyes. “Is... is something wrong, landlord?” Richard asked, narrowing his eyes.

“You know, sir...” the innkeeper whispered, leaning over the bar nervously. “The young King from the neighboring valley always used to introduce himself as *Kristof* back when he was still a hidden prince working the mills. There are absolutely legendary stories about him traveling the land. And you... you resemble your late father remarkably, Your Majesty.”

Richard let out a quiet, defeated chuckle, rubbing the bridge of his nose. *Klára was right. My face is becoming a liability.* “It seems I’ll have to officially retire my old secret identity.”

“So,” the innkeeper smiled knowingly, picking up the quill again. “What name will it be under tonight, sir?”

“Felix,” Richard said after a brief moment of thought.

“Excellent. I hope you’ll like the room, Master Felix. What brings a man of your stature to our town?”

“The King’s personal request for help,” Richard said, taking the brass key.

The innkeeper’s eyes lit up. “The princesses?”

“I’ve already had the distinct honor,” Richard grimaced faintly. “Especially with the eldest. I need to find a way to secure a position at the castle to be close enough to observe them, but I don’t know what roles are vacant.”

The innkeeper thought deeply for a moment, scratching his chin. Then, a brilliant spark appeared in his eyes. “The palace diplomacy and etiquette teacher fled the kingdom in a mad panic some weeks ago. They haven't been able to find a replacement brave enough to face the girls. Maybe you could try for that.”

Richard’s eyes flashed with amusement. “That is a brilliant idea. I’ll go inquire about the post today,” he said enthusiastically, heading up the stairs to settle into his quarters.

That very afternoon, Richard walked up the winding stone paths to the castle gates. He bypassed the lower officials and had himself formally announced to King Tomáš as *Felix*, the newly arrived candidate for the diplomacy governorship.

The King received him immediately in his private study. Richard entered, bowing respectfully. “Your Majesty.”

King Tomáš, looking weary and stressed beneath his heavy gold crown, didn't recognize the broad-shouldered man in the tailored blue suit at first glance.

“Welcome, dear boy. Please, sit. I must warn you before we begin, the last three teachers fled my daughters' classroom in tears.”

“I assure you, Your Majesty, I won’t give up quite so easily,” Richard said, his voice dropping into its natural, rich register.

The King stepped closer, squinting as he looked into the candidate's face. Suddenly, his old eyes widened, and a massive smile broke through his grey beard. “Richard! By the heavens, I didn’t recognize you at all in those fine clothes! I last saw you when you were just a scrawny boy running around your father's gardens. You’ve grown into an extraordinary, imposing man.”

“It is wonderful to see you again, Tomáš,” Richard said warmly, embracing the older king. “My father always spoke of your loyalty and wisdom with the highest regard.”

“Thank you for coming so quickly, my boy. But tell me... do you really want to put yourself through this? Do you truly want to be their teacher?”

“I can certainly give it a try,” Richard smiled, adjusting his vest. “We’ll see what can be done to crack that royal armor.”

“What was the alias you used with the guards?” Tomáš asked, leaning in.

“Felix.”

“Felix... good, a strong name. I hope my old brain doesn’t mix it up in front of the servants. I don’t understand what went wrong, Richard. They didn’t used to be this wild. I thought we raised them with love and dignity, but it seems I was completely wrong. Especially with Adela. She is fierce, stubborn, and her younger sisters follow her every move blindly. You’ll see the fire for yourself when you meet them.”

Richard let out a soft chuckle. “Oh, I’ve already met them this morning at the market, Your Majesty. I must say... the girls certainly have an explosive temperament.”

At that exact moment, as if on a perfectly timed cue, the heavy oak doors of the study burst open. Adela marched into the room, her silks rustling with fury. But the moment her eyes fell upon Richard standing comfortably by her father's desk, she froze, her jaw tightening as the anger flared anew.

“Father!” she shrieked, pointing a furious finger at him. “What is *this* man doing inside our palace?! Do you have any idea how horribly he insulted my honor in the middle of the town square today? He should be thrown into the deepest dungeon!”

The King looked between Richard's perfectly calm expression and his daughter's raging face in utter confusion. Then, a slow, deeply amused smile spread across Tomáš's face. He cleared his throat, adjusting his posture.

“Adela, control your tongue,” the King said calmly. “This gentleman is Master Felix. He is your newly appointed royal diplomacy and etiquette teacher. And from what I am hearing... it seems you’ve already successfully received your very first lesson.”

“You cannot be serious!” she cried out in sheer horror.

She slammed her foot on the stone floor, gave Richard one final, promise-of-death glare, and stormed out of the study, grumbling heavy curses under her breath.

Richard simply turned to the King, unbuttoned the next button of his shirt with a smirk, and nodded. “The class is officially in session, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 9 You will be a Good Queen

“It won’t be easy,” Richard muttered under his breath, watching her storm away, before he picked up his pace to follow her down the grand corridor.

“My lady,” he called out, his boots echoing against the stone floor. “Do you know it is considered remarkably rude to simply walk out of a room while someone is speaking to you? We haven’t even properly introduced ourselves yet.”

Adela spun around, her eyes blazing with absolute anger. Richard stopped just a foot away, looking directly into them without a hint of intimidation. She was tall for a woman, but her head only reached slightly above his shoulder. He took in her flushed cheeks and defiant posture.

“So much beauty, and yet so much impudence,” he remarked coolly, crossing his arms.

Adela sneered, stepping closer. “Are you going to be at my very heels the entire time you are here, teacher?”

“Essentially, yes,” Richard agreed with a calm, maddening smirk.

For the first few days, she treated him like air, ignoring his presence as much as humanly possible. But Richard was relentless. Every single time she committed a social blunder, he corrected her on the spot, calmly pointing out exactly what she was doing wrong in front of the servants and her family. He was annoying, unyielding, and completely unfazed by her royal tantrums.

On the fourth morning, however, Richard achieved a small, hard-won victory. As he entered the morning parlor, Adela actually greeted him first. Or rather, she mumbled something resembling a "good morning" entirely under her breath, refusing to look at him. But it was a start.

Slowly, his persistent training began to bleed into the rest of the family. Her younger sisters, Laura and Sofia, began to visibly change, actively curbing their bizarre, rowdy behavior at the table. But Adela resisted with every fiber of her being, holding onto her rebellion as hard as she possibly could.

One evening, the peace of the palace was shattered when the twins came running down the corridor toward Richard, their faces masks of pure, terrified panic.

“Felix! Felix, you must come with us right now!” Laura cried, grabbing his sleeve.

“Something horrible happened to Adela,” Sofia chimed in, breathless. “I think she fell and sprained her ankle terribly. She’s trapped in the main kitchen!”

Richard didn't hesitate. His protective instincts flaring, he rushed down the stone stairs toward the royal kitchen. He burst through the heavy oak doors, his eyes scanning the room, but he didn’t see her anywhere near the hearths.

In fact, a moment later, he couldn’t see anything at all.

Splat.

A massive, heavy piece of leftover cream cake landed square on his face, burying his nose, eyes, and forehead in thick, sweet frosting. Richard stood frozen as the rich cream began to slowly drip down his chin. He calmly wiped the frosting away from his eyes with two fingers and looked across the room.

Adela was standing behind the central wooden island, bent double, laughing hysterically at her perfect strike. Laura and Sofia were leaning against the wall, shrieking with delight at their successful trap.

Richard didn't say a word. He slowly wiped his cheek, tasted the cream, and nodded. Then, with lightning speed, he lunged to the side, grabbing a large, open fabric bag of baking flour from the pantry shelf. He stepped closing to Adela before she could even realize what he was holding.

As she opened her mouth to laugh directly in his face again, Richard hoisted the bag. A massive white cloud of flour landed right on her head, turning her dark hair and expensive gown completely snow-white.

Adela’s laughter choked into a gasp as she coughed out a puff of flour. The twins burst into an even louder fit of hysterics, pointing at their ghost-like sister. But their victory was incredibly short-lived. Richard turned around, grabbed a basket of overripe tomatoes from the counter, and began pelting them with perfect accuracy.

Within minutes, the royal kitchen descended into absolute, chaotic warfare. Soon, everyone—the Prince-turned-teacher and the three princesses—was throwing old scraps of bruised fruit, soft vegetables, and dough at one another, chasing each other around the tables and laughing until their stomachs ached.

Suddenly, the heavy door clicked open, and the head cook appeared on the threshold. She took one look at her pristine kitchen—now dripping with tomato juice, flour crusts, and cream—and slowly shook her head in utter despair.

“Who in the heavens is going to clean up this disaster?” she groaned, looking directly at the disguised king. “Felix... I thought at least *you* had some baseline of maturity and sense left in you.”

Looking at the four guilty, food-covered faces, the cook eventually just waved her hand in defeat, muttered a prayer, and left them to their fate. The moment the door clicked shut, the four of them erupted into laughter all over again.

Finally, Richard composed himself, wiping a stray piece of tomato from his shoulder, and spoke with mock seriousness. “Alright, enough fun. Time to face the music. Let's clean this place up.”

Adela immediately turned up her nose, tossed her floury hair, and marched out of the kitchen without a word. Laura and Sofia looked at each other and quickly followed her example, leaving Richard alone in the mess.

But Richard didn't complain. He quietly rolled up his sleeves, grabbed a heavy wooden scrub brush, and began to forcefully scrub the stained tables. Ten minutes passed. The heavy door creaked open again. Laura and Sofia peeked in, and when they saw that the great, arrogant diplomacy teacher had stayed behind and was actually down on his knees scrubbing the floor, a flush of shame hit their faces. They quietly stepped inside.

Richard looked up from his bucket, raising an eyebrow. “Did you ladies forget something?”

They didn't answer him. Laura silently walked to the corner, picked up a straw broom, and began to sweep the flour into piles, while Sofia took a damp cloth and began wiping the cream from the wooden tables.

Richard watched them for a moment, a hidden smile touching his lips. He quietly filled a wooden bucket with clean, cold water, sneaked up behind them, and splashed it right over their legs. Both princesses shrieked in shock, jumping back.

“Oh, calm down, it’s only water,” Richard chuckled, dipping his brush back into the bucket. “You girls aren’t made of sugar, are you? You won't melt.”

Working together in a strange, newfound rhythm, the three of them thoroughly cleaned every inch of the kitchen before parting ways to their separate chambers to change into clothes that weren't thoroughly covered in rotten food.

An hour later, dressed in a fresh, clean shirt, Richard was walking down the western gallery when he glanced through a large hallway window. Down in the courtyard, a solitary figure was sitting on the stone edge of the central fountain.

He stopped, recognizing the posture, and called out to Laura, who was passing by with a basket of laundry. “Laura, is that Adela sitting out by the fountain all alone?”

“Yes,” Laura said, her cheerful mood dropping as she looked out the window with a worried expression. “She spends a lot of time out there, Felix. She sits by the water entirely alone, sometimes deep into the night when the whole castle is asleep.”

From that moment on, Richard changed his approach. He watched their every move with heightened focus, but instead of just reprimanding them, he looked for the root of the problem. When they went into the bustling town, he constantly reminded them of the power of a simple “please” and “thank you,” and firmly showed them that it was completely improper for royalty to cut in front of common citizens in line.

By now, Richard was in his third week at Tomáš's palace. He missed his own home terribly—he missed the quiet rustle of the mill, the warmth of Klára, and the sweet scent of little Eliza. And deep down, a heavy frustration was building; it felt as though Adela simply would never truly change. Truth be told, her behavior *was* slightly different now, softer around the edges, but Richard just couldn't seem to find the right key to motivate her correctly.

After an incredibly long, exhausting day of constant reprimands, bickering, and stubborn defiance, Richard looked out the window after dusk. Sure enough, Adela was sitting by the fountain again. It was a bitterly cold autumn evening.

Richard went down to the kitchen, carefully brewed two steaming cups of herbal tea, and walked out into the dark courtyard. The wind was biting. He approached the fountain quietly and gently handed one of the warm clay cups to the shivering princess.

Adela blinked, looking up at him through the darkness. “Thank you,” she said softly, her voice devoid of any arrogance.

Richard offered her a kind, genuine smile, sitting down on the stone edge a respectful distance away. “There is one thing I simply cannot understand, Adela. You know that sooner or later, a noble prince or a foreign lord will appear at these gates to seek your hand in marriage. And yet, you stubbornly choose to behave like an undisciplined child. Whether you marry or stay single, there is still an entire kingdom here that will one day need to be fiercely cared for.”

To his complete surprise, Adela didn't yell. Instead, she looked down at her reflection in the dark water, and a single, heavy tear escaped her eye, sparkling in the moonlight before she hastily wiped it away.

“What could you possibly know about it, Felix?” she whispered, her voice cracking with an old, hidden pain. “Look at our land right now. It is flourishing, peaceful, and rich. But what if something terrible happens? What if a sudden famine strikes, or a war comes to our borders, or anything else goes wrong, and the entire, crushing weight of this kingdom lands squarely on my shoulders? How am I supposed to rule? How am I to care for thousands of living people, manage the complex trade agreements, and handle the fragile relations with fierce, neighboring kingdoms? And... what if the prince who marries me has absolutely no interest in helping me manage this piece of land? How am I supposed to carry it all alone?”

Richard’s breath hitched in the cold air. He looked at her trembling shoulders, the realization hitting him like a physical blow.

“You are terrified of failing them,” Richard said softly, his voice full of profound understanding. “Is that why you play the spoiled brat? Because if they think you are useless, they won't expect you to lead?”

Richard bowed his head, shaking it slowly in the dark. He finally understood the intricate clockwork happening inside the princess’s mind. It wasn't malice or vanity; it was paralyzing, suffocating fear.

“Do you have any idea how terrifyingly hard it is to decide for the good of an entire country, Felix?” she asked, looking at him with wide, desperate eyes. “I’ve watched my father sit for agonizing hours in his study over massive piles of administrative papers, desperate requests, angry complaints, and vital trade logs. I see the toll it takes on him. I am simply not ready for it. And I don’t know if I ever will be.”

“Perhaps not entirely ready right now,” Richard said gently, his voice carrying the deep weight of a man who had sat in that very seat. “But you have the incredible opportunity to learn from the best right now. Your father is a good man. And by the way... I heard a rumor around the guard barracks today that King Richard from the valley is planning an official state visit here very soon.”

Adela let out a heavy, dramatic sigh, rolling her eyes. “Oh, brilliant. The *perfect* King Richard. My father surely invited him here just to talk down to me, to lecture me on how a kingdom must be perfectly cared for, how to look after the common folk, and how to help them. It’s so incredibly easy for a man like him to say. Everything is simple for him. The people practically worship the ground he walks on.”

Richard had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud. “Hm... really? That's strange. Usually, travelers have told me that King Richard is notoriously hot-headed, constantly punishes everyone, and throws people into the dungeon for the slightest offense.”

Adela paused, looking at him in surprise. “Then someone grossly lied to you, Felix. I’m not saying he’s a bad ruler—far from it—but his absolute, flawless perfection drives me crazy. The moment he arrives, my father and the people will want me to be exactly like him. And I can't be.”

“Why on earth should the people want you to be like him?” Richard asked earnestly, leaning in. “Be like yourself, Adela. Besides, if they want to compare your future rule at all, they should do it with your own father, not some foreign king who knows absolutely nothing about how this specific country or its people work.”

“But that’s the problem, Felix... I don’t know how it works either.”

Richard looked at her quietly for a moment. “Let me ask you a simple question. Do you know what is fundamentally good for your country?”

Adela thought for a long moment, the wind blowing her hair across her face. “Peace,” she said firmly.

“And what is good for the common people?”

“That they have what they need to live with dignity,” she said, her voice growing stronger. “That they have true joy in their daily work, or at least sufficient, fair silver pay for their hard labor.”

Richard smiled, his eyes shining with immense pride. “If you know those two things in your heart, Adela, then you will be an extraordinary queen. Because you will do everything in your power to ensure peace and a fair reward for the people’s labor. That is the core of all diplomacy. And by the way... I can tell you from a very reliable source: King Richard is not nearly as perfect as the stories claim.”

Adela raised an eyebrow, a small, mischievous spark returning to her eyes. “Oh really? Let me guess... I bet he smacks his lips loudly when he eats,” she joked.

The two of them burst into spontaneous, loud laughter, the heavy tension completely evaporating into the night air.

Richard quickly straightened his face, adopting his stern teacher persona, though his eyes were dancing with amusement. “Now, that comment was highly undiplomatic, my lady.”

Adela smirked, standing up and bowing to him with flawless grace. “Forgive me, Your Majestic Felix! Excuse my utter audacity, but my brilliant diplomacy teacher constantly reminds me to eat with my mouth completely closed. Could you please respect his sacred teachings and close your own esteemed mouth while you chew your words?”

Richard laughed, standing up with his empty cup. “I see something has managed to stick in that stubborn head of yours after all. I think you are finally ready for a real diplomatic meeting.”

“Oh, Felix,” Adela sighed, walking beside him back toward the castle doors. “If only real diplomatic meetings could be like simple conversations with you. King Richard is known as one of the greatest diplomats in the lands. I just hope you will be standing somewhere close by my side during the tea to point out everything I’m doing wrong.”

Richard looked ahead at the stone gates, his smile turning soft and mysterious. “That won’t be necessary, Adela. I am entirely certain you’ll manage beautifully on your own. Besides... you still have a few more days to practice your stance.”

The next morning, Richard requested a private meeting with King Tomáš and the Queen in the small breakfast chamber to discuss their daughter's immense progress.

Adela was walking down the corridor, intending to enter the room, but the moment she saw the three of them speaking in low, serious tones, she stopped behind the heavy velvet curtain, lingering outside to listen.

After about a minute of silence, Richard's rich voice rang out clearly from inside the room, without him even turning around. "Do you know that eavesdropping on others' private conversations is considered highly impolite and undiplomatic, Princess?"

Adela bit her lip, stepping out from behind the curtain and entering the room with her head bowed. "Forgive me, Father, Mother, Felix... I truly didn't want to disturb your meeting," she replied politely.

King Tomáš and the Queen froze, their forks halfway to their mouths as they stared at their eldest daughter in utter, jaw-dropping surprise. She had apologized. Sincerely.

"I'll... I'll come back later when you are finished," Adela said softly, giving a perfect, respectful nod before quietly exiting the room.

The moment the door clicked shut, King Tomáš turned to Richard, his eyes wide as saucers. "Who in the heavens was that, Felix, and what exactly have you done with our terrifying daughter?"

Richard simply took a calm sip of his tea, a knowing smirk on his face. "We just had a proper talk by the water, Your Majesty."

After breakfast, Richard joined Adela in the small, sunlit parlor to begin her final preparations.

"That performance this morning wasn't bad at all," he said appreciatively, leaning against the window sill. "I'm proud of you."

She looked up from her etiquette book in genuine surprise. "This morning? My apology?"

"Yes. But I wanted to tell you something else, Adela. The schedules have shifted. King Richard is arriving for an official afternoon tea in exactly two days."

Adela instantly let out a long, shuddering sigh, her hands gripping the edges of the book.

"Is that a problem?" Richard asked, tilting his head.

She merely shook her head, staring at the floor. "Can you at least give me a sense of what the meeting will actually look like, Felix? My nerves are twisting into knots."

"Why are you so deathly afraid of him, Adela? It's just tea."

"Because King Richard is my father's closest friend and our most vital ally!" she burst out, her voice tight with anxiety. "We cannot afford to lose his favor just because of my clumsy, undiplomatic behavior. If our kingdom ever faces a crisis and we need

his army or his grain, and he says no... it will be entirely my fault because I insulted him or acted like a fool in his presence."

Richard made a comically dramatic face, waving his hand. "Do you honestly think the great King Richard would be such a petty, short-sighted fool over a cup of spilled tea? Regardless of his reputation, I am absolutely certain you can be a far better diplomat than him."

Adela let out a hollow, sarcastic laugh. "Right. Surely."

"Oh, you'll handle him with one single hand tied behind your back," Richard insisted confidently, stepping closer. "Listen to me: you can take the ultimate initiative. The moment he enters the pavilion, don't wait for your father. Walk straight up to him, look him in the eye, and introduce yourself first. If your father wants to do the formal introductions later, let him. But here is one critical piece of advice: do *not* say anything funny, sarcastic, or inappropriate about his wife, Klára, even as a light joke. He is notoriously sensitive about her honor. Your younger sisters can afford small, childish blunders during the meal, but it will be up to you, as the eldest, to smoothly sweep them under the rug."

"Felix, you are genuinely scaring me now," she whispered.

"Come now, look at me. It's just tea. It won't last forever. If you feel cornered or overwhelmed by a question, simply apologize gracefully and leave the table for a moment. If he keeps bothersome topics alive, just say you don't feel well or wish to be alone. One more thing: if for some reason your mind goes completely blank and you don't know what to say... just step away to the balcony and take a deep, slow breath. It works wonders. Do you want to try a possible scenario right now?"

Adela swallowed hard, squaring her shoulders. "Oh... why not," she agreed.

Richard instantly shifted his posture, standing tall, his voice adopting a deep, booming, royal cadence that made her gasp. "Your Highness, I am deeply pleased to finally meet you," he began as the imaginary king.

Adela caught her breath, instantly sliding into her perfect posture. "King Richard, the pleasure is entirely mine. Tell me, how was your long journey across the mountain passes?" she asked with flawless poise.

Richard looked at her with genuine, unscripted approval. "Truthfully, Princess, it was long, dusty, and thoroughly exhausting."

"I am terribly sorry to hear that, Your Majesty. I am certain a fresh cup of our mountain tea will do you a world of good."

"That is very kind of you, Adela," Richard continued, his eyes narrowing in a mock-serious stare. "But I must be frank with you. Troubling reports have reached my ears in the valley regarding your behavior. The merchants claimed you are incredibly

spoiled, arrogant, and outright dislike paying for honest goods. Is there any truth to those rumors, young lady?”

Adela’s temper flared instantly, her fingers clenching into fists as she opened her mouth to launch a furious defense, but Richard quickly held up his hand, dropping the character with a chuckle.

“Stop, stop,” he smiled. “It’s just a possible scenario. You must learn to master your anger, Adela. A true queen controls her fire and answers even the most unpleasant, insulting questions or harsh criticism with absolute grace and poise.”

Adela deflated, letting out a frustrated breath. “What can a person even say to an insulting question like that, Felix?”

“Hm... something humble but powerful,” Richard mused, pacing the room. “Try something like: *‘I must honestly admit that until recently, my behavior was not the most appropriate, Your Majesty, and I deeply regret it. But a true ruler must learn from past mistakes and move forward with dignity.’*”

Adela stared at him in complete awe. “How do you do that? How do you have a brilliant, perfect answer for absolutely everything, Felix?”

Richard let out a soft laugh, thinking of his years in the mill and on the throne. “Only years of grueling experience, my lady.”

“Felix... what happens if I mess it all up in front of my father?”

“Everything will be perfectly fine, I promise you,” Richard said gently. “And besides... until three weeks ago, you didn’t mind behaving irresponsibly in front of the entire world. So why such a sudden, massive change of heart?”

Adela looked down, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Because... you were right. I was shaming my parents' name. And... I’ve always carried a great fear—a profound respect—for King Richard.”

Richard shook his head, a wave of deep amusement washing over him. “I truly don’t understand why everyone fears him so much. Trust me, Adela... he’s still just a regular man.”

Adela only shrugged, but his words seemed to spark a fire in her. The following day, she completely showered him with an endless barrage of questions. She wanted to know the exact appropriateness of every word, the themes suitable for a king, the subtle meaning of hand gestures, and even how long a royal look should last. Richard found her sudden intensity almost comical, a beautiful contrast to the girl who had thrown a cake at his face.

To distract her spinning mind and relieve the immense pressure building up before the big day, Richard came up with a brilliant, highly undiplomatic plan that involved her sisters.

Late that evening, Laura and Sofia slipped into Adela's chambers, delivering a mysterious, urgent message from their teacher: *Felix is waiting for the Princess in the kitchen for a final, emergency lesson.*

Adela hurried down the dark stone stairs, entering the quiet kitchen. Richard was standing by the central island, holding a silver bowl.

“Hey, Your Highness,” Richard grinned, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “I wanted to show you one final, crucial diplomatic technique. Please, come closer.”

The moment Adela stepped next to him, suspecting nothing, Richard reached into the bowl and sprayed a massive, thick dollop of fresh whipped cream directly into her face.

“Felix!” she shrieked, wiping the sweet foam from her eyes. “I am going to personally shoot you with a crossbow!” she screamed, but Richard had already taken off running around the brick ovens, laughing loudly.

Adela didn't hesitate—she grabbed a nearby bag of flour from the counter and hurled it after him, creating a magnificent white explosion near the hearth. Her younger sisters, who had been hiding in the pantry laughing at the scene, were soon thoroughly cooled down when Richard intercepted them with a wild spray of forgotten dried lentils.

The four of them continued their chaotic, joyful warfare for quite a while, throwing scraps and chasing each other through the shadows until none of them had the strength to run or laugh anymore. Breathless and completely covered in food, they all collapsed, tired and happy, onto the clean wooden floor.

Richard was the first to compose himself, sitting up and shaking flour from his vest. “And now... the ultimate test of a ruler. Cleaning.”

To his immense satisfaction, the girls didn't complain or walk away this time. They immediately set to work as a team. Adela looked at her sisters, a bright, genuine smile on her face. She picked up the heavy straw broom herself and began to sweep the lentils from the stones. Together, they dusted the remains of flour off their clothes, washed the massive wooden tables, scrubbed the floor until it shone, and with a profound sense of shared accomplishment, they finally headed back up the stairs toward their bedchambers.

As they reached the split in the grand corridor, Adela paused. She turned back to the tall man standing in the shadows, her eyes soft and full of deep gratitude.

“Thanks, Felix,” Adela said quietly, before stepping into her room.

Richard watched her door click shut, a warm, proud smile spreading across his face as he adjusted his messy collar. *You are more than ready, Queen Adela,* he thought to himself. *See you at tea.*

Chapter 10 The Visit of The King Richard

Richard slipped away from the castle in the quiet, misty hours of the early morning, leaving no trace behind but a cleanly scrubbed kitchen.

Throughout the entire day, Princess Adela wandered through the grand corridors like a ball of nervous energy. Every time she turned a corner or passed a heavy oak door, she half-expected Richard to pop out from behind the tapestry to remind her to stand tall, look people in the eye, act respectfully, and keep her fiery temperament firmly in check. But the corridors remained quiet.

Meanwhile, back across the border, Richard was celebrating a joyous reunion with Klára and little Eliza. He had missed the sweet scent of his daughter and the warm, grounding presence of his wife more than words could say. Together, they packed a small trunk and prepared for the formal diplomatic journey to King Tomáš's realm. On their way through the lower valley, they made a brief stop to leave baby Eliza in the safe, loving hands of Marek and Rebeka, before pressing on toward the capital.

The King and Queen welcomed the royal couple with immense warmth. While the servants prepared the pavilion, King Tomáš took Klára aside, animatedly sharing the unbelievable tales of the past three weeks and the miraculous transformation of his daughters. Finally, with a proud smile, Tomáš sent a page to fetch the princesses.

Laura and Sofia entered the pavilion first, their fine silks rustling. The moment their eyes fell upon the tall man in the exquisite royal attire standing by the tea table, they understood the truth instantly. The twins exchanged stunned glances and began to giggle uncontrollably behind their hands.

Then, Adela appeared in the doorway.

Richard's back was turned to her as he spoke quietly with the Queen, so at first, she didn't see his face. King Tomáš stepped forward, gesturing proudly toward his family.

"And this is my eldest daughter, Adela," the King announced. "Adela, dearest, allow me to formally introduce King Richard and his lovely wife, Queen Klára."

Richard slowly turned around, a light, deeply amused smile playing on his lips.

Adela took a step forward, dropping into a practiced, elegant curtsy. "It is a great..." she began, her voice steady and diplomatic. But the moment their eyes met, her breath caught in her throat. The room went dead silent. Her jaw dropped slightly, and she could only finish the sentence in a strained, stunned whisper. "...pleasure."

Within seconds, her face flushed a deep, brilliant crimson. The realization hit her like a lightning bolt: *The flour. The lentils. The lip-smacking. The whipped cream.*

"Excuse me, please," she choked out, breaking all royal protocol as she spun on her heel and hurried out of the pavilion in a sheer panic.

Klára gave Richard a slightly reproachful, knowing look, nudging him with her elbow. “I’ll go after her,” Klára said softly. Richard simply nodded, a guilty smirk on his face.

Klára found the young princess standing by a stone balcony, her hands gripping the railing as she tried to force her breathing to slow down. Klára stepped up beside her, gently handing her a cool glass of spring water.

Adela took it gratefully, her hands trembling slightly as she took a sip. “Are you alright, Princess?” Klára asked with genuine, sisterly care.

Adela shook her head miserably, staring at the water. “I... I threw a sack of raw flour at a high king's head yesterday.”

Klára let out a bright, musical laugh. “Oh, it’s alright, Adela. Trust me, he does this sort of thing entirely too often. He always says it’s far easier to get to know the true character of people that way. If they don’t know he wears a crown, they don’t hide behind a polite, manufactured mask.”

“But he was the one behind a mask,” Adela whispered, looking at her.

Klára shook her head gently, her eyes full of warmth. “No, my dear. This finery he is wearing right now... *this* is the mask. The man who spent the past three weeks with you in the dust, the one who was annoying, meddling, understanding, and constantly helping—that is the real Richard.”

Before Adela could reply, a heavy step echoed behind them. Richard was standing a few paces away, his hands tucked into his pockets, looking entirely casual. Klára offered her husband a tender look, touched his arm lightly as she passed, and left the two of them alone, slipping into the adjacent parlor to join the King, Queen, and the giggling twins.

Richard stepped up to the railing, leaning his elbows against the cold stone. “Your Highness,” he began, his tone formal, “word has reached my ears that you have great respect for my name. Perhaps even a little fear. I truly hope it isn't fear. Either way... thank you. It is very respectful. But now, I think we can safely set aside these exhausting formalities, for you know deep down that I am exactly the same kind of person as you.”

Adela let out a hollow, disappointed sigh, looking away. “The always-perfect King Richard.”

“Oh, come now,” Richard scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I am Richard. Just Richard. And I assure you, I am miles—no, leagues—away from anything resembling perfection.”

“When did you ever do anything wrong?” she challenged, looking up at his sharp profile.

“Hm, where exactly should I start?” Richard mused, counting on his fingers. “When I was your exact age, I was arrogant, utterly irresponsible, incredibly superficial, and a

great many other unpleasant things. My father got so tired of my attitude that he sent me to serve in the navy, out on the open sea. Adela, after just one week on that ship, I was crying like a child. I kept whining that I wanted to go home, that the work was too much, that I was the future King and they couldn't possibly treat me like a common servant."

Adela blinked in surprise. "What did they do?"

"My commander walked up to me, looked me dead in the face, and told me he didn't care in the least who my father was. He said as long as I was on his ship, I would do exactly as I was told, because not only my miserable life, but the lives of every man on board depended on my labor. It wasn't about fighting wars, you see. It was about learning how unpredictable and dangerous the sea can be. So, I lowered my head, swallowed my pride, and did what I was told. It took three years."

He turned to face her fully. "And when I returned, the Advisor was running amok. While I was posing as a traveler in that lower village, the royal guards came and arrested me for 'robbing the Prince.' And a while after that, I sort of brutally attacked a fake Prince against a barn wall, for which I basically begged the Captain of the Guard to arrest me and throw me in chains. To be honest, it was the absolute pinnacle of my diplomatic career."

Adela stared at him, her jaw dropping. "You... you actually allowed yourself to be arrested?"

"Yes," Richard said softly, his smile fading into a look of deep empathy. "I understand your fears very well, Adela. Seeing the people I was supposed to protect starve and live in absolute terror wasn't easy. In the beginning, every single thing I did to help only seemed to make their lives worse. I was completely desperate. I felt entirely inadequate."

"I can't believe there was ever a situation you couldn't handle," she murmured.

"Adela, look at me. I'm just Richard. Please. No more 'Your Majesty.' And whenever you find yourself facing a crisis, or you feel the weight of this kingdom getting too heavy, you can count on me. I will do everything in my power to help you stand tall. Forget diplomacy. Just call a friend."

Adela searched his face, seeing the familiar, stubborn spark of the teacher who had sprayed cream in her face. "I thought you were... that *you* were different. Far above us."

"Disappointed?" he asked with a sarcastic smirk.

"Not a chance!" she suddenly beamed, a bright, excited laugh escaping her lips. "I am on a first-name basis with the legendary King Richard!"

"A real prize, I tell you," he added sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

“You are a great man, Richard. And I don’t just mean your ridiculous height,” she joked, her confidence fully returning. “Though... I still can’t believe I threw a massive bag of flour at you yesterday.”

“Well, if you like, you can certainly throw one at me today too, if it makes you happy,” Richard offered dryly, adjusting his royal vest. “But expect me to return the favor with interest. And keep in mind, these happen to be my absolute best clothes.”

Adela laughed, the fear completely gone from her eyes. “What am I going to do without you here every day?”

“You’re going to be yourself, and everything will be perfectly fine,” Richard said firmly. “But I think we should probably return to the diplomatic tea now, because knowing my wife, she has surely revealed every single one of my embarrassing flaws to your parents by now.”

After a beautiful, pleasant evening filled with laughter and newfound alliances, Richard and Klára finally bade farewell to Tomáš’s family and set out for home. They picked up little Eliza from Marek and Rebeka’s farm, thanking them warmly, and were casually heading up the path toward the mill when the frantic sound of boots shattered the night.

Patrik, the Captain of the Guard, came running down the dirt lane toward them, his chest heaving and his face pale with panic.

Richard immediately stepped forward, his expression tightening with concern as he handed the reins to Klára. “Patrik! What is it? What's happened?”

“Your Majesty...” Patrik gasps, catching his breath as he pointed back up toward the ridge. “The castle... the castle is in flames!”

“What?!” Richard’s blood ran cold. “What happened? Is anyone hurt?”

Without waiting for an answer, Richard took off at a dead sprint up the hill toward the fortress, Patrik running hard at his heels. Klára followed as fast as she could, clutching little Eliza tightly against her chest, her heart hammering against her ribs.

When they reached the courtyard, the scene was pure chaos. Massive, roaring orange tongues of fire were tearing through the stone towers, thick black smoke billowing into the starlit sky. Richard frantically questioned the guards and bucket lines, but amidst the panic, no one had any idea how the fire had broken out.

Ignoring Patrik’s shouts of warning, Richard wrapped a wet cloth around his mouth and ran directly inside the burning structure to ensure no servants or guards were trapped in the lower halls. He methodically cleared the rooms, leading the last of the coughing, terrified kitchen staff out into the safety of the courtyard, before immediately joining the lines to help extinguish the roaring blaze.

Suddenly, a massive, terrifying shadow swept over their heads, blotting out the light of the stars.

The air grew thick and suffocatingly hot. Richard looked up into the smoke, and in that split second, a pair of enormous, scaled obsidian claws slammed down from the sky, wrapping securely around his torso and lifting his heavy frame high into the air before he could even draw a breath.

The wind roared in Richard's ears as the ground rapidly fell away. He didn't scream; he gripped the massive scales of the claw, his mind racing as the heat of the fire faded beneath them.

Fortunately, the flight didn't last long. With a heavy, earth-shaking thud, the creature landed in a dark, secluded clearing deep within the northern crags. The grip released, and Richard tumbled onto the hard dirt, coughing out a mouthful of ash.

He cautiously sat up, rubbing his bruised ribs, and lifted his eyes. Standing directly before him was a monstrous, magnificent dragon. Its scales were the color of midnight, its eyes glowing like twin pools of molten gold. Richard froze, his eyes wide as he stared at the mythical beast in sheer, unadulterated awe.

“So... this is the great King Richard, whom everyone admires so much,” the dragon spoke, its voice a deep, vibrating rumble that shook the very stones beneath Richard's boots. The creature tilted its massive head, inspecting him. “Hm. You don’t look so bad, human. To be perfectly honest, I expected much worse.”

Richard swallowed hard, forcing his royal composure to return. He pointed a finger back toward the distant, glowing horizon. “The fire at my home... was that you?”

“Yes,” the dragon replied casually, blowing a small puff of smoke from its nostrils. “I didn’t know you weren’t home at the time.”

“And what about everyone who *was* home?!” Richard snapped, his anger momentarily overriding his fear. “All of my servants? My guards? Did you intend to burn them alive too?”

“Of course not,” the dragon rumbled, sounding almost offended. “I only wanted to flush *you* out. I thought you were hiding deep inside the castle like a typical, cowardly king.”

Richard stood up, straightening his torn, ash-stained shirt. “If you have a grievance against me, deal with me directly, monster. Leave my people out of your games.”

The dragon went quiet, its golden eyes widening slightly in genuine wonder. “Well... they truly weren't lying about your character, were they?”

“Well, I suppose that’s progress,” Richard muttered dryly, crossing his arms. “People used to only spin lies about me. Why am I here? If your goal was to burn me to a crisp, you had your perfect chance in the courtyard.”

“I didn’t want to burn you, Richard. I wanted to speak with you.”

“You could have just walked through my front gates and asked for an audience; you didn’t have to destroy my home,” Richard pointed out sharply. “What is it you want to talk about? What can I possibly do for a creature of your power?”

“Rather, the question is: what can *I* do for you?” the dragon countered, its tail sweeping the ground. “It is time for you to broaden your horizons, King. Your country can manage perfectly well without your presence for a while, and it is time for you to see a completely different world.”

Richard furrowed his brow. “Why me?”

“Because I think you are finally ready for it.”

Richard’s heart instantly dropped as he thought of the valley. “And what about Klára? And Eliza? I won't leave them.”

“Hm...” the dragon mused, its golden eyes flashing.

Without another word, the massive beast took flight with a powerful beat of its wings, disappearing into the night sky. Richard stood alone in the clearing, breathing heavily. But a mere minute later, the wind roared again. The dragon dropped from the clouds and carefully, with unbelievable gentleness, placed a terrified Klára and their tightly wrapped daughter onto the grass right next to him.

Klára instantly let out a sob of relief, scrambling to her feet and pressing herself tightly against Richard's chest, her eyes wide with terror as she stared at the beast.

Richard wrapped his strong arms around them, glaring up at the monster. “Does this mean they are coming with me?”

“Yes,” the dragon rumbled.

“Where exactly are we going?” Klára asked, her voice trembling but brave as she looked between the two of them.

The dragon leaned down, its giant snout inches from her face. “I like her,” the beast remarked.

Richard instantly stepped in front of his wife, giving the creature a fierce, warning look. “Back off.”

The dragon let out a strange, rumbling sound—which Richard realized with a chill was actually a laugh. “Keep your boots on, King. She’s not my type.”

Richard rolled his eyes, letting out a tired breath. “You have an absolutely terrible sense of humor.”

“So I’ve been told,” the dragon replied.

Suddenly, the dragon’s massive body began to shake strangely. A swirling, blinding cloud of brilliant blue sparks and thick white smoke formed around the creature, obscuring its massive form. Richard shielded Klára and Eliza with his cloak.

When the smoke finally cleared, the monster was gone.

Standing in its place was a tall, lean man dressed in unfamiliar, heavily practical northern traveler's gear. He had sharp features, piercing grey eyes, and a confident, easy smirk. He casually approached Richard, reaching out a strong, calloused hand to help the king fully to his feet.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself,” the man said, his voice now entirely human but carrying a distinct, crisp northern accent. “I am Benedict. My family's kingdom lies far to the frozen north of here. This... whole dragon transformation thing? It runs quite strongly in the bloodline. Not much I can really do about it, unfortunately.”

Richard gripped his hand, pulling himself up, though his eyes remained wary. “Pleased to meet you, Benedict,” Richard said dryly. “But you really, truly could have skipped the whole castle fire bit. Especially considering I wasn’t even home to appreciate the drama.”

“I am a deeply distrustful man by nature, Richard,” Benedict admitted, shrugging his shoulders lightheartedly. “Especially when an entire continent speaks nothing but glowing, saintly words about a single ruler. It all sounded a bit too good to be true, if you ask me. I didn’t believe a word of it. But... back to the matter of your journey. I think you’ll find you quite like where we are heading. You’ll just have to get used to the scenery. And... you’ll definitely be needing these.”

Benedict reached into his leather vest and pulled out a small packet, handing it directly to Richard.

Richard took the papers, flipping through them in total bewilderment. The parchment felt strange, smooth, and was stamped with bizarre, highly complex seals he had never seen before in any royal registry. Alongside the documents was a heavy pouch of uniquely stamped, unfamiliar coinage.

“Don’t lose those,” Benedict said, his smirk vanishing into a look of dead seriousness. “Those are official identification documents for you and your wife, and sufficient currency for the transition. And now...”

Before Richard could ask a single question about what "identification documents" meant, Benedict stepped back. The blue sparks flared wildly once more, and within the blink of an eye, the northern man transformed back into the magnificent midnight dragon.

“All aboard,” the dragon’s voice rumbled through their minds as the beast leaned its massive shoulder down toward the grass, creating a makeshift ramp. “Hold on tight. The northern winds do not play gentle.”

Richard looked at Klára. She looked back at him, her eyes wide, but seeing the absolute resolve in her husband's face, she gave a firm nod, adjusting the blanket around baby Eliza.

Together, the small family climbed onto the dragon's massive, warm back, locking their hands securely into the ridges of his thick scales.

With a deafening roar that echoed through the canyons, Benedict leapt into the air. The ground vanished instantly as the dragon soared high into the clouds, leaving the burning castle and the old world far behind them, charting a course for an entirely unknown horizon.

Chapter 11 The New World

It was impossible to accurately say how long the dizzying flight through the clouds actually lasted. To Richard and Klára, holding onto the dragon's massive scales for dear life, it felt like only a few terrifying, breathless minutes.

Without warning, Benedict descended sharply, dropping them off gently on the damp grass in the middle of a deserted city park, before vanishing into the night sky like a ghost.

Richard and Klára stood up slowly, looking around at their surroundings, completely and utterly bewildered. Enormous towers of glass and concrete loomed in the distance, glowing with thousands of artificial, internal lights. Strange, low rumbles and mechanical hums echoed from the nearby paved roads.

“What are we going to do, Richard? Where even are we?” Klára whispered, clutching the shivering bundle of Eliza tightly against her chest.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Richard admitted, his eyes darting across the strange black pathways. “But first, we must find a dry place to sleep. Stand here, I’ll try to ask someone for directions.”

Richard attempted to approach several passing citizens hurrying through the park. But dressed in his torn, ash-stained medieval finery, the passersby simply cast nervous glances at him, adjusted their coats, and entirely ignored him, walking past as if he were invisible.

Unbeknownst to them, someone was watching their desperate situation closely through the warm, lit window of a nearby café. A young man sat at a stool, sipping his drink, tracking Richard’s increasingly frantic attempts to ask for help.

As he watched, the sky darkened completely and a sudden, cold downpour began to lash against the glass. Through the rain, he saw the deep look of hopelessness and rising fear in Klára’s eyes as she desperately tried to shield her tiny baby from the

freezing torrent. He couldn't just sit there. The man pushed away from the counter, grabbed his jacket, and headed out into the storm toward them.

Richard was entirely busy trying to wrap his own coat around Klára, murmuring comforting words, and didn't see the stranger approaching from behind.

“Excuse me... do you two need some help?” the man asked, raising his voice over the sound of the rain.

Richard spun around defensively. Their eyes met in the glow of a nearby streetlamp, and neither man could believe what they were looking at. The stranger froze, his jaw dropping as he stared at Richard’s face.

“Andy...?” the man asked, completely stunned, taking a step back. “What on earth are you doing out here? And what are you wearing?”

Richard stared at him blankly, his mind struggling to process why this strangely dressed man looked like a mirror image of himself. He shook his head. “No. My name is Richard. And you are?”

The man looked between Richard and the shivering Klára in utter confusion for a long, quiet moment. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Let’s just get out of this pouring rain first,” he said firmly, gesturing toward the warm light of the building behind him. He led the damp, terrified royal family directly into the cozy café.

Richard and Klára looked around the establishment in complete disbelief. The smooth, polished surfaces, the humming machines emitting the rich scent of roasted beans, and the brightly colored signs were completely alien to them. The man walked over to the counter, spoke softly to the barista, and returned with three steaming porcelain cups.

They sat together at a small, secluded table by the large window, watching the rain lash against the glass.

“So... you are Richard,” the man began gently, leaning forward. “And you?” he asked, looking at Klára.

“Klára,” she replied in a small, trembling voice.

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Filip.” He paused, looking questioningly at Richard’s face again, analyzing every line, every feature. “So... you are telling me you aren’t my brother, Andrej, and you haven’t just been in some horrible accident?”

Richard simply shook his head, holding his warm cup of coffee with both hands, fascinated by the heat it radiated. “I have no idea who Andrej is, friend.”

Filip reached into his pocket, pulled out a small, glowing glass rectangle—a smartphone—and pressed it to his ear. Richard and Klára jumped slightly at the magic device, watching him wide-eyed.

“Hey, Andy. Where exactly are you right now?”

“At the hospital on shift, Filip. Why? Did something happen at home?”

“No... no, it’s nothing. Just checking in. I’ll call you right back.”

Filip hung up the call, slid the phone onto the table, and stared at Richard with renewed intensity. “How is it humanly possible that you look exactly like me? Like... identical?”

“I truly have no idea,” Richard sighed heavily, the weight of the entire night crashing down on him. “But we wouldn’t want to cause you any trouble, Filip. We just wanted to ask about some local lodging. We don’t know a single thing about this city.”

“Where exactly are you from?” Filip asked.

“From Tusia,” Richard answered honestly.

Filip furrowed his brow, racking his brain. “Tusia? I’ve never heard of such a country. Is it overseas?” He paused, his eyes drifting down to the bundle in Klára's arms. “The little one doesn’t look well at all,” he added softly, pointing to Eliza.

“She’s burning up,” Klára said, her voice breaking with motherly terror as she felt her daughter's hot cheek. “Her fever is rising.”

Filip stood up immediately, grabbing his car keys. “Come with me,” he said, hardly believing he was volunteering to help complete strangers who looked like his clone.

“You don’t have to do that,” Richard said automatically, his protective instincts flaring. “Just show us the way to an inn and we’ll go.”

“No, no, no. Not a chance,” Filip insisted, waving his hand as he ushered them toward the back exit. “You’d get completely lost at the very next corner. Besides, it’s pouring rain, and the city hospital is a dangerously long walk from here.”

“Hospital?” Klára whispered, unfamiliar with the word.

“A place for healing,” Filip explained kindly. “Someone professional should look at the little one immediately, and the best pediatrician around happens to be on duty right now. And by sheer chance... he’s my brother. We’re identical twins, so he looks exactly like me. Come on.”

Filip led them out to a sleek, metallic vehicle parked in the alley. He opened the doors and put them in the back seat of the car. He slammed the doors shut and shifted into drive. Richard didn't want to ask and expose his ignorance, but it was painfully clear to Filip from the way the man gripped the seat upholstery with white knuckles and gasped at every turn that this was the man’s absolute first time inside a car. Filip let out a quiet, sympathetic sigh, smoothing out the acceleration.

When they finally arrived at the brightly lit emergency entrance of the hospital, Filip hurried them inside the sterile, white corridors and immediately sent a page for his

brother. Within minutes, a man dressed in neat medical scrubs hurried down the hallway.

“Sorry, Filip, I had a critical patient intake,” Andrej said, wiping his brow. “You sounded incredibly strange when you called earlier. Is everything okay with you?”

“You won’t believe this, Andy. Look,” Filip said, stepping aside. “This is Richard.”

The two men looked at each other—Andrej looking significantly more surprised, his professional medical demeanor slipping for a fraction of a second as he stared into his own face.

“And this is Klára and their daughter,” Filip continued quickly, breaking the stunned silence. “That’s the real reason I’m here. I think you should look at the baby right away.”

Klára gave the doctor a pleading, desperate look, her eyes swimming with tears. Andrej's medical instincts instantly kicked in. He gave his brother a firm nod.

“Come with me, Klára. You two men wait out here in the hallway.”

Andrej worked in the high-pressure emergency room and was thoroughly used to treating patients quickly and efficiently. He gently guided Klára into his small, quiet office. She looked around at the strange monitors, the sterile metal tools, and the bright artificial lights with immense distrust, holding Eliza tightly.

Andrej placed a gentle, warm hand on Eliza’s forehead and looked at Klára with a reassuring smile. “Don’t be afraid, mama. It’s likely just a common cold aggravated by the damp weather. I’m Andrej. May I examine her?” he asked softly, extending his arms. “What is her name?”

“Eliza,” Klára whispered, reluctantly handing her over.

“Alright, Lizzy. Come here, little one,” Andrej cooed. He took the baby into his arms and expertly examined her ears, throat, and chest. Eliza cried out for a brief moment at the cold stethoscope, but Andrej quickly soothed her with a practiced, gentle rocking motion.

“It’s nothing serious at all, Klára,” he said, placing the baby back into her mother's arms. “I’ll prescribe a soothing syrup, and in a few days, she’ll be completely fine. But... you are shaking terribly too. How are you feeling?”

“It’s nothing,” Klára murmured, staring at the floor. “Just... too much has happened in the last two hours. Too many changes.”

Andrej grabbed a clean glass, filled it with fresh water from the dispenser, and handed it to her. “Drink this. You are completely safe here, I promise. Will you tell me what happened to you? Maybe my brother and I can help you find your feet. Besides... looking at your husband, it feels like we’re family in some strange way.”

“I’m afraid... you wouldn’t believe a single word I said,” she whispered.

Andrej let out a soft chuckle. “Fair enough. Medical school prepares you for a lot of strange things, but I'm a patient man. You’re Klára... what? What is your last name?”

Klára blinked, entirely uncomprehending. “Last name?”

“Yes. A family name. A second name,” Andrej explained patiently. “For instance, I am Andrej Kráľ.”

Klára’s breath caught in her throat. She looked at him with wide, shocked eyes. “Richard is... kráľ (king).”

“Well, we’re getting somewhere,” Andrej smiled, thinking it was a joke or a strange translation. “And you even have the same name as me.”

To Klára, however, none of this made any sense. The matching faces, the strange magical world, the doctor sharing the title of her husband's throne—it was overwhelming. The room began to spin, and she began to shake even more violently.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. Nothing bad is happening, Klára,” Andrej said quickly, gently touching her hand to ground her. He could see she was entering a state of severe psychological shock. “It’s probably better if we get you back to your husband right away. What do you say? Here is the fever syrup for Lizzy.”

He pulled a small bottle from the medical cabinet. “We’ll give her one spoonful right now to start lowering the fever. Give her another spoonful tonight, and then three times a day after meals.”

He spoke with immense kindness, guiding her by the elbow back out to the waiting room where Richard and Filip were pacing. The moment the door opened, Richard lunged forward and hugged Klára tightly; it was painfully clear to him from her pale face and trembling frame that she was not okay.

“Filip, can I have a quick word?” Andy asked his brother, stepping to the side of the hallway. “Where exactly did you find them?”

“In the park, right near the café,” Filip whispered back. “They looked completely lost, drenched, and terrified, Andy. I just wanted to help.”

Andrej looked back at the couple with a worried, professional expression. “I don’t want to jump to hasty conclusions, but she is clearly in severe shock. She mentioned that too much happened in the last two hours. They both desperately need warmth, dry clothes, hot food, and a place where they feel completely safe. Can you arrange that tonight?”

“I’ll take them straight to my place,” Filip nodded without hesitation.

“Thanks. I’ll come by to see them tomorrow after my shift ends. I’d still like to have a proper talk with him.”

Richard stood nearby, cradling the now-quiet Lizzy in his arms. Klára seemed a bit calmer just being pressed against his side.

“Richard, can I borrow you for just a minute?” Andy asked.

Richard handed Eliza to Klára and followed the doctor down the hall. “Thank you for taking care of Eliza, Doctor,” Richard said sincerely.

“Don’t mention it. It’s my job,” Andrej said, waving it off. “I’m far more concerned about your wife right now. I don’t know what trauma you two went through tonight, but it was simply too much for her mind to process. Filip will look after you tonight, and I’ll come by tomorrow. If you need help with anything at all, we’re happy to assist. Just... out of professional curiosity... when were you born, Richard?”

In Richard’s world, the days and years were counted by eras, seasons, and different royal calendars. But while Andrej had been inside examining Klára, Richard had secretly reached into his vest, pulling out the strange, smooth papers Benedict the dragon had given him. He had memorized the strange numbers stamped under his face.

“May third, eighty-nine,” Richard stated clearly, mimicking the format on the document.

Andrej’s eyes widened slightly, a chill running down his spine. “Hm... I thought so. The exact same day as my brother and me,” Andy added quietly, staring at his lookalike. He shook his head to clear the mystery. “Anyway, I have to go.”

“Doctor Kráľ, we need you at intake immediately! Ambulance arriving!” a nurse called out from down the hall.

“Duty calls. See you tomorrow, Richard.”

“Thanks,” Filip said, clapping his brother on the shoulder and leading Richard and Klára out toward the exit.

As they walked out into the cool night air toward the car, Richard turned to Filip. “Thank you for everything you’ve done, Filip. Just tell us where we can find a local inn for the night and we’ll go. We truly won’t cause you any more trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Richard. Don’t worry about it,” Filip smiled, unlocking the vehicle. “I’m taking you to my apartment. Once you’ve eaten and rested, you can tell me more about yourselves whenever you feel ready.”

Richard let out a long, defeated sigh, but looking at his exhausted wife, he gratefully agreed.

Filip took them to his modern apartment building and led them inside. The flat was incredibly cozy, filled with soft carpets, warm lighting, and comfortable furniture. He immediately showed them to a quiet guest room where they could settle down, rushing back and forth to bring them fresh pillows and thick, warm blankets.

“Alright, what would you two like to eat?” Filip asked, leaning against the kitchen counter. “I can whip something up quickly.”

“Does... does this really not bother you?” Klára asked shyly, wrapping a blanket tightly around her shoulders as she sat on the sofa. “We are strangers.”

“Really, it doesn’t bother me at all,” Filip said warmly, opening his refrigerator. “And please, let’s use *‘ti’* from now on. No formalities. It seems like we’re family in some strange, cosmic way anyway. Let's see what I have... I can make some pasta, a quick risotto, or we can just do fresh bread, butter, cheese, ham, and some vegetables.”

He listed everything neatly, but looking at their blank, utterly overwhelmed expressions, he quickly realized they had absolutely no idea what "risotto" was or how to choose for themselves in this strange paradise of abundance.

“Tell you what, just sit back and relax, and I’ll bring you a bit of everything,” Filip said gently.

A few minutes later, Filip placed two steaming plates in front of them with a neat assortment of food. Klára, however, still couldn’t stop her hands from shaking as she stared at the bright ceramic plate. Filip noticed, stepped away, and returned to set a warm, aromatic cup of tea right before her.

“Chamomile,” Filip said softly. “It’ll help your nerves calm down. You have absolutely nothing to fear here, Klára. Nothing bad will ever happen to you under this roof. Andrej will come by tomorrow afternoon just to make sure the little one is still recovering well.”

Richard sat beside her, his expression tightening as he watched her distress. He took her hand. “Did that doctor do something to you, Klára? Or say something harmful? Or to Eliza?”

She quickly shook her head shamefully, taking a sip of the sweet tea. Filip also grew highly alert, leaning against the table, wanting to know what had triggered her panic attack in the office.

“No,” Klára whispered. “Nothing bad at all. He was incredibly kind and gentle with Eliza. He... he just asked me for a last name. A second name.”

Filip furrowed his brow, completely failing to understand why a routine administrative question would cause a total psychological breakdown. “A last name? But that's just standard procedure for medical records...”

But Richard reacted with lightning speed, his sharp mind connecting the pieces of Benedict's warning. He looked at Filip honestly.

“Filip... in the land we come from, we simply do not use last names. It doesn't exist. It is just Peter the shoemaker, or Juraj the farmer’s son, or Richard. We even count our years, our months, and our history entirely differently than you do here.”

Filip stared at him, the sheer gravity of the situation finally beginning to dawn on him. These people weren't from a different country; they were from a completely different reality.

“Andrej asks a lot of questions,” Filip said softly, his voice full of apology. “It’s just an ingrained part of his job as a doctor. I’m so sorry he made you uncomfortable, Klára.”

“Everything is just... so incredibly different here,” Richard said, looking around the brightly lit room, a determined spark returning to his eyes. “I just need a little time to get used to it, to study, and to learn exactly how things work in this world.”

Filip smiled, reaching over to pat Richard's arm. “And you will, my friend. But first, you both desperately need to eat your food. Tonight, you’ll get some proper, uninterrupted rest. Tomorrow, Richard can tell me your entire story over breakfast. And don't worry—we’ll go out and buy plenty of clothes and toys for little Lizzy, too.”

Chapter 12 The Switch

Klára calmed down slightly. Everything that had happened over the last twenty-four hours had exhausted her. After eating, she truly appreciated the chance to sleep.

Filip lent Richard some clothes and took him shopping. Although night was slowly falling in Richard’s kingdom, here it was only shortly after noon. Eliza fell asleep as well, so they left them both in the safety of Filip’s apartment and headed into the city together.

As soon as they were in the car, Filip could no longer hold back.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of Klára—she’s clearly been through more than enough—but you can take it,” Filip began. “How could you leave so irresponsibly? Without anything, and with a child, no less! I don’t know what horrible thing forced you to do it, but still... where was your head?! You look like an intelligent, responsible man, so what happened? I’m happy to help you, I’ll pay for everything necessary, but you can’t live like this.”

The words shook Richard, but the diplomat in him won out.

“You’re right. It was a very hasty and ill-conceived decision,” Richard replied. “But I do have some money. I have no idea if it’s a lot or a little, but as soon as I understand how things work here, I’ll start working and find us a place to live. I will take care of my family. For the past few years, I’ve taken care of an entire country. But here, that means nothing. I am grateful for your help and everything you’re doing

for us. I know it’s no small thing to take in strangers under your own roof. As soon as I am able, I will repay you for everything.”

“Who are you?” Filip asked.

Richard looked at him blankly. Filip parked the car but stayed inside.

“How much money do you actually have?” he continued.

Richard pulled out the envelope Benedict had given him. Inside were documents, money, and a note with a phone number and a message: *IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO, CALL ME. BENEDICT.* Filip looked into the envelope. “So, Richard Kráľ. Born May 3rd, 1989. Eight thousand... that’s a nice sum. You can buy everything you need with that and still have enough for two or three months. Did you know my last name is also Kráľ and I was born on May 3rd, 1989?”

“I know. Your brother told me.”

“And who is Benedict?”

“He got us here,” Richard explained. “I didn’t have many options to negotiate with him. In essence, he burned down my home.”

“So he basically kidnapped you. That would make sense,” Filip said. “But there’s a law for that. You should go to the police and resolve it.”

“I’m not sure what the police are, but I don’t think it would help me much.”

Filip shook his head and got out of the car. He helped Richard pick out everything he needed for Eliza—from clothes and food to a stroller—as well as some clothes for Klára, toiletries, and dinner.

When they returned, Richard’s head began to fill with questions. He was interested in everything: how to make coffee, how to heat food, who works where and how, who leads their “country,” what their history was, and what the police and democracy were.

Later, Klára joined them, feeling significantly better and more rested. Even Lizzy was back to her old self, exploring everything around her. When Andrej stopped by Filip’s the next morning and saw them, he was greatly relieved.

Filip spent several more days with them, trying to show them everything that could help and everything they would have to manage on their own while he was at work. Andrej introduced them to his wife and daughter, so Klára had someone to talk to who understood her. Both quickly adapted to the new way of life. Some things remained hard to explain, and Richard did his best to avoid answering who he truly was in his own land.

Benedict seemed to have vanished, and Richard only hoped his kingdom was prospering and that no one was claiming his people or seeking war. Days passed like water, and he began to doubt he would ever return home.

But while for him it was only a few days, weeks passed in his own land. They had no idea what had happened to their King. Many even thought Richard was dead, and the rumor spread quickly. Some distant neighbors began to think of conquering the country. The only thing holding them back from war was Richard's persona and everything he represented. Now that he was gone, they wanted to seize the land.

Patrik, the captain of the guard and Richard's close friend, knew Richard would never allow his people and land to belong to someone else. He reminded everyone of this constantly. He resisted for a long time, but after long months, a burned castle, and a poor harvest, he was slowly losing his strength and will.

In the new world, Richard found a job as a school assistant. And then, Benedict decided to shuffle the cards again.

"Excuse me, are you Doctor Kráľ?" Benedict approached Andrej one day on his way to work.

"Yes. What do you need?" Andrej asked.

"Please, come with me," he requested.

But after a few steps, Benedict transformed and snatched Andrej in his claws. He flew high above the city and carried him away. Andrej had no idea what was happening. The dragon dropped him in a field and returned to the city to take Filip as well, dropping him near the Inn below the castle.

Andrej slowly picked himself up from the ground and looked around. Rubi was the first to see him and ran toward him.

"You're back!" she cried out.

"Back?" Andrej asked, confused.

"You must have hit your head really hard," she remarked.

"That's true. Where am I?"

"In the field, obviously."

"I can see that, but where in the field?"

By then, Leo was approaching him. "Your Majesty! So you are alive after all. I am so glad to see you again." He welcomed him, but Andrej was so dazed he couldn't put two and two together.

Filip was picking himself up from the ground in the exact same way. He was leaning against the door of the Inn when the Innkeeper came out to see what the noise was about.

“Goodness! Look at you. Come on in, what happened to you?” the Innkeeper said, helping him inside. “It’s about time you were back.”

“Back?” Filip asked.

“Sit down. I’ll bring you soup. It’ll do you good.”

“Thanks, you don’t have to. I’ll be fine,” Filip said. “Once I figure out what happened... and where I am...”

Andrej sat back down on the ground in the field. His head was buzzing, and the midday sun wasn’t helping. Rubi stared at him. Something didn’t feel right. This man looked like Richard, but he wasn’t him.

“You aren’t King Richard,” she stated.

“You’re right, little one. I am Andrej Kráľ. Wait, you know Richard?”

Leo stared at him in confusion. “Well, Richard is our King. We didn’t know he had a double who was also a king.”

“No, no. I’m not a king, a king. That’s just my name.”

Marek and Rebeka joined them too, but neither of them understood a single word he said.

“So you aren’t Richard?” Marek asked.

Andrej shook his head, looking at Marek. It was slowly dawning on him. “So I’m at Richard’s. And Richard is your King. And I look like him.” He thought out loud, and everyone nodded. “Now I understand why Klára said I wouldn’t believe her,” he mused.

“You saw Klára?” Rebeka asked. “Is she alright?”

“Yes. Both of them are fine.”

“And Richard?” Marek asked timidly.

“Him too. They are all... in my world,” Andrej said quietly.

Meanwhile, the Innkeeper set the soup before Filip. He wanted to protest, but the man stopped him.

“Just eat. What happened to you? We thought you were dead.”

“How do you know me?” Filip asked, taking a sip of the soup.

The Innkeeper looked at him strangely. “Well, you are our King. We all know you. But about ten months ago—after the palace burned down—you disappeared.”

“Ten months?” Filip gasped.

“Yes. Neighboring kings have slowly started to claim the land. Patrik is trying to hold it together, but much has happened, and the people are losing hope.”

Filip held his head. He couldn’t understand what had happened.

“Do you want me to call someone?” the Innkeeper asked. “Where were you, anyway? Is Klára alright?”

Filip grew alert. “Klára. You know Klára?”

“She’s your wife. Of course I know her.”

It slowly clicked for Filip. *Klára is Richard’s wife. Richard is 'King'. That’s not a name, it’s a title.*

“I’m glad your memory is returning,” the Innkeeper smiled.

“Good man, is this Richard’s country?”

“Yes,” the Innkeeper said uncertainly.

“Now it makes sense. But I am not Richard. I am Filip. I met Richard only recently. He appeared in my country. With Klára and Eliza. They’re staying with me.”

“And you know you look the same?”

“Yes. It’s strange. Everyone is fine. At least they were this morning.”

Back in the field, Leo asked Andrej, “How did you get here?”

“I... I’m not quite sure. Someone approached me on my way to work this morning, but everything after that is a blur.”

“Well, Richard used to stay at the rectory for a while,” Leo suggested. “The castle isn’t in a state to be lived in yet. Or at the mill. That is his second home, after all.”

“I think the mill will be fine.”

“I’ll take you there,” Marek offered and escorted him.

Filip decided to head to the mill as well, so both brothers met there. Of course, their arrival caused quite a shock for Marek and the Innkeeper.

“If you need anything, come to the town below the castle, and we will help you,” Marek said.

“Thank you. That is very kind of you,” Filip replied. Marek and the Innkeeper then left them alone.

“So he is a king,” Andrej said in awe, looking around the mill.

“Supposedly others are claiming his throne now,” Filip noted.

“I know that look, Filip. You want to save the kingdom. Literally. But we aren’t him,” Andrej countered.

“But we look like him. Maybe we could help. Even the people mistook us for him.”

“And what if they find out we aren’t Richard and someone else takes over the whole kingdom?” Andrej worried.

“But that will happen even if we do nothing.”

Andrej sighed. “I hate it when you do that, Filip. So, what do you want? What’s the plan?”

“We need to talk to this Patrik.”

Andrej wasn’t thrilled, but he agreed. That very evening, they met with Patrik, and he explained exactly what was happening.

Chapter 13 Price for the Name

The kingdom desperately needed an ally, so Patrik sent a swift messenger to King Tomáš. However, Tomáš was severely ill, and so Princess Adela arrived at the kingdom instead.

Patrik wanted to test something, so he deliberately didn't tell Adela that she wouldn’t be speaking with the real Richard. He reasoned that if one of the twin brothers could successfully convince her he was Richard, they would stand a chance at negotiating with the surrounding hostile kingdoms.

Andrej was waiting for her in a small, quiet parlor.

“Princess Adela, I am glad to see you again. I am sorry it is under such dire circumstances,” Andrej said, doing his absolute best to sound like a commanding king.

She looked at him in surprise, her eyes narrowing. “Your Majesty, why all this stiff diplomacy? We are friends, after all.”

“It is not easy to ask for help,” Andrej said, lowering his eyes and looking a bit ashamed.

Adela crossed her arms. “Alright, who are you and what have you done with Richard?” she asked, completely confused.

Andrej sighed and turned toward the corner where the captain was standing. “I told you it wouldn’t work, Patrik,” he said irritably.

At that moment, Filip stepped through the door. “But at least she can help us be like him.”

Adela stared at the two identical men, completely bewildered.

“My Lady, these gentlemen are Andrej and Filip,” Patrik explained quickly. “Both met King Richard in their own world, and somehow, they have ended up here. The kingdom desperately needs a king to deter our neighbors, so these gentlemen offered to help. Perhaps you can help them become the King.”

“Why can’t they just do it in their own names?” Adela argued, shaking her head. “I won’t be able to turn them into kings in a single day. Look at them—they can’t even stand the way Richard does.”

“What do you suggest then?” Filip asked her.

“Hm...” Adela mused, tapping her chin. “I think the most important thing right now is for word to spread again that Richard is back. One of you will spend some time in the town below the castle, repair the fortress, and that will be that. If the other lords learn he is back, they will stop making claims on our land.”

“So we won’t actually have to speak with anyone?” Andrej asked, relieved.

“No one from the outside. At least for now.”

“Thank you,” Filip said. “But I must ask... how did you know so quickly that we weren’t Richard?”

Adela smiled warmly at Filip. “I think we can use *‘ty’*. To answer your question—neither of you has Richard’s absolute confidence, but you also lack his specific kind of lightness.”

“Hm, there’s definitely some truth to that,” Andrej noted.

Things gradually settled down in the valley, and the news that King Richard had returned spread quickly across the borders. Together, the brothers attempted to restore the castle and help the local people. The recent harvest hadn’t been great, but thankfully, there was enough grain stored in the royal granaries for everyone to survive the coming winter.

Andrej and Filip gradually learned how to manage the crops the people brought as taxes and how to divide the rations so that every family had enough. Still, whenever the townspeople addressed them as “Your Majesty,” neither of them could get used to it. They kept up the act solely so that no foreigner would discover the King’s true absence.

While for Filip and Andrej several long days passed in the old world, for Richard, Klára, and Eliza, it was only a matter of a few hours.

However, they grew increasingly uneasy when Filip didn’t return home from work. Their anxiety peaked when Andrej’s wife, Bea, suddenly appeared at the apartment door, frantic. She explained that Andrej hadn’t returned from his hospital shift either, nor had he left her any kind of message.

They were all gathered anxiously in Filip’s living room when a firm knock echoed on the door. Richard opened it. It was Benedict, dressed in neat, modern civilian clothes. Richard immediately invited him inside.

“Good day,” Benedict said, stepping into the hallway. “I am Benedict Drobný, and I work at the Institute for Research and Development. I just wanted to formally inform you that we have asked your husband and his brother for their urgent assistance with a project. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you any details, as it is a top-secret government project. However, you need not worry. Both men are perfectly fine and will be back home in a few days. That is all I wanted to say. If anything changes, I will inform you. Thank you.”

He gave a polite nod and promptly left the apartment.

Bea stood there, completely stunned. “My husband... and a top-secret project?” she muttered blankly, shaking her head. On the other hand, the explanation calmed her nerves. Andrej was alive and well, and for now, that was enough for her.

Richard, however, strongly suspected what had actually happened. He could only hope that his people back home would help the twins, just as Filip and Andrej had helped him. In the meantime, he continued getting used to the rhythm of ordinary modern life.

“Those kids are going to destroy me. You wouldn’t believe what they are truly capable of,” Richard complained with a sigh, collapsing onto the sofa when he returned from the school on the third day.

“What exactly did they do to you?” Klára asked with a bright smile, handing him a cup of tea.

“One day they pretend to like you, the next they act entirely innocent, and finally, they do everything out of sheer spite just to drive you to madness.”

“I find it very hard to believe that the legendary King Richard can’t handle a bunch of school children.”

“You haven’t experienced them, Klára. And besides, here, I am not a king. It was much easier for me to pretend to be a traveler in our world, because back then, I knew exactly who I was and I knew I had the power to change things.”

“But you can do that here too,” Klára said softly, kneeling beside him and taking his hand. “You are still a king in your heart, and you can always change things for the better.”

Richard smiled and kissed Klára. She always knew exactly what to say to help him and put him back on the right path.

When Richard spoke in the classroom the next day, his voice held a newfound strength. Every student's eyes were fixed on him, and no one even tried to turn to their neighbor to gossip.

“Teacher,” a boy asked in the middle of the lesson, raising his hand. “Is it true that in the country you come from, you have a real king?”

Richard paused, chalk in hand. “Who told you that? But yes... it is true.”

“And what is it like?” another student chimed in.

“That is not the subject of today's English lesson.”

“Will you please tell us something about it?” the others kept asking, leaning forward in their desks.

Richard sighed, a small smirk playing on his lips. “Only if you agree to do the grammar notes for your homework entirely by yourselves.”

The classroom went silent as everyone immediately closed their notebooks, waiting eagerly for him to speak.

“Fine then,” Richard said, leaning against his desk. “I don’t know what exactly you want to hear, but having a king isn’t actually that different from having a president. At least... in the case where the king truly listens to his people and tries his best to help them.”

“What kind of king do you have right now?” a girl from the front row asked.

“Right now, none,” Richard said quietly, his expression darkening. “And that worries me a bit.”

“What happened to the previous king? And who will be the new one?”

“I must say, you are asking very good questions today,” Richard smiled as the loud school bell suddenly cut him off. “But the bell is ringing, so we will have to finish this discussion another time.”

He gathered his materials and left the classroom. On his entire way home, he looked up at the sky, hoping Benedict would appear as soon as possible.

The restoration of the castle was almost complete. Andrej was helping with the interior repairs inside the keep, while Filip was down in the town below the castle, checking on the merchants.

Suddenly, a group of armed riders on horseback appeared out of nowhere. They swept through the stone streets like a violent whirlwind, shouting commands. Before

anyone could react, they surrounded Filip, hoisted him onto a horse, and tore back out of the gates.

Up at the castle, Andrej heard the distant screaming echoing from below. He ran out onto the battlements to see what had happened. Descending the path, he found a crowd of confused, weeping townspeople looking around desperately, trying to find any trace of Filip.

Patrik ran out into the courtyard, his sword drawn. He spotted the dust cloud of the riders in the far distance. He wanted to mount his horse and go after them immediately, but they were already far too far away to catch.

“What happened down there?” Andrej asked, running up to the gates.

“Riders,” Hana told him, her voice trembling. “They took Filip by force and injured a few of our people who tried to stand in their way.”

“Where are the injured?”

“The Innkeeper took them inside the tavern.”

“Are you alright, Hana?” Andrej asked quickly.

“I am, but one of the raiders injured this boy. He must have been standing in their path when they grabbed Filip.”

Hana showed him a young boy cradled in her arms. He had a deep, jagged gash across his shoulder.

“This is going to need a few clean stitches,” Andrej said thoughtfully, instinctively inspecting the wound. But then he stopped, looking around blankly. He didn’t have his medical kit, needles, or anything sterile to treat the child with.

“Are you a healer, Your Majesty?” Hana asked, looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

Andrej looked at her in surprise. In the panic, he had completely forgotten that the people in this world didn’t have modern doctors. “You could say that,” he murmured.

“I suspect you’ll be needing this,” a calm voice spoke from behind.

Andrej spun around. Benedict was suddenly standing right behind him, completely calm, handing him a familiar black leather medical bag.

“Thanks,” Andrej gasped.

Without wasting another second, Andrej took the boy from Hana and hurried inside the Inn to help the rest of the wounded townspeople. Everyone in the tavern watched him in absolute awe as he cleaned the wounds with precision and stitched the flesh with practiced, steady hands.

“I’ve never seen a healer work with such strange tools and speed,” the Innkeeper whispered, patting Andrej's shoulder in deep respect.

“Trust me, I’ve seen much worse in the emergency room,” Andrej smiled tiredly. “But does anyone here know exactly who those men were? Where are they taking Filip?”

The Innkeeper’s face fell. “They were elite riders from King Oskar. It won’t be easy to get him back from that man's territory, Your Majesty.”

A heavily beaten Filip sat slumped against the cold, damp stone wall of a dark dungeon, chains rattling around his wrists.

The heavy iron door groaned open, and a man in polished armor stepped into the torchlight.

“His Majesty, King Richard, on the wet ground in chains... now that is a sight you don’t see every day,” King Oskar sneered, looking down at him. “I must say, I am quite disappointed, Richard. I expected much more from the legendary ruler of the valley.”

“What do you want from me?” Filip stammered, coughing slightly as he tasted iron in his mouth.

Oskar let out a heavy sigh, pacing the cell. “Your kingdom flourishes. Even now, during a poor harvest, your people have enough of everything to eat; they look up to you like a god. And yet, you don’t act like a proper king at all. You never did. You married a common miller’s daughter. You worked the dirt fields alongside your own lowborn subjects. And you call yourself a king? Furthermore, you spread these dangerous, rebellious ways of yours among the neighboring lands.”

Filip let out a dry, bloody chuckle, lifting his head. “Hm... I don’t know what bothers you more, Oskar—that the people actually love their ruler, or that the kingdom is doing well despite your interference. That is truly pathetic.”

For that comment, Filip earned a brutal kick directly to his ribs. He groaned, curling into a ball on the stone floor.

“What exactly do you hope to gain by holding me here?” Filip gasped for air.

“Your people, your fertile land, and your absolute wealth,” Oskar stated coldly.

Filip laughed out loud, despite the pain in his chest. “Then you are a fool. I have absolutely nothing. And the people won’t trade a single piece of land or gold for my release, because I am not their king.”

“Nonsense!” Oskar snapped, narrowing his eyes. “I know your subjects. They would gladly die for you.”

“They would die for the *King*,” Filip countered fiercely, staring Oskar dead in the eye. “But I am just someone who happens to look exactly like him. I don’t have his royal ways. I don’t even have the posture of Richard. You will get absolutely nothing in exchange for me.”

Oskar, convinced that the man before him was simply playing a clever diplomatic game to protect his realm, grew absolutely furious. He gestured to the guards in the shadows. He had Filip beaten thoroughly once more, before spinning on his heel and leaving the dungeon, slamming the heavy iron door shut.

Chapter 14 Three Kings and one Destiny

Meanwhile, back at the mill, Andrej and Patrik were anxiously discussing ways to save Filip without losing the kingdom in the process. Andrej was fully determined to trade himself for his twin brother, but they both knew that wouldn’t help protect the land. And they certainly weren't willing to give it up to a tyrant.

A few hours later, a massive shadow swept over the valley. The dragon landed heavily in the castle square, and Richard stepped off his back. He looked around, surprised to see the fortress nearly restored, and shivered slightly as he felt the biting, cold wind of late autumn. He ran inside the keep immediately, searching for any familiar face.

Patrik heard the hurried footsteps echoing down the stone corridor and called out. “Your Majesty? We are in the throne room!”

Richard entered the room without hesitation. “Patrik!”

“It is so good to see you,” Patrik gasped, and the two long-time friends embraced tightly.

“Hi,” Andrej said quietly from the side.

Richard turned and gave him a wide, grateful smile. “Welcome to my home, Doctor. I hope they’ve taken good care of you here.”

“They have. Thank you,” Andrej replied grimly. “But we have a major problem.”

Richard furrowed his brow. “How long exactly was I gone?”

“Almost a year,” Patrik answered heavily.

“Is everyone alright? Do you have enough winter supplies?”

“Yes. Andrej and Filip have helped us immensely over the past few weeks,” Patrik explained.

“Filip is here too? Where is he?”

“Hm... that’s the problem,” Andrej told him. “Oskar’s riders captured him this morning. They injured a few townspeople in the process, but Andrej took care of everyone's wounds. We only lost Filip.”

Richard’s gaze hardened. “I’ll get him back. Don’t worry.”

“I’m coming with you,” Andrej insisted, stepping forward. “He is my brother, after all.”

“And I’m coming too,” Patrik added, checking his scabbard.

“In that case, we should leave immediately,” Richard said firmly. “I fear Filip won’t be in the best shape by the time we arrive.”

Patrik prepared the horses in the courtyard, and they got ready to set out at a full gallop. However, as the stable boys brought the animals forward, Andrej froze.

“Erm... guys, I can’t do this,” Andrej spoke up, his face paling.

Both Richard and Patrik looked at him in surprise.

“Horses,” Andrej admitted, pointing at the large animals. “Not only do I not know how to ride, but I’m actually terrified of them.”

Richard stepped closer, a warm smile breaking through his serious expression, and placed a comforting hand on the doctor's shoulder. “It’s alright. We’ll bring him back safely. Wait for us here.”

“Are you serious?” Andrej paused, blinking.

“Yes.”

Andrej let out a breath. “As a king, you are truly full of surprises.”

“I hope that’s a good thing,” Richard chuckled. He turned to Patrik, then looked back at Andrej. “Doctor Kráľ, would it bother you if we rode on one horse together?”

Andrej shook his head, a bit relieved. “No.”

“Then watch closely, and I’ll help you up.”

Richard mounted his horse with practiced grace and reached down, helping Andrej up into the saddle behind him.

When they arrived at King Oskar’s formidable castle, Richard rode straight to the gates and had himself formally announced, which caused no small amount of utter confusion among the guards. King Oskar received him in his hall immediately, completely unable to believe his own eyes.

“King Oskar,” Richard spoke, his voice echoing with absolute authority. “I heard you have something that belongs to me.”

“King Richard?” Oskar stammered, looking between Richard and the identically faced Andrej standing beside him. “How? Who on earth...?”

“Clearly, you know exactly what I’m talking about,” Richard interrupted coldly. “Release my brother to me immediately, and then we can discuss a fair trade. I have no intention of making your innocent people suffer for your stupidity.”

Andrej couldn’t hide his surprise at Richard's ruthless confidence, but he kept his mouth shut.

At Oskar's signal, the heavy chains rattled, and two guards brought Filip out into the hall. Andrej looked at his twin in utter horror, rushing over. “Filip, are you okay? What did they do to you?”

“I’ll survive,” Filip muttered through his bruised lips.

The Standoff in the Great Hall:

- Patrik drew his broadsword with a sharp ring, pointing it directly at King Oskar’s throat.
- Instantly, Oskar’s royal guards drew their weapons, forming a deadly circle and surrounding the visitors.
- Filip and Andrej watched the flashing steel in absolute disbelief, their hearts pounding.

Richard, however, stood perfectly still in the dead center of the room with a completely cool, unbothered head.

“I see you didn’t spare me,” Richard said softly, looking at Filip’s bruises. Then he glanced at his captain. “Patrik, lower your sword.”

Patrik stepped back, sheathing his blade, but Oskar’s guards remained on high alert, their spears raised. Richard took a slow, deliberate step closer to Oskar, his eyes locked onto the rival king.

“I don’t want a war, Oskar. But if you want one... you shall have it.”

“You know I hate asking for help,” Oskar hissed through his teeth, trying to maintain his composure.

“Ah, so you find it much easier and more civilized to kidnap a man and torture him,” Richard mocked smoothly.

“Evidently, he isn’t a king,” Oskar growled, gesturing at Filip.

“But that changes absolutely nothing about the fact that you kidnapped him fully believing he *was* a king,” Richard countered, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Tell me... what do you think you deserve for an action like that?”

Oskar narrowed his eyes. “Don’t forget you are standing on my territory, Richard.”

“And don’t you forget that I am standing close enough to let you take your very last breath.”

Oskar stared at him for a long, tense moment. Finally, a small smirk appeared on his face. “Hm. I never believed those sweet, gentle stories the bards sing about you, but I had no idea you played this dirty. I’m impressed.”

“I play by the exact same rules as my opponent,” Richard replied flatly. “So... shall we strike a deal?”

Oskar sighed and raised his hand, signaling his guards to stand down. The tension in the room dissipated, and Richard stepped back.

“We have some winter supplies,” Oskar said reluctantly, looking at the floor. “But not enough to last the whole winter. Will you help us, please?”

“But of course. I’d be happy to,” Richard answered gracefully. “Within the week, my guards will bring supply wagons and distribute them directly to your people.”

With the deal struck, Richard stepped closer to Filip. “I am very sorry this happened to you. Can you walk?”

Filip nodded gingerly. But when he looked out into the courtyard and saw they had come only on horses, he stopped dead in his tracks. Richard turned back to him with a smirk.

“Are you afraid of horses too, Filip?”

“No,” Filip muttered, glancing at his twin. “But I just can’t believe Andrej actually rode on one.”

They mounted the horses and returned to the valley. The moment they arrived back at the castle, Andrej immediately tended to Filip’s cuts and bruises.

As soon as the townspeople heard the news that the real King Richard was finally back, they gathered in the courtyard in massive crowds, cheering. Richard went out to meet them, greeting his subjects warmly.

He spotted a familiar face in the crowd. “Hana, it is good to see you.”

Hana smiled up at him. “What happened to you, Your Majesty?”

“It’s nothing. Andrej healed me,” Richard replied warmly.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hana smiled, holding her son. “He healed our little one's shoulder too.”

“Your doubles don’t just look like you, Richard,” the Innkeeper added, stepping forward. “They have the exact same good heart as you.”

“I hoped you would help them and welcome them,” Richard said to the crowd. “In their world, they took care of Klára, Eliza, and me as best as they could.”

“Where are they anyway?” the Innkeeper asked, looking around the courtyard.

“Filip needed immediate treatment,” Richard explained. “Oskar didn’t treat him very well in that dungeon.”

Before he could even finish his sentence, the heavy wooden doors opened, and both twin brothers stepped outside to face the people. Everyone in the courtyard looked at Filip's bruised face in shock.

"Nothing is broken, and there don't seem to be any internal injuries, so he'll be completely fine soon," Andrej announced loudly to the crowd.

Richard turned to Filip, his expression deeply sincere. "Thank you for defending my people with your own life. I don't know how I will ever repay you."

"Oh, come on," Filip chuckled, waving it off. "I did nothing. You are the one who just saved me."

"At any moment in that cell, you could have traded your life for the country," Richard insisted.

"You would never have allowed that to happen anyway," Filip smiled.

Richard then turned to the other twin. "Andrej, thank you for taking such good care of my people, of me... of us."

"It's not even worth mentioning," Andrej smiled, nudging his brother. "Believe me, seeing you give it to Oskar like that in his own hall was worth the entire trip."

Princess Adela also heard of Richard's sudden arrival and rode to visit the castle immediately. All three men—Richard, Andrej, and Filip—were waiting for her in the small parlor.

When she stepped through the door and saw Filip's bruised face, she gasped in surprise. This time, however, looking at the three identical men sitting side by side, she truly had no earthly idea which one was the real Richard.

"What on earth happened here?" she asked, startled by Filip's appearance.

"Oh, it's nothing, Adela. Just a small misunderstanding with King Oskar," Filip joked, mimicking the royal tone.

"I'm glad you're okay," she said, her voice trailing off uncertainly as she stared at him.

Andrej laughed from his chair. "Oh, come now, surely we aren't going to start with the stiff diplomacy again. I'm sure you'd like to hug an old friend."

Adela smiled broadly at Andrej, thinking he was the one, and stepped confidently toward him. Richard couldn't help himself and let out a dramatic sigh.

"Seriously, Adela? I thought for sure you'd recognize me."

"Richard!" she cried out.

“Nice of you,” she laughed, quickly turning around and throwing her arms around the real king, hugging him tightly. “A few days ago, I could tell you apart definitely. But now... you’re all exactly the same. What happened?”

“They completely surpassed themselves,” Benedict’s calm voice suddenly came from nowhere.

Everyone jumped. No one had seen or heard him enter the room. He stood near the window, holding his coat.

“And it is high time to return home,” Benedict added with a knowing smile. “By the way... Klára and Lizzy are already here.”

Chapter 15 The Legacy of Stories

When Tessa was little, her great-grandfather used to tell her stories about a land in a completely different world, a place reachable only on the back of a dragon who could transform into a man. He told stories about the town below the castle and the people living there. He spoke of how he had spent some time with them and how everyone initially mistook him for the King, because the King looked exactly like him. He talked about their first meeting and how the King worked in the mill to help his people. He also mentioned that ever since they met, they remained connected. He thought of him often and sometimes heard the King’s answer in his mind. The King always knew what to do and what to say.

Tessa always thought these were just bedtime stories. When she was ten, her great-grandfather passed away. That was the first time she wished his stories were real, so she could hear an answer from the wise King Richard in her mind. In the silence, she reached out to him. It was strange, but she felt as though he truly heard her, reassuring her that everything would be alright. That feeling stayed with her for years. As she grew older, she dismissed it as merely her own subconscious, a place where she found answers or at least comfort.

Years passed, Tessa grew up, and she reached a period in her life where she had many questions, few answers, and a broken heart. In that time, she truly wished she could hear the real Richard. Feeling a bit broken and tired, she was spending time in the university library.

One day, someone sat down next to her. He looked more like a lecturer than a student, so she gave him a startled look. “Tessa, right?” he said. She simply nodded. “What would you say if I showed you the land your great-grandfather told you about?” Tessa leaned back in her chair, unable to believe her ears. “Who sent you?” she asked, sounding a bit irritated. “No one,” he answered. “Right... of course. I don’t know who told you nonsense about my great-grandfather, but it’s not nice to mock me like this.” “I’m serious. I’m Benedict, by the way.” “The dragon himself. I imagined you a bit differently,” she said sarcastically. “I don’t want to know how Filip described

me," he laughed. "You're serious," she looked at him intently. "Dead serious," he said without hesitation, his gaze fixed on her. "How do I know you're not some psychopath trying to kidnap me?" "If I were a psychopath trying to kidnap you, I'd be waiting for you in a dark alley on your way home, not talking about your great-grandfather." "Hm... you have a point there." "If you want to be absolutely sure, ask me something he told only you. Something no one else knows except you and Filip."

Tessa thought for a moment, mentally scrolling through the stories he had told her, trying to find a detail that would prove he was telling the truth. Finally, she found it. "Great-grandfather always claimed there was something strange about the King that he could never describe. And he said he would never want to be his enemy. He claimed he only saw him once in his full power." "That was at King Oskar's. Richard always deeply valued what your great-grandfather did for his kingdom." Tessa looked at him, confused. Benedict smiled. "He probably never told you that part of the story. You have the chance to find out for yourself." "If only I knew what he would say to me now. Both of them..." "I think you know the answer." "Fine. But how do I know you won't leave me somewhere without a way to get back?" Benedict looked at her and then handed her a pendant. "This is my freedom. If I give it to someone, it means I am their servant. Whenever you call me, I will come and do whatever you wish. If I were to refuse, it would cost me my life." "Great-grandfather never mentioned anything like that." "I never gave him that choice." "Alright. Why not? In the worst-case scenario, nothing happens," she said. Benedict nodded, and they went outside together. He took her to a nearby park. Tessa watched him curiously. Benedict shook himself, and suddenly, a dragon stood before her.

"Wow. How is it that no one is screaming?" she asked. Overlooking a massive dragon in the middle of a park in broad daylight was not easy. *They don't see us,* a voice echoed in her head. *Or rather, they don't perceive us. It's a small bit of magic. Now, climb up and hold on tight.*

Tessa didn't ask anything else and scrambled onto his back. The dragon soared above the city and headed away from our world toward the kingdom where King Richard ruled. Time in his world flowed completely differently. While decades had passed for Tessa, for Richard, it had been only a few months since he last saw his doubles. However, he could hear and sometimes even see their thoughts. He knew their time ran differently than his. There truly was a bond between him, Filip, and Andrej that allowed them to hear each other's thoughts. Ever since Tessa first reached out to him as a little girl, he knew everything she secretly revealed to him in her mind.

Before long, the dragon landed in a field near the castle and transformed back into a man. "When you want to return, just call me. I'll walk you to the town below and then leave you on your own. The people here are very kind. They will take care of you." "I think I'd prefer if I could just pass through inconspicuously." "Hm..." Benedict thought for a moment. "Here is some money. Buy something. The people would be

disappointed if you refused everything. And if anyone asks, say you've come to see the fair. That you're from a neighboring country. Even if you make up the name, they'll believe you. We have some minor celebrations going on. The King's birthday is approaching. There's always a fair then."

As he spoke, they neared the town, where Benedict stopped. "Ready to see your great-grandfather's fairy tales come to life?" he asked. Tessa took a deep breath and nodded. "Enjoy yourself then," he said, letting her pass through the gate into the town.

Tessa was enchanted. She didn't know where to look first. The square was full of stalls and crowds of people. She found a stall with hair ornaments, one with mead, wooden spoons, and carved animals of every kind. After a while, she smelled the aroma of fresh pastries. A lady at a stall offered her all sorts of buns and cakes. Tessa decided on cheese pastries. Her attention was drawn to a crowd gathered around someone. After a moment, she saw them talking to a miller, who was helping a baker with sacks full of flour. She looked at other stalls until she finally saw the Inn. She knew it well from her great-grandfather's stories, just like the Innkeeper. She stopped in front of it, looking at it searchingly.

"It's open, if you'd like to come in, young lady," the Innkeeper addressed her. "Oh, sorry. I was just staring." "At an Inn? If the lady were staring at rings, dresses, or the King, I'd understand. But at an Inn?" Tessa smiled at him. "My great-grandfather mentioned this Inn. He said he spent some time here." "Then come inside and see for yourself."

Tessa looked around and was filled with wonder. She still couldn't believe that everything Filip told her was true. *If only everything about King Richard was true as well,* she thought. "Are you alright?" the Innkeeper asked. "Yes. I just never believed I'd ever see this place with my own eyes." "It must have meant a lot to your great-grandfather. Perhaps I knew him. What was his name?" "Great-grandfather died a long time ago. We never believed his stories." "I'm sorry to hear that." "It's alright. I'm glad to be here. It's exciting." "What else did your great-grandfather tell you about? Maybe I can help you." "A lot about the people, how they helped him, how he repaired the castle, and he always marveled at the King's wisdom." "Our King is one of a kind. But we repaired the castle about a year and a half ago." "A year ago? In our world, it was nearly fifty." The Innkeeper looked at her and then nodded to himself. "I should have noticed right away. You're from the other world." "Hm, great-grandfather mentioned you were a very attentive and understanding listener, Mr. Innkeeper." "Oh, don't call me 'Mr.' Even the King doesn't let himself be called that here. So, great-grandfather. He said time runs completely differently between our worlds. The only visitors from the other world were Filip and Andrej, so I assume you're the great-granddaughter of one of them." Tessa nodded to him with a smile. "Filip's." The Innkeeper gave her a cheerful smile. "I didn't want anyone to know where I was from." "It runs in the family." Tessa didn't know what he meant by that,

but she let it be. “Your secret is safe with me.” “Thank you. I won’t stay long. I might look around a bit more and then go.” “Don’t you want to meet Richard?” “I’d like to see him, at least from a distance,” she said thoughtfully. “If you change your mind, there’s always a room for you here.” “Thank you, that’s very kind of you,” she said gratefully and returned to the crowd. The Innkeeper followed her out. Richard was just talking to someone in the courtyard. The Innkeeper came closer to her and pointed out where to look. She didn’t know what he was showing her at first.

“That is Richard.”

Chapter 16 The Whispers of Worlds and Iron Bars

Tessa gazed at him. He truly looked like Filip when he was young. She smiled. There was something about him that was hard to describe with words. His gaze settled on her, and her heart began to race. It was that kind of look a best friend gives you—someone who hasn’t seen you in years but knows everything about you, the good and the bad, and still loves you just the same. Richard looked away, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She wiped them away quickly and headed toward the gate. Someone called out to her.

“Leaving so soon?” Tessa turned and looked at him in wonder. “Tessa, right?” he asked. After a moment, she regained her composure and bowed. “Your Majesty,” she said shyly. Richard reached out his hands to stop her. Again, she looked at him, almost frightened. “To you, always Richard.” She still couldn’t find the words and was trembling slightly. “Come, I know what will help,” he said, gesturing for her to follow him back into the town. He led her to one of the stalls and bought hot chocolate for both of them. As soon as she took a sip, she relaxed.

“Ah, I love hot chocolate,” she said with delight. Richard laughed. “You look exactly like him in the old photos.” “Drop the formalities. And I know. Everyone used to mistake us for each other.” “I can’t believe it. Everything he told us is real. You are real. I can’t even tell you how happy I am. There’s so much I want to say, but there isn’t enough time.” “You have as much time as you want. I have no plans for the rest of the day. So, I hope you’ll tell me everything.” Tessa was overjoyed. “I imagined talking to you so many times...” “I know. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you. Especially during these last few days.” “How do you know that?” she asked. “I heard you. I tried to help, but you weren’t very keen on listening.” “How?” “I don’t know. I always heard Filip and Andrej when they thought of me, and then I heard you.” “Oh... so you know everything?” “Essentially, yes.” Tessa looked at him, embarrassed. “If you’re waiting for a lecture or a sermon on what’s proper and what isn’t, don’t expect it from me. I’m not here to judge anyone. Especially when you know where the boundaries are and do your best not to cross them. Things in your world aren’t easy for anyone. I experienced it firsthand. It’s not easy to learn your unwritten rules. People are different there than they are here. They judge you quickly and push you

aside. Often, circumstances force you to make compromises. And maintaining your true self in the midst of it all is not simple.” Tessa stared at him, her mouth nearly open.

“You really are exactly as Filip described you.” Someone interrupted them and addressed Richard. “Your Majesty, forgive the intrusion, but a messenger from King Matias is waiting for you at the castle.” “From Matias? What happened? Is everyone alright?” “The King is well, but the Prince is in prison.” “In prison? Adrian wouldn’t hurt a fly. Who had him arrested?” Richard asked as they headed to the castle, keeping Tessa close to him. “King Oskar.” Richard was furious. He burst into the castle, where the King’s messenger was already waiting.

“Tell me everything you know,” he said urgently as soon as he entered the room. “King Richard. It’s been a long time.” “Erik, I think I told you clearly enough that if you ever showed your face in this kingdom again, I’d have you locked up. So please, tell me why I shouldn’t do exactly that,” Richard said, his blood boiling. “Because Adrian is in prison. I arrested him myself. Oskar accused him of attempting to incite a military conflict. Supposedly, he wanted to find out what weapons Oskar has. And Oskar has sentenced him to death. King Matias knows nothing. He thinks his son is traveling.” “Why are you telling me this? This doesn’t sound like you. Saving a prince’s life?” “Because Adrian was snooping around Oskar’s for an entirely different reason.” Richard sighed and shook his head. He knew what it was about. Tessa, however, had no idea and looked at them questioningly. “Oskar has a daughter.” “Ah. But then it can be explained, right?” she asked. “Not to Oskar,” Erik shook his head. “Oskar will always find a reason for conflict, even though he knows well why Adrian was at the castle. He’d rather accuse him so he can lay claim to Matias’s land.” “How will you get him out of this?” “I have no idea... I’m sorry I have to leave, but I’ll take you to Klára. She’ll keep you company until I return and show you around.” “I thought you were taking me with you.” “Not a chance. It could be a trap. You never know with Oskar.” “Come on, at least I’ll see King Richard in action.” Richard looked at her and finally agreed.

“One more thing. Adrian didn’t seem quite like himself.” “What do you mean?” “He claimed he wasn’t Adrian. He was terrified. As if he didn’t even know what was happening around him. That’s actually why I came. Normally, I wouldn’t care, but I felt genuinely sorry for him. And Oskar listens to you.” “Thanks, Erik.” Erik bowed and left them. Richard sighed. “Come on then. I’ll take you to Hana. Klára is helping her.” “You said you were taking me with you.” “I will, but you need different clothes.” “Right. That makes sense.”

Hana and Klára found appropriate clothes for her and wished them both luck. “Do you think it’s someone from their world?” Klára asked. “It looks that way. If so, I feel truly sorry for him. He has no idea what he’s gotten into.” “Watch over Tessa. Knowing Filip, he raised her to be a fighter.” “It’s strange hearing him spoken of that way. I still can’t quite believe it.” “I know how you feel. It took me a few days,” Klára

admitted. Richard smiled at her and stroked her face. “I’ll miss you, but I hope we’ll be back soon.” “Be careful.” They both nodded and set off. Oskar’s kingdom wasn’t far, taking a little over an hour by horse. The downside was that dusk was beginning to fall.

They arrived at the castle before sunset. Merchants were slowly closing their shops and stalls and returning home. When Oskar heard Richard was at the castle, he wasn’t very pleased. “Wait for me here. And don’t get lost,” Richard told Tessa before entering the throne room where Oskar awaited him. “What brings you here so late? Or did you need a break from family life?” “I like my family life. I heard about Adrian.” “Ah, news travels fast. He was snooping in my armory and then claimed he had no idea where he was. I’m not saying his father sent him, but I won’t stand idly by. Matias’s army is already superior.” “Did it ever occur to you that perhaps he wanted to see your daughter and not your weapons?” “Anabel? They’ve never met.” “Are you sure you know everything?” “Regardless, he has no business snooping in the armory.” “And what do you plan to do with him?” “I haven’t decided yet. I’m waiting for him to confess.” “Let me at least speak with him.”

Chapter 17 The Great Bluff and the Healer’s Return

While Oskar and Richard spoke, Tessa looked around the corridor. Suddenly, she saw Richard talking to the guards. She had no idea where he had come from, but she set off after him. “Let me through to him. Immediately,” he said irritably to the guards. “I will lead you,” one of the guards replied. “No need. I can find my own way.”

Tessa practically ran after him. She muttered something to the guards about belonging with him and tried not to lose sight of him. Finally, she called out. “Richard! Wait, please. What did he tell you? Did he let you see him? Come on, stop!” The man finally realized she was speaking to him and turned around in surprise. She looked at him just as startled. “When did you have time to change? And where are you going? I thought you didn’t mind bringing me along.” He had no idea what to say to her. “Richard?” she asked. He finally understood.

“I’m not Richard. I’m Andrej. I know, I look just like him. Trust me, it’s a long story, but right now I have to go. Someone needs me.” Tessa stared at him, confused. Andrej felt a moment of pity for her. “If you’re here with Richard, you should go back. I’m sure he’ll be looking for you in a moment. And tell him I said hello. He’ll know.” “Who are you?” she asked in a trembling voice. Andrej stepped closer to see her face clearly. “You’re not from here.” Tessa shook her head. “How do you know?” “Makeup. What’s your name?” “Tessa,” she said, still a bit stunned. “It’s a pleasure, Tessa. Would you rather come with me than wait for Richard? But I must warn you, it won’t be a pretty sight. They don’t treat prisoners very well here.” Tessa nodded and followed him.

Andrej led her to the cells where Adrian was kept. The guards let Andrej and Tessa in to tend to him; it wasn't the first time he had appeared there. Adrian lay on the floor, curled into a ball. Andrej knelt beside him and lightly touched his shoulder. "Let me see. Oh, they really worked you over." Adrian trembled all over. "What happened? Why did you end up here?" Andrej asked, rummaging through his bag. "I don't know. I don't even know where 'here' is. I don't understand anything. Please, help me." "I can treat you, but Oskar is hard to negotiate with." "But I didn't do anything! Why does no one believe me?" "Are you Prince Adrian?" Tessa asked from behind Andrej. He hadn't noticed her until now and simply shook his head. "No. But everyone calls me that." Andrej sighed.

"So here you are," Richard's voice rang out as he saw Tessa by the cell. Andrej stood and turned to Richard. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you," Andrej said, and they embraced. "Did you speak with Oskar? They think he's Prince Adrian." "I know. I just spoke with him. How did you get here?" Richard asked. "Benedict brings me occasionally if someone needs my help." "What is your name?" Richard asked the boy. "I'm Daniel. Do you believe me?" he looked at them with hope in his eyes. "Look at us. We've been through this. My brother ended up just like you." "I have no clue what's going on here!" Tessa couldn't stand it anymore and ran away. Richard cursed. "I shouldn't have brought her with me." "Who is she anyway?" Andrej asked, leaning back down to help Daniel. "Family." "Family? From whose side?" "Filip's." Andrej nodded as if he understood. "I'll go find her before she gets lost or ends up like Daniel." "Go. I'll take care of him."

Tessa returned to the palace corridors with tears in her eyes. "Tessa, wait! I know it looked bad, but Andrej will take care of him. He knows what he's doing," Richard called after her. She ignored him and headed straight for the throne room. "Tessa! Crazy girl, what are you doing?" Richard followed her helplessly.

"Your Majesty, I demand the release of your prisoner." "And why should I do that?" Oskar asked, somewhat amused. Richard walked in behind her and was literally speechless. "Because he is *my* prisoner. He comes from my land. I don't know how he got to you, but I assure you it won't happen again. I will have him taken away and properly punished." "You plan to carry him away on your back?" "On the back of a dragon," she said without hesitation. At that moment, a roar echoed over the castle, and Benedict entered the palace. "My Lady, I am at your service," he said devotedly.

"King Oskar has done me a service by arresting my prisoner who escaped. Take him back to my lands. I will punish him accordingly when I return. And watch him so he doesn't escape again. My guard, Andy, shall remain with him." "As you command, my Lady," Benedict bowed respectfully and headed toward the dungeons. "I apologize for the inconvenience we have caused you. King Richard, will you escort me, please?"

Richard followed her without a word. As soon as they were outside the castle, Tessa felt sick. Richard handed her a bottle of water he had stored in his saddle. "Will you

tell me what that was about?” “That’s how you handle it when someone beats up your enemy.” “That makes no sense.” “The only one allowed to hit Daniel is me—because he drives me insane with his constant lecturing—but no one else touches him.” “Daniel. *That* Daniel.” “Exactly... and who the hell is Andrej? How can he look just like you?” “It’s a long story.” “Hm, I’ve heard that one today already.”

Meanwhile, Benedict took Daniel and Andrej back to their world. “Benedict, can you take us somewhere near a hospital, please?” Andrej asked. The dragon nodded and landed in a hospital park. They both supported Daniel as they headed for the emergency room. Andrej stopped for a moment. “Do I still work here?” he asked Benedict. “Not for a long time,” he replied. Andrej simply nodded and went inside. He headed to the window and asked for help. A short while later, a doctor appeared and took care of Daniel. Benedict and Andrej were left alone.

“How long has it been since I worked here?” “A very long time.” “What happens now?” “I have my instructions. Once Daniel is alright, I’ll take you back to Richard.” “It feels like yesterday when we first met, and yet decades have passed here. I didn’t realize how differently time flows between our worlds.” “That’s one thing. The other is that I can choose *where* to return. It’s not one hundred percent, but I can estimate it.” “So you can travel through time?” “In a way,” Benedict admitted. Daniel returned to them, looking much better than he had thirty minutes ago. “They said I could go. Thanks for helping me, though honestly, I have no idea what even happened.” “A few answers are waiting on the other side. I’m curious myself,” Andrej told him. “Do you want to take me back?” he asked, terrified. “Rest easy. Not to Oskar,” Benedict assured him and took them back to Richard’s land, where everyone was waiting impatiently.

Chapter 18 The Miller, the Twins, and the Tangled Threads of Time

The guards led them to Richard, who was sitting on the throne. “That’s a new one. Since I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you actually sit there,” Andrej said, surprised. “I’m trying to look sufficiently serious, because *you*, young man, have a significant problem,” Richard said, pointing at Daniel. “Patrik, please bring Tessa.” Daniel felt his blood run cold.

“You’re back! Benedict, thank you,” Tessa addressed the dragon enthusiastically and returned the amulet. He nodded and smiled at her. “I’m glad you’re safe, BUT... how did you get here? And I want to hear everything,” Richard continued, looking sternly at Daniel. “To be honest, I still don’t really know where I am, and how I got here is also quite a blur.” “If Benedict didn’t bring you, someone else likely did. Do you know who? Or at least why?” “No one brought me. I was on my way to Tessa’s because she hadn’t been in touch for over a week and no one had seen her. I was almost at her house when I found myself somewhere else entirely. And that, apparently, was where I was arrested,” Daniel explained.

“Benedict?” Richard asked. The dragon stood beside a nearly trembling Daniel. Meanwhile, Andrej moved closer to Tessa. “How are you liking it here so far?” Andrej whispered. It caught her off guard, and she said nothing. “It doesn’t happen often, but perhaps because I brought Tessa, a portal might have opened randomly, and Daniel simply stepped through. Unfortunately, right into Oskar’s armory,” Benedict answered Richard.

Tessa leaned toward Andrej and started whispering. “I think I’d be afraid of him.” “Of who? Richard?” Andrej whispered back. She nodded. “Hm, I wouldn’t want to anger him. But this is nothing. I’ve seen him truly furious.” “Alright, you two—behind me. Go talk somewhere else. I still need to speak with Daniel alone. Benedict, thanks for the help, but I suspect I’ll be needing you again soon.” “Happy to help. You know how to call me,” Benedict said and left them. Richard sighed and looked at the shaking Daniel. He stepped down from the throne and approached him.

“Come with me,” he said. He led him into a side parlor, where they sat together at a small table. “Do you want something to drink?” Richard asked. Daniel just shook his head. “Well, stop shaking. I have no intention of hurting you—and frankly, after seeing Tessa, I wouldn’t even dare. That woman has some fire in her. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve seen a lot. She’s the one who got you away from Oskar.” “Tessa spoke up for me?” “I wouldn’t call it ‘speaking up.’ She simply informed him she was taking you, and she didn’t wait for an answer at all.” “Honestly, I’m surprised she did that for me. I don’t even know how many times I’ve let her down.” “Perhaps it’s time to stop doing that and start taking care of her. Not that she needs it. It’s enough if you don’t annoy her and give her her freedom. Because that is exactly what she needs.” “You know her better than I do.” “Let’s just say I can see into her soul a bit. And you can use ‘ty’ (informal address) with me. If she’s fighting for you, there must be something to you. But I’ll give you some good advice: Don’t let the glass overflow. That will be the end of you. I guarantee it.” “Advice worth its weight in gold.”

Tessa sat with Andrej in the kitchen, talking. “I can’t quite imagine him angry. When my great-grandfather spoke of him, he always described him as a very kind king who helps his people. Even now, he didn’t seem angry. Maybe a bit stern, but not mean.” “Not mean, definitely. And he would do anything for his people. While he was still a prince, he spent time in the town and the nearby village. He worked with them, trying to change things for the better.” “Did you know him before?” she asked. “No. I only met him as a king. In a completely un-royal world. In ours. Filip brought them to me at the hospital.” “Filip? You knew my great-grandfather?” “Great-grandfather?” Andrej looked at her, puzzled. “I heard about Richard from him.” “Filip Kráľ is your great-grandfather?” “Hm, yes. But he died ten years ago,” Tessa said sadly. “Ten years? I had no idea I had missed so much... how was he?” “Hard to say. I was only ten. But he was always cheerful. Maybe he missed his adventures a bit, but otherwise, he

was very kind to everyone. Everyone always loved him." "Filip..." Andrej said sadly. "All three of you look the same. Or at least like he did in his old photos." "I don't know why we look like Richard. But Filip is my twin. It was because of him that Richard got angry at Oskar." "He said Richard saved his life." "And he saved the kingdom," said Richard, appearing in the kitchen. "How so?" Tessa asked. "Oskar kidnapped him thinking it was me. He ended up much like Daniel, yet he still wouldn't trade his life for the kingdom. We took him out of there, and Andrej took care of him. I will never forget what he did." "He never told me that part of the story." "That's classic Filip. He never liked being made into a hero. I can't believe a whole lifetime has passed for him." "Maybe it's possible to meet him. That dragon can travel through time," noted Daniel, whom everyone seemed to have forgotten. "Maybe you're not a total lost cause after all," Richard said and summoned Benedict.

It took Benedict several hours to appear, and he didn't come alone. Richard was with Klára and Eliza in their part of the castle. Tessa and Daniel were in the guest room, and Andrej had decided on the Inn. Through the window, he saw Benedict land in the square and went out to meet them. He stood staring in shock as Filip climbed off the dragon's back—alive, healthy, and still the same age as him.

"So this is where you've been hiding all this time," Filip said instead of a greeting. "Filip! It's good to see you," Andrej said and hugged him. "You look like you've seen a ghost." "It's a long story. I'm not entirely clear on it myself." "I'm sure you'll figure it out together," Benedict said and left them. "Thanks, Benedict!" Andrej called after him.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Filip asked. "How long has it been since we were here together?" Andrej inquired. Filip sighed. "Nearly two years." "Two years. Here, only a few months have passed." "How long have you been here?" "Benedict brought me about a month after we returned. Here, barely a few days had passed. It happened several times, but he never hit the timing right. He'd always bring me back after weeks, even though for me it was only a few hours. That's how I missed Sonka's second birthday. They need me here. That's why we decided to live here. We're not in Richard's kingdom. We're in a different land. It's only been a month and a half, but we're slowly getting used to it. Time flows the same there." "Why didn't you tell me anything? I was worried about you. And then I was angry that you disappeared without a trace. A year and a half passed for us." "And it's even more complicated. Benedict somehow travels through time, but let's leave that for tomorrow. So tell me, how are you?" "Not bad. And I met someone. Her name is Rachel. And she's amazing. I hope by the time I get back she won't be married to someone else. Why am I even here? Did something happen? Is Richard and his family okay?" "Yes, they're doing well. Little Eliza is wonderful, she's starting to crawl." "I'd love to see them." "I think tomorrow morning will be best."

The Innkeeper approached their table. "Filip! Good to see you again. Will you stay the night? Shall I prepare one room or two?" "One will suffice. I suspect we won't be

going to sleep anytime soon," Andrej told him. "I'm really glad you're doing well, Filip," Andrej admitted once they were in the room. "I'm glad we're all happy too. I miss you guys. But you started something earlier and didn't finish. I think we have time for a long talk now." "Benedict brought me because of Oskar's prisoner. Unfortunately, it happens quite often. That's also why we decided to move. When I was there last, they told me it was Adrian, King Matias's son. But it was his double, who had no idea where he was or what happened, and you can imagine how he fared. But the strangest thing isn't that he's from our world, but that he's from our *future*. Believe me, I don't know what to think of it myself. That's where I met Richard, who was trying to get Adrian out of prison." "Good old Richard. Always where you need him." "It wasn't exactly Richard who got him out. It was someone who came with Richard and knew Oskar's prisoner." "Are you telling me there's someone else here from our world and from the future? Just please don't tell me they look like us," Filip said, stunned. "No. But she has our last name." "You're joking." Andrej just shook his head. "Is she here?" Filip continued. "At Richard's castle, along with Daniel. That's the prisoner," Andrej explained.

Filip didn't know what to say. All this time-mixing of two worlds made his head spin. Andrej didn't want to reveal more, so they finally turned out the light and soon fell asleep. In the morning, they didn't miss the Innkeeper's famous breakfast and a fragrant cup of coffee. "Why does everything taste better here?" Filip wondered aloud. "Because here, everything is still made the way it should be," Andrej remarked. Filip nodded with a smile, and after breakfast, they went to find Richard. From early morning, he had been helping the baker, running between the mill and the bakery.

"Want some help?" Filip asked. "Filip! No way! You have no idea how glad I am to see you," Richard exclaimed. "What is it with all of you?" "I'll explain later. I had a bit of a diplomatic day yesterday, and today I have to catch up at the mill, so I could use every hand." All three set to work. At the mill, they filled the sacks and took them to the baker. Filip decided to stay at the mill to fill more sacks. Besides that, they were waiting for several sacks of wheat.

Chapter 19 The Miller's Shadow and the Weight of the Future

When Tessa and Daniel appeared in the castle dining hall the next morning, they found only Klára and Lizy. "Good morning. I hope you slept well," Klára addressed them. "Good morning. Like a dream," Tessa said with a smile. "I haven't slept like that in a long time, especially after these past few days," Daniel added. "I'm sorry about that. But it seems they healed you quickly." "Hm, nowadays they can heal a broken leg in a day. It has its pros and cons." "Perhaps that's why people are so cold and indifferent where we come from. Here, everything is different. I'm not surprised my great-grandfather could never forget this place. I don't understand, though, why he never mentioned Andrej. They seem to have been close." "They were. Most likely,

that is something that is yet to happen for Andrej," Klára said a bit sadly. She cared for both brothers and it pained her that their paths had diverged. "Ah, this time-travel mish-mash," Daniel sighed. "Where are they, anyway?" Tessa asked. "Somewhere between the bakery and the mill. Richard is trying to catch up on yesterday's work. And don't worry, it has nothing to do with you. He has days like that sometimes. You get used to it after a while," Klára assured them, noticing the guilt on their faces.

"Did you know them well? Andrej and Filip, I mean," Daniel asked, trying in vain to connect all the threads. "Well enough. Not for long, but you could tell from their behavior exactly who they were and grow fond of them quickly. First impressions usually matter, and they made a good one. When Benedict took us to your world, it was Filip who saw us looking lost in the park and helped us. He took us to his home and then led us to Andrej because Eliza fell ill. I don't know what we would have done without them. There was something about them that made us not afraid to trust them. And not just because they look like Richard. Both were always very kind to us." "There is something about them. When they came to see me in prison, there was something special. It's hard to explain. Not just that someone was finally good to me and listened, but you feel safe around them." "That is exactly what makes them different," Klára agreed. "But you'd probably rather spend time with them. Feel free to go find them if you like. The mill is a bit further from the center, near the river, but you'll surely find it. In our town, it's basically straight ahead. If you need anything, just ask in the town below. They'll be happy to help," Klára said kindly and left them.

Daniel and Tessa finished their breakfast and set out to find Richard and Andrej. Seeing them nowhere in town, they continued toward the mill. There, Filip was still alone, filling sacks. He stood on the steps to fasten a sack to the opening where the ground flour was pouring out. "Richard! Andrej! Are you here?" Tessa called from the door. She didn't wait for an answer and stepped inside. She saw Filip struggling with a sack. Daniel decided to help him and climbed the stairs from the other side, while Tessa simply walked further in. Filip decided to let her talk. He still found it amusing when someone mistook them. When he and Andrej were young, they did it to people all the time. He had no idea who they were, but these two clearly knew Richard and Andrej.

"Klára told us where to find you. She told us how you all met. You know what I thought? It'll sound crazy, but maybe Filip will show up here sometime. All those stories he told me probably haven't happened for you yet." Filip immediately sharpened his focus. He looked at Daniel across from him. This definitely caught his attention, and he waited to hear more. Meanwhile, Richard and Andrej had returned, but hearing her voice, they paused by the door. "Can you imagine if I saw my great-grandfather stand up against injustice, or if you fought enemies together?" Filip nearly fell off the steps. "Or at least something..." she grumbled to herself.

Filip stepped down to her and looked her directly in the eyes, still without a word. "If this is one of your 'kingly' faces, it's quite terrifying," she said, startled. Richard and

Andrej watched them silently. “Kráľová. So, ‘great-grandfather,’ huh?” Filip finally spoke. “I don’t understand. You’re scaring me a bit,” she said almost in a whisper. “Richard?” she asked timidly. He shook his head. “Andrej,” she said, swallowing hard, as his eyes narrowed, looking right into hers. “The third one,” he said seriously and looked away.

“Tessa, this is Filip. Filip, Tessa. Please, get acquainted,” Richard said from the door, walking slowly toward them. Filip ignored him, however, and marched over to Andrej. “Why didn’t you tell me? When you said they were from the future, I expected ten years at most, not my entire life! Or years when I’m long dead!” he said, his voice rising. “Filip, you’re scaring my guest,” Richard said in a grave voice, standing next to Tessa. Tears welled up in her eyes. She turned her back to them, so only Daniel saw the pain in her expression. He stepped closer and stroked her shoulders. “This isn’t the Filip you know. But one day, he will be. Give him time,” he told her calmly. Andrej came over as well. “I’m sorry,” he told her. Tessa wiped her eyes and walked outside, with Daniel following.

In the mill, the twins and Richard remained. A tense atmosphere filled the room. Andrej turned toward Filip and wanted to hit him, but Richard stopped him. “We need to take more sacks to the baker. We should get to it. Tessa, Daniel, hold the sack, and you two, bring more wheat.” Richard put them to work. Everyone obeyed him instantly. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped like that,” Filip apologized. “I should have told you,” Andrej said shamefully. “I’m sorry that for Tessa, this wasn’t the best reunion with you. Since she found out your stories are true, she admires you even more. You’re her hero.” “After today, I won’t be. I can’t wrap my head around it. A great-granddaughter...”

Outside, Daniel comforted her. “Tessa, you couldn’t have known who it was.” “He didn’t even look at me again,” Tessa said mournfully. Their work was interrupted by Patrik’s voice. “Your Majesty, I hate to disturb you, but there are several requests for you.” “Patrik, what’s going on?” “King Matias is requesting an audience, Princess Adela is in the town, and Marek has been wanting to speak with you for days.” “All at once? Hm, fine. Andrej, could you please go check on Marek? Filip, I’m sure Adela would be very happy to see you—take Tessa with you. And you and I,” Richard said to Daniel, “will go find out what brings King Matias here. Thanks, Patrik. Let’s load these sacks, and I’ll drop them at the bakery on the way.” “I’ll handle it. King Matias is worried about his son. Take my horse,” Patrik told him. “Thank you. I promise to return him to the stables.”

Daniel barely had time to process it before he was in the saddle with Richard. A lingering silence fell between Filip and Tessa, which she finally broke. “I thought you were Richard. I’m sorry for what I said.” “You have nothing to apologize for. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I’m sorry. It caught me off guard.” “I know.” “So, ’great-granddaughter,’” he said, smiling at her. “How did you get here?” “Benedict.” “How else. I hope you had a pleasant flight and a soft landing. He dropped me off at

the Inn.” “He let me dismount,” she said, still a bit shyly. They fell silent again. Adela was standing at a stall with rings and pendants. “Where else could I find you,” Filip said from behind her. She turned to him with a smile. “Filip Kráľ.” “You’re the only one who can tell us apart. I have no idea how you do it.” “I saw Richard on a horse flying across the square. And Andrej speaks a bit differently than you. And who is this beautiful young lady next to you?” “Princess Adela, this is my cousin Tessa.” “A cousin, then. Very nice to meet you, Tessa,” Adela said. “Pleasure to meet you, Princess,” Tessa bowed. “Just Adela,” Adela winked at her. “What brought you here? I assume it’s not just the fair.” “I heard Richard visited Oskar.” “That was last night. How did that get to you so quickly?” “Because Erik came to us first.” “Erik?” “He works for Oskar now. He used to pretend to be a prince here. He’s the old Advisor’s son. I wanted to know if you were all alright. I still remember how you looked after his last visit.” “I won’t forget that one anytime soon. But I heard it was Tessa who freed the prisoner.” “Hm, saving people clearly runs in the family. And where was Richard rushing to?” “King Matias is waiting for him at the castle.” “Then I’ll leave him to his diplomatic meetings. I’m glad you’re all alright. Give him my regards. Tessa, it was a pleasure to meet you,” Adela said goodbye and moved to the next stall.

“Was that Princess Adela?” Tessa asked excitedly. “In all her nobility.” “I imagined her differently.” Filip looked at her, confused. “From your stories. I thought she was a bit stuck-up, but she’s very kind.” “As far as I know, she used to be. Until she met Richard and his ’diplomacy lessons.’” “I’m here, and yet I feel like I missed everything. Everything interesting.” “Definitely not. By the way, I still don’t know how you got Daniel out and who he actually is?” “My friend. Actually, we broke up and then all this madness happened.” “Should I talk to him?” “I think Richard has already managed to scare him to death.” “So how did you get him out?” “Hm, I thanked Oskar for catching my prisoner and told him I was taking him back to deal with him. Benedict handled the rest.” “I’ll tell you, girl, that was brave. I still have nightmares about Oskar.” “You never told me you saved the kingdom.” “I don’t feel like I saved it. Andrej and Richard saved me.” “And you didn’t mention Andrej. I only found out about him here.” Filip thought for a moment. “Probably because he disappears from my life, and I never quite come to terms with it.” “Maybe it doesn’t have to be that way.” “Andrej has already decided. Besides, we shouldn’t talk about my future. I think you’d rather see Richard from another perspective.” “That’s true. But right now, peace is everywhere. The bad times are long gone.” “Ah, to see Richard in his full strength, you don’t need a war. Small things annoy him too. Just speak ill of his wife, and you’ll wish he’d kill you. Literally. He cannot stand arrogance and superficiality.” “Do you think he would let himself be provoked?” “Truthfully, I have no idea. He always has an ace up his sleeve. You never know how he’ll react.”

Chapter 20 The Lion's Grin and the Shadows of Treason

Andrej meanwhile reached Marek and Rebeka's home. Ruby was the first to spot him, waving frantically from a distance. "Ruby! It's good to see you again. How are you?" Ruby just smiled and shrugged. "Greetings. Richard sent me; he said you wanted to speak with him. He had to return to the castle—someone was already waiting for him there."

"Andrej, welcome to our home," Rebeka greeted him. "Well, well. How are you feeling? Six months along?" he asked joyfully. "I can see you know your way around medicine. Good for now. The beginning wasn't the worst, but the rest is yet to come." "And where is the happy father-to-be of two?" "He's in the orchard today." "Is Ruby alright?" Andrej asked, noticing she had retreated back to a corner of the room, though she usually bounced around him. "I don't think she's very excited about the sibling," Rebeka sighed. "But that's probably not why you wanted to speak with Richard." "No. These past few days, someone has been lurking around the field. We wanted to help, but he wouldn't let us near him at all, so we just left him water and some food." "I can go take a look and see what can be done." "Thanks, Andrej." "If you need anything at all, let me know. Richard and I will figure out a way for you to reach me directly. Especially when the little one starts asking to see the world." Rebeka gave him a grateful smile. "Hey, Ruby, can you walk me out? I haven't seen you in so long and you're just sitting in the corner."

"Thank you," Rebeka whispered. Ruby happily ran to join him. "I thought you didn't want to talk to me. Everyone is only talking about the baby and mom," Ruby complained. "Oh, I'm sorry. Of course I want to talk to you! You're the first person I met here. No one can take that away from you. I know it will be different when the baby is born, but only because they won't be able to do anything for themselves. But you can. And I think Mom and Dad are going to need you." He whispered the last part to her. "Trust me, they'll both be a bit out of it from the crying and the lack of sleep. So it'll be up to you to make sure they don't accidentally burn the house down. Or leave a mess everywhere." He winked. Ruby thought for a moment. "I'll think about it," she said finally. "Fair enough. One more hug, and I can take it from here. Take care, Ruby."

Near the field, Andrej spotted the man who had been hiding there for days. "Are you alright?" Andrej asked. "Leave me alone," the frightened man said. "I don't want to hurt you. I want to help. Tell me, why are you here?" Andrej stepped closer. The man cowered even more. "You are the Prince. The King's son. Please, don't hurt me." "I told you, I don't want to do that. And the King died several years ago." "So you are the King. Mercy, Your Majesty!" "Not exactly, but I can take you to the King. I'm sure he will help you. Can you stand?" The man nodded. Andrej helped him up and led him toward the castle.

Back at the castle, Richard received King Matias. “Matias, forgive me for making you wait. Come, sit,” Richard said, leading him into a small parlor. Daniel stood further off, watching them. Richard gestured for him to come closer. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to intrude, but I’m worried about Adrian,” Matias said, initially ignoring Daniel. “Adrian is likely far away on his travels, as he told you. It was this young man who ended up at Oskar’s,” Richard said, pointing to Daniel. Daniel bowed. “Your Majesty.” Matias looked at him, confused. “Adrian?” “No. This is Daniel. Do you remember when I disappeared for a time? I was in another land. A completely different one. That is where Daniel is from. By an unfortunate accident, he found himself at Oskar’s, who arrested him thinking he was Adrian trying to spy on his armory.” “Oh... I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry you ended up in the dungeon.” “It’s alright. I would have ended up there anyway. You look exactly like my father...” “It seems I’m not the only one with a double,” Richard smiled. “If you want my guards to ask around for Adrian, I can send them out.” “That won’t be necessary. As long as he isn’t in Oskar’s dungeon, I’m sure he’s fine.” “Daniel, are you alright?” Richard asked, noticing he couldn’t take his eyes off King Matias. “Yes. Sorry. I last saw my father when I was six.” “Dear boy, I am sorry,” Matias said compassionately. “I won’t keep you any longer. Everyone at home is worried.”

“This world is so different,” Daniel mused once they were alone. “I know exactly what you mean. Coming to your world was a shock. I had no idea what was happening. I don’t know how we would have managed without Filip and Andrej,” Richard agreed. “I’m glad I met them both. And you too. Tessa has been mentioning her great-grandfather more and more lately. It was too much for her, and I wasn’t the best boyfriend.” “But you’re here now, and that’s what matters.” Daniel looked at him gratefully. Tessa and Filip returned to the castle as well.

“I was with Adela. She sends her regards. She wanted to make sure you were okay after hearing about the visit to Oskar.” “News travels incredibly fast,” Richard muttered. “Hasn’t Andrej returned yet?” Filip asked. “Not yet. Rebeka is pregnant, so he might be staying there a while.” “Rebeka is having another child? That’s great! And how are Hana and Filip doing?” “They’re doing well too,” Richard smiled.

Tessa suddenly had a thought on how to test Richard. “I’d like to stay here. I’d like the royal life. New dresses all the time, everyone serving me, and I wouldn’t have to do a thing. Maybe issue a few orders now and then...” she said snobbishly. All three men looked at her in surprise.

“Hm. New dresses all the time, which you’d then have made for every girl in the town and village. And I must disappoint you—we don’t ‘issue orders’ here; we all help each other. And this attempt to manipulate me... that was pathetic, Tessa. Don’t forget, I know you,” Richard said and winked at her. She turned to Filip, mouth agape. “I told you he always has an ace up his sleeve.”

“Richard! This man needs your help!” Andrej called out as he entered the room. Richard turned, and his eyes literally flared with rage. “How dare you!?” he hissed at the man, staring him straight in the eye. Andrej looked at him, confused. “Andrej, get away from him. Now!” Tessa couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Like father, like son,” the man said. “Don’t you dare speak of my father. I remember well how you nearly started a war. What are you even doing here?” Richard asked, standing right in front of him. “Your twin found me. And your people took care of me.” “Who did you go near?” “A lovely little family at the edge of the village. I think they’re expecting another child soon.” Richard nearly lost his temper. “You slimy snake. Don’t you dare go near them. Why did you return? Did you betray another king and now you’re looking for a hole to hide in? You should have gone somewhere they don’t know you. You will find no mercy with me.” “You’ll be the one seeking mercy from King Albert.”

Richard’s diplomacy was gone. In that moment, he was just a furious man with fear in his eyes—fear for his people. Filip, Andrej, Tessa, and Daniel stood motionless behind him. Klára entered the room. “Your Majesty, I see you found the traitor,” she said calmly, walking over to him. “Andrej’s kindness brought him here. And now he’s threatening me with King Albert.” “Albert?” she asked incredulously. Richard relaxed his tense body and turned to her. The man tried to take advantage of his distraction and lunged at Richard. But Richard spun back instantly, blocking the blow. The man collapsed to his knees in pain. Richard stood over him, looking down coldly.

“Did you really think I didn’t know about you? I asked Marek to keep an eye on you. And Albert? Your brother told me long ago that you were up to something again. Alfred, you have to stop. You’re scaring my people and now my guests. Patrik, take him away,” he finally told the guards and turned to Tessa. “That is how you do it if you want to provoke me. But if you want to ‘experience’ something, I’ll make sure of it,” he told her, winking. Tessa instantly regretted her earlier move and stood there, stunned, as everyone followed Richard. Andrej patted her on the shoulder and left her with Filip.

“I’m in deep trouble, aren’t I?” she asked. Filip took a deep breath and showed a small gap between his thumb and forefinger. It looked like a tiny bit, but his expression suggested that even that was more than enough.

Chapter 21 The Ring that Stops Wars

About half an hour later, both were on their way to the village. “What do you think he’ll do?” Daniel asked her. “I have no idea. With him, you never know. That’s his superpower. It depends on which part of his character he decides to show me—the royal or the human.” “Will you tell me more about it?” “While he was a prince, everyone thought he was cruel and evil. That’s why he decided to stay with the people for a while and help them as one of their own. With Princess Adela, it was the

opposite. He wasn't explicitly mean to her, but he was a bit tough. At least, that's how it sounded from what my great-grandfather told me. How he'll handle me is the question. And this must be the farm where he used to help," she said as she saw the gate and Leo standing near it.

"Good day. Can I help you with something?" Leo asked them. Tessa didn't know what to say, so Daniel took the lead. "Good day. We heard that life is better in King Richard's land, so we decided to give it a try." "Oh, if you're looking for an easy path, you won't find it here. In this kingdom, even the King works." "That's exactly why we're here," Daniel told him. "In that case, welcome. I hope you'll like it here. Do you know where you'll be staying yet?" "Not yet," Tessa answered quickly. "You can stay here with us until evening. At least you can help us a bit, and in the evening, we can ask Father Rafael if he'll take you in at the rectory." As he spoke to them, he noticed Richard standing a short distance away. He wanted to call out to him, but Richard shook his head and disappeared.

Later that afternoon, Filip was looking for them. "Richard, have you seen Tessa? I can't find her or Daniel anywhere." "They're at Leo's farm. I'm sure they'll be back for dinner." "Did you send her there?" Andrej asked. Richard shook his head. "No. They went there on their own. So I let them be."

However, Tessa and Daniel did not return. They stayed at the rectory with Rafael. The next morning, Richard and Filip set out to find them. When they arrived at the rectory, they were already gone. Rafael directed them toward the orchard. Leo came out to meet them immediately. "Your Majesty, good to see you. What brings you here? Filip, good to see you again." "Hi, Leo. I'd say I ended up here by accident," Filip said. "Leo, do you have those two from yesterday around here somewhere?" Richard asked. "Yes. They're in the orchard. I can call them." "That won't be necessary. Just keep an eye on them, please," Richard said with a small smile. "How are they doing?" Filip propped. "I must say, they're trying. Do you know them?" Richard and Filip looked at each other and nodded. "I suppose I shouldn't ask any more questions, right?" Both nodded again without a word and left.

"In the end, no lesson of mine will be necessary. I suppose I really did terrify them." "Just out of curiosity, what did you have planned?" Filip asked. "I don't even know. She isn't Adela. She's simply a Kráľová. It's in her blood."

Tessa decided to stay for a few more days. One evening, Richard actually appeared with the guards. He saw her sitting in the back pew where he usually sat. He sat down next to her. "So, how do you like it here with us?" he asked both of them. Daniel just nodded and smiled. "I think it's better than your 'lesson'," Tessa said. "Did I terrify you so much that you fled to the village?" "I know you can be strict and tough. The last thing I wanted to hear right now was you telling me everything I did wrong. Here, at least I can help. I'm not very good at it, but no one judges me." "Do you

think I would judge you?" "I don't know. It's possible," she said sadly, lowering her head. Richard looked at her face.

"I don't know what Filip told you about me, but I know very well the difference between pointlessly reopening a wound and cleaning it. Believe me, I'd rather lose my hands than use them to intentionally cause someone pain just because I can. I thought Filip knew me better." Tessa looked at him, startled. "I didn't mean it like that. Filip always spoke well of you." "Did *I* say anything like that to you, then?" "Alfred," she murmured. "Ah, Alfred. He can't come to terms with being the second-born while his brother is the heir. He's been putting on this performance for years." "I tried it on you too." "You are a long way from being an Alfred, Tessa. I still don't understand why you're trying to find a punishment for yourself. A few arguments with your parents and Daniel isn't the end of the world. Besides, you're trying to change. That's never easy." "You really don't think I'm a completely horrible person?" "I have no reason to think that. You are a Kráľová. You have your temperament. It's hereditary, believe me. I wasn't always the most exemplary son, either. Stubborn and hot-headed. My father was often furious, but we got through it in the end."

The next day, they were in the field with Leo and the others. Oskar occasionally passed by when returning from a hunt. He saw Daniel and Tessa. He jumped off his horse and approached them. "I might have guessed. Is this how you punish prisoners in your land?" he asked her. Tessa didn't know what to say. His guards appeared right behind him and arrested both of them. "Your Majesty, what is happening?" Leo asked him. "I don't know how these two got to you, but they are my prisoners, and I will take them where they belong—and not even your King Richard will get them out of there," Oskar said and left with Tessa and Daniel, whom the guards were now dragging behind them. Leo immediately sent one of the men to the castle to find Richard.

As soon as they heard, Filip and Richard didn't hesitate and raced after Oskar. Patrik and Adam followed. Tessa and Daniel were in the throne room, where the guards literally threw them to the ground. Oskar held Tessa's face in his hand. "Leave her alone!" Daniel shouted, but he only earned a kick for it. Tessa began to cry.

"Release them! Now!" Richard roared, bursting inside, ignoring Oskar's guards who were trying in vain to stop him. "Or what? She deceived me. He was my prisoner, and she tricked me. They belong to me. Both of them, and you know it very well." "Oskar, let them go. They've done nothing." "He was prowling in my armory, and she stole him from me. You have no right. Be glad I don't lock you up with them. Why do you even care about them so much? As far as I know, they aren't even from your kingdom." "Give them to me," Richard said, almost pleading, stepping closer to Oskar. The guards stopped him immediately. "Wait, wait. You won't get to me that easily. And if you somehow get them out of here, I will declare war on you. And believe me, it won't be pretty."

“War?” Tessa said, terrified, turning to Richard. “Let it be, Richard. Go back and leave me here. You can’t risk a war for me.” “I’d listen to her if I were you,” Oskar remarked. “Not a chance. If you want a war, you’ll have it, but they are coming with me.” “You can’t do that!” Daniel tried to stop him. “Take them away,” Oskar ordered. The guards grabbed Tessa, and in the struggle, they tore the chain from around her neck. A ring hit the floor. Tessa remembered the story Filip had told her—the story of a ring that once stopped a war.

Chapter 22 The Weight of the Seal

“The ring!” she cried out. Oskar picked it up from the ground and stared at it. He signaled the guards not to take her away and handed the ring to Richard. “It seems I’ve caught a thief. If I’m not mistaken, this is your signet ring,” he said with a smirk. Total silence fell over the room. Richard stepped toward Tessa and looked at her sternly.

“Where did you get this?” he asked. Her whole body began to tremble, but she didn’t answer. “You couldn’t have gotten it from Filip. This is my signet ring. I would never give it to him.” He clenched his fists and took a deep breath. “Patrik, Adam, take them both and lock them in the dungeon.” Both hesitated. “Now!” Richard commanded. “Oskar, I am in your debt,” Richard said bitterly.

“Oh, seeing your face at this moment is satisfaction enough. Betrayed by your own... Do with them what you will, but if you let them go without punishment, I will consider it treason and declare war on you,” Oskar said right to his face. “I will punish them. Don’t you worry about that,” Richard said in an icy voice. He and Filip left for the castle, where Andrej was waiting impatiently. When he saw only the two of them, he grew terrified.

“Where are they? What happened?” “Patrik took them to a cell,” Filip said expressionlessly. Richard was fuming. “Sebastian! Bring me the prisoners, and don’t go easy on them!” he ordered one of the guards. Andrej stared at them in confusion but said nothing. The guards brought Daniel and Tessa before Richard.

“I hate arrogance and superficiality, but most of all, I cannot stand liars and thieves!” he shouted at them. “Tessa, where did you get that ring? And I want the truth.” “Richard, do you really think she would steal it?” Andrej asked. “Out. Both of you,” Richard said to Filip and Andrej. “Not a chance,” Filip replied. “Filip, if you don’t want to end up in the dungeon yourself, get out of here. If they need Andrej, I’ll send for him. Now go.”

Richard rubbed his forehead and continued. “Patrik, take them away. Lock them up somewhere if you have to.” Adam and Patrik approached Filip and Andrej to lead them out. Both resisted. “Filip, we don’t want to hurt you. Please, come with us. Trust

me, they'll be alright," Adam assured them. "How do you know he won't do anything to them?" Andrej asked. "Because I know him. He wouldn't hurt a fly," Adam replied. "You saw what he did to Alfred," Andrej argued. "Alfred wanted to start a war. She prevented it. Trust me," Adam said and pushed them both out the door.

Inside, Daniel pleaded from the floor. "Richard, you can't be serious. She did nothing." Richard looked at them with concern. "No one noticed the ring. If you hadn't pointed it out, it likely would have been lost in the chaos." "And it would have cost you years of guarded peace and your reputation as a diplomat," she replied. "You know I can't just let this go. If I release you, there will be war anyway." "I know." "Damn it, Tessa!" "Let Daniel go. Do what you want with me." Richard looked at her in surprise. Daniel immediately began to protest. "Take them both to the cell," Richard said dejectedly. "And call Filip and Andrej back."

Richard stared at the ring and sighed. When Filip and Andrej returned, they started shouting at him. "Silence, you two! That girl prevented a war, and I have to punish her for it." Both fell silent instantly. "Did she tell you where she got the ring?" Filip asked. "No. But she knew what was coming, which is why she pointed it out. Leave me alone for a moment, please."

Richard went to the treasury. He pulled out the box where the ring was kept. When he opened it, he couldn't believe his eyes. The ring was still there, exactly where he had placed it. He ran to find Adam and asked him to bring Tessa. "Thanks, Adam," he said when she was brought before him. "Please, get Daniel some clean clothes and let him wash. And tell Andrej to look at him. Who knows what Oskar did to him this time." "My pleasure," Adam said with a bow.

"You go wash and change too," Richard told Tessa. "Then we'll talk." "If Oskar finds out I'm not in a cell, he'll attack you." "I can do what I want with my prisoners. Besides, I need to interrogate you. Now go," he said in a serious tone.

Later, Tessa returned to Richard. He placed both rings on the table. "One is mine. Tessa, who are you really? This is my signet ring. It's passed down from generation to generation. One day it will belong to Lizy. Did you know that?" "I didn't know it was your signet ring. Not until I saw your crest at the castle. But even then, it didn't click. Not until the guards tore my chain... then I remembered Filip's story." "You got the ring from Filip?" "No. I got it from my grandmother." "From your grandmother?" he asked, stunned. "You are likely more of a Kráľová than you thought. I'm afraid I'll have to talk to Filip. Or his older version." Tessa looked confused. "Benedict and his time travel," he explained. "I'll talk to him, but for now, I have to put you back in the cell. I'm sorry."

Richard met Filip and Andrej at the Inn. “I thought there was only one signet ring,” Andrej said, looking at the two identical rings on the table. “It *is* one ring. One is mine, and the other belongs to Tessa. She got it from her grandmother. If I find out how, it will have to be without you, Filip. It’s your future. I’m not sure you should know. And then there’s Oskar...” “He wants to see her pay...” Filip said to himself. Richard nodded.

“I feel just like I did when I first arrived here,” Richard admitted to the Innkeeper. “And what is giving you all such grey hair?” the Innkeeper asked. “Injustice, Mr. Innkeeper,” Andrej said sadly. “Tessa is likely a future queen, and right now she’s locked in a dungeon because Oskar accused her of stealing the signet ring,” Richard explained. “And by the way, she’s our great-granddaughter,” Filip added blankly.

“Benedict. Maybe he has the answers,” Richard muttered. Suddenly, Benedict appeared behind them. “Where is the famous Richard-style diplomacy and controlled emotion?” the dragon asked. “Gone. The moment I saw her.” “Why?” “Because I know her. I know what she’s been through, what hurts her, what makes her happy.” “Fine,” Benedict said. “Andrej, you have the most distance here. What would you do if you were Richard?” Andrej thought for a while. “I’d show Oskar both rings and take him to our world. It doesn’t matter if it’s my time or hers.” “And if that doesn’t work, how are thieves punished here?” Benedict asked. “For stealing a signet ring? They’d likely lose their hands.”

Filip and Andrej looked at him in horror. “No one steals here!” Richard defended. “The last one was little Filip, and I caught him stealing an apple for his sister.” Benedict nodded and left the room.

In the cell, Tessa stared into the void. “Do you know what will happen to us?” Daniel asked. “There’s a chance I’ll lose my hands, but I hope Richard won’t go that far. Either way, it won’t be pretty.” “Do you think he’ll really punish us?” “I’m afraid he doesn’t have much of a choice. He won’t lead a whole kingdom into war for two people.” “Did you know it was the signet ring?” He nodded, and she sighed. “Does Richard know who you are?” “Not exactly, but he suspects it.” “Did Filip ever tell you the end of the story?” Tessa shook her head. “I’m afraid this was his last visit to Richard.” “I see. So this is likely our ‘end of the story’...” Daniel said. Tessa leaned against the wall, looking hopelessly into the distance.

Chapter 23 The Shadow of the Rod and the Light of the Future

Meanwhile, Benedict set out to visit King Oskar. At first, Oskar had no idea what was happening—whether to be afraid or to attack—but Benedict stopped him. “King Oskar, I have not come to start a conflict. I only want to show you something, but I need you to come with me.” “Show me what? That those kids are innocent? Even if I

let it slide that she deceived me and took my prisoner, you cannot deny she had Richard's signet ring. Everyone saw it. There's no other way she could have gotten it unless she stole it." "Have you already forgotten where Filip and Andrej are from?" "Are you trying to tell me that in their world, that ring belongs to her?" "I don't want to tell you. I want to show you." Oskar shook his head, but curiosity won. "Fine. But I want your word that if you don't convince me, Richard will punish her." "You can have that in writing if you wish."

Oskar did not hesitate. He sent a message to Richard demanding a public punishment for Tessa, to be carried out in a week. The only one who could stop it was Oskar himself. If Richard refused, it would be considered an act of war. Richard was desperate, searching for a way out, but saw none. Everything was in Benedict's hands.

Benedict transformed into a dragon, grabbed Oskar, and flew high above the clouds. After what felt like minutes, they landed in Tessa's world—at a cemetery. Benedict was human once more. "Where are we? And who are these people?" Oskar asked, bewildered. "This is Filip's funeral. And that little girl in the front—that is Tessa." "What do you mean, Filip's funeral?" "Tessa is from Filip's future. He is her great-grandfather." Oskar stared at him, trying to process the word. "Great-grandfather?"

"Focus on the others," Benedict urged. "Those are Tessa's parents and her grandmother, Amanda." Oskar looked at Amanda. "Does she look familiar?" "A little... she reminds me of someone." "She should. That is Richard's granddaughter." Oskar's eyes filled with fear. "I brought her here years ago because she wanted to see another world. She fell in love and stayed."

They watched as Amanda placed a chain around young Tessa's neck. "What did she give her?" "Let's get closer," Benedict suggested. They moved into the garden where the family gathered after the service. Tessa saw them and approached. "Did you know my great-grandfather?" she asked. "A little. We worked together once," Benedict replied. Oskar's gaze fell on her necklace. Tessa noticed and showed him the ring. "Grandma gave it to me. She said Great-grandpa wanted me to have it. It's supposed to be the ring that once saved a kingdom from war," she said, shrugging before returning to her parents.

"Do you believe me now?" Benedict asked. Without waiting for an answer, he took Oskar to another place: the courtyard of Richard's castle, but it looked different. It was the day of a coronation.

Future Tessa saw them and approached. "Benedict. And King Oskar. What brings you here?" "Your Majesty, forgive me," Oskar stammered, overwhelmed. "I hope our kingdoms will have good relations," she said calmly. "Though, if I recall correctly, you threw my fiancé in prison and forced a punishment upon me for a crime I didn't commit. What is there to say to that?" Oskar looked horrified, but she continued with

Richard's own grace. "Your people are not responsible for your actions. Do not worry. It is the past now." She looked at her hands as if she could still feel the phantom pain of that day. "King Oskar, your country will be safe. I will ensure our relations remain friendly."

"We have to go. There is a punishment to stop," Benedict urged. They landed back in the town square. It was crowded, but the atmosphere was terrified—something that never happened under Richard's rule. Oskar pushed through the crowd. He saw Tessa kneeling, her hands locked in a pillory. Patrik stood over her with a thin but strong rod. Richard stood further away, unable to watch, clenching his fists with every strike. He saw blood starting to drip from her hands.

"STOP! Cease at once! Richard, stop this now!" Oskar roared, running toward Tessa. Patrik exhaled in relief and stepped back. Richard met Oskar mid-way. "Where is your double? The healer?" Oskar demanded as he tried to free Tessa. "Andrej," Richard said, stunned. "If this is a trick to start a war..." "I am trying to stop it," Oskar snapped, looking at Tessa. "You'll be okay. I am sorry."

Benedict appeared and whisked Andrej and Tessa away to the modern world, near Andrej's original time. Andrej took her straight to the hospital. He ran into an old colleague, Braňo. "Andrej? What happened?" "Braňo! I'm here with my cousin," Andrej said nervously. "Forget the paperwork, come with me."

Braňo examined her hands and was shocked. The skin was torn, bloody, and several finger joints were dislocated. He gave her pain medication and began cleaning the wounds. Afterward, he pulled Andrej aside, fuming. "Damn it, Andrej! Who did this to her?" "It was an accident at school... a play rehearsal," Andrej lied poorly. "Andrej, someone dislocated her joints while striking her hands. I'm not stupid. This was intentional and merciless." Braňo stared at him. "You knew about this! How could you let this happen to a girl?" "Would you believe me if I told you she accepted a punishment for something she didn't do, just to protect a country from war?" Braňo shook his head. "If I didn't know you were a brilliant doctor, I'd send you to a psychiatrist. Will she be okay?" "The next few days won't be pleasant, but she'll recover. I'll give you meds and cream. You're an ER doctor, you know how to wrap these."

Benedict was waiting outside to take them both back to Richard.

Chapter 24 The Echoes of Tomorrow

As soon as they arrived at the castle, Andrej escorted Tessa to her room and let her sleep. Then he joined Richard and Oskar. "Is she alright?" Oskar asked eagerly. Andrej glared at him. "No thanks to you. You wanted to start a war if Richard didn't punish her for something she didn't do, and now you ask if she's alright?!"

Oskar lowered his head in shame. Richard looked at Andrej, waiting for the medical report. “Three dislocated finger joints, abrasions, and bruises. Some wounds will heal slowly given where they are. She has pain medication. I took her to her room; hopefully, she’ll manage to sleep.” “Thank you,” Richard said with a heavy sigh. He turned his gaze back to Oskar. “You know now that she didn’t steal the ring. That’s why you’re here. That’s why you stopped it.” “You knew it too, and yet you had her punished.” “You went too far, threatening war.” “Everyone talks about your kindness and justice, and then I saw them working in the field...” “She wanted to know more about me. That’s all.” “She learned everything. It seems your arrogance, hidden behind diplomacy, is hereditary. It’s simply in her blood. You can’t deny it; it’s something you either have or you don’t.”

“What do you mean, it’s in her blood?” Andrej asked, puzzled. Oskar looked startled, but Richard took over. “She inherited the ring from someone of my lineage.” “Your granddaughter gave it to her. At Filip’s request. I saw it,” Oskar said, his voice trembling. “My granddaughter is her grandmother...” Richard murmured to himself. “I still can’t imagine that would shock you enough to stop the punishment.” “I spoke with her. Twice, essentially. Once when she was small, and then on the day of her coronation. She is exactly like you. Proud and wise.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear that, but I still can’t overlook the fact that you were ready to go to war with me. Where is Patrik?” Richard asked, sounding irritated. “Patrik is in a cell. After everything, he let the guards take him. He told them it was on your orders,” Adam informed him. “Does everyone here just do whatever they want? I never gave such an order.” Richard looked at Oskar. “You said the day of her coronation?” Oskar nodded. “Hm, Benedict... I’m going to see Patrik, and I’ll deal with you later,” Richard told Oskar and headed to the dungeon.

Patrik was sitting in the cell, staring at the floor. “Patrik, what are you doing here?” “Never ask me to punish someone again.” “Not even if they deserve it?” “Do you intend to punish Oskar?” “I’m considering it.” “With all due respect, Your Majesty, you should stop with the punishments and start acting like a king again. I know Tessa means a lot to you, but that’s never clouded your judgment before.” “Have I ever suggested you should be my Advisor?” “Several times...” “Then get out of there. I need guards who guard, not guards who need guarding.” “As you command, Your Majesty.”

Tessa stayed in the kingdom for a few more days until Benedict reappeared. She wasn’t surprised; she felt it was time to go back. “I’d like to see you again someday,” she said sadly. “It was my pleasure. If Benedict decides on another time-trip, I certainly won’t refuse,” Richard assured her and gave her a warm embrace.

She and Daniel followed Benedict to the courtyard. She took one last look at the land she would one day rule—though she didn't know it yet—looked back at Richard, Klára, and Lizy, and mounted Benedict's dragon back.

When she returned home, everything was as it had been. Benedict had timed it perfectly, so only a few hours had passed. She returned to her old life, but she saw everything differently. Her time with Richard had changed her, and she couldn't quite find her place anymore.

Until the day Benedict appeared at her door once again.