

Vow of Secrecy

A hoary man stepped into an inn some ways off the main streets. Though adorned in shabby clothes under a threadbare coat, he walked with his back straight and strides confident. The interior of the inn seemed almost barren with an air of unease hanging about. At the back of the building behind a counter, the portly innkeep downed mugs of alcohol one after the other, paying no heed to his arrival. As he was taking in his surroundings, double checking whether this was the right place, a young girl - judging by her getup, a waitress or barmaid - leaned her head around a corner from the depths of the building to see who had come in. With some uncertainty the girl approached him.

- "Uhm... Welcome! Are you looking for lodging or fare?"
- "No, not really... I am only looking for someone, they arranged to meet here... I wonder if they're still here...?"

He couldn't help but bring attention to the unsettling lack of patrons, however the subtle nod completely flew over the girl's head. Instead she lightheartedly thought that it was easier to find what person the old man was looking for with fewer people in the inn.

- "Do you know their name or what they look like?"

Thinking to himself for a moment:

- "Hmm... yes... I believe their name was... Alicia? A woman with white hair, yet not as old as I am..."

Instantly she knew who the man was referring to:

- "Ah! I'll go and see if they want to talk. Who is it that wants to speak to them?"
- "Stephano will do."
- "Okay! I'll be right back!"

Saying so, with light steps, she dashed up to the second-floor rooms, running up against one of the doors, knocking gently. Not long after she returned with a smile to lead him to the room, asking if they wanted a drink to which he requested a particular blend of tea, though unfortunately the establishment lacked the particular mix. As the girl left, he barely knocked on the door before it opened.

- "Stephano! I thought you retired months ago!"

He had barely stepped into the room when Rosalia raced up and hugged him, evidently overjoyed. Stephano froze for a while, stunned, before looking at Rosalia's face then squeezing out a response.

- "It... It really is you, young mistress! We feared we had lost you forever."

In the background of the reunion scene, Alicia was deep in thought trying to figure out a way to act like she was seeing the man for the first time. Inadvertently her subconscious wish to not be noticed until she formed a plausible acting script, triggered stealth to take its effect.

- "Where is Lennardt?"

Rosalia inquired but received only a heavy hearted downhearted stare.

- "Is... Is father here...?"

Slow and despondently he shook his head.

- "How- Why...?"

He brought out an envelope from the depths of his worn coat. As soon as she saw it, she knew from whom it was from. The wax sealing it bore not the insignia of House Valtima but the personal emblem of Reynold himself, a kite shield depicting a predatory beast snarling at the beholder. Letter had an unnatural yet welcoming warmth as if it was just written from the hearthside of her home when she touched it, content in finding its way to her; it was her father's magical seal. Hastily tearing through the envelope scanning through every phrase, word and letter not letting a single detail pass by.

Alicia, respecting her privacy as best as she could, fought against her urge to sneak a peak or tune into her inner voice through Cold Reader. But even without any additional assistance she could guess the letter didn't bring the news they wanted, as Rosalia's eyes started to squinch and bedew as she started to cradle the letter. Her initial hope and optimism faded, in its place a look of loss set in. When Rosalia's legs started to waver from emotion, fearing that his master's daughter would collapse, Stephano quickly grabbed ahold of her and led her to a bed nearby. Unsure how to approach the situation, Alicia decided it was best to give her time and space mentally going through her to-do list and double checking if she had forgotten something. Before she was even halfway through the checklist Rosalia came up to her, face filled with conviction.

'Wow, she recovered fast.'

- "Please, take me in."

- "Excuse me?"
- "Please, take me in."
- "I heard you fine the first time, I want you to elaborate. What is happening?"
- "I..."

Rosalia looked to be struggling to put her thoughts into words, floundering, starting sentences over and over again without forming a complete idea. Even the ever reliable cold reader couldn't help Alicia as her mind was in a state of utter chaos, a cesspit of confused thoughts and a riot of emotions. The bewilderment even spread to Alicia who couldn't bear to peer any further into her thoughts without getting lost and confused herself.

- "Right, how about we start from the beginning. What was in the letter? What can you tell me?"

After an arduous few moments Rosalia started to speak. Alicia abridged the points as best as she could.

'So skipping over the soap opera bits she got disowned... not quite... exiled maybe...? Is there a specific word for this...? Anyway, basically she can't return. The point being her father thinks the attempted murder and her subsequent disappearance was an inside job and doesn't know who to trust; bringing her back to a place like that only endangers her, perhaps more than if she were out in the middle of nowhere running away from wild dogs or whatever. So he asked a favor of his previous servant, Stefanos, a coachman in service to his family who he apparently has a long history with that retired a few moons ago. But he has a lead of sorts... someone brought her bloody signet ring as proof of her death claiming that they later found it from the site of the attack and wanted to see where that rabbit hole led. Bringing her back in the flesh makes for great incriminating evidence... but probably won't root out the problem as he thinks the corruption runs even deeper. Additionally her return will most likely push the true culprits into hiding until they make another far more prepared plan.

Knowing that she's alive and recognizing that he has been tricked¹ also allowed him to ruminate the actions of his allies from a different light and already he has seen some holes in their claims, making some highly dubious actions. Unfortunately he can't also assist her directly without raising

¹backstabbed and quite possibly bamboozled

suspicious and implications to whoever that might be monitoring him. Playing the grieving jester he wants to bring them all to justice and wants some time. He had already caught some accomplices sending more people after her trying to finish what they started. Yeah, yeah, yeah... I think I know how that turned out, he missed one and that one guy put a bounty on her head and that just so happened to catch the attention of a local sociopath... that sexually assaulted me, pretending to be her... you know what I'll just leave out this part.

- *'What was next...'*
- *'...come with us...'*
- *'Ah right.'*

And then his bright idea for how she should continue is to just hide outside of his domicile so she's far away from the danger, suggesting that I, who had helped her so far, take her in for some indeterminate amount of time. For some reason she also mentioned that I was some sort of distant noble or whatever in her letter and he thinks that I can take her away, vowing to return the favor in some eventuality promising some vague political gains... Okay, what kind of whackjob asylum patient's diary of a letter did she write to him? How did I become part of the aristocracy? Ugh- I'll omit this part too...

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- "That about sums it up?"
 - "Yes, thank you very much..."

Rosalia had calmed down quite a bit since her initial panic.

- "Well, as much as I sympathize, I will have to decline."

It was the first time Rosalia had been taken aback by Alicia's decisions, but she had her answers prepared from the start.

- "But-"
- "Why? First of all, let's just say I'm not interested in any compensation you or your family offers. Secondly I can't take you in, because it is only a matter of time before some... things that I wish to keep under wraps from the world will leak out. Everyone has their secrets... you'll be too close to mine."
- "I promise-"
- "Words won't be enough my dear."

Rosalia was at a loss for words when it came to persuading Alicia to change her decision. Realizing that the conversation was quickly coming to a

standstill and subsequently to its conclusion in an unsatisfactory direction for Rosalila, *Stephano* chimed in.

- "There must be something we can do..."
- "Oh there is a way but... I don't think anyone would want what I impose unto themselves willingly, even in a life or death desperation you know."

At her wits end Rosalia relented.

- "I-I'll do anything..."
- "'Anything...?' Very poor choice of words... would you like to rephrase that?"
- "I-no... I mean it."

Alicia gave her another chance to reconsider and put what is in store for her into a meaningful perspective that she can understand, grimly stated:

- "I don't think you know the full implications so let me put it this way... You will be submitting into quite possibly a **lifetime** of indenturement. You may consider the life in handcuffs you were found in to be cruel, painful and hopeless, but believe me when I say this to you, it's **nothing** compared to what's to come oh and if your friend is coming too... it also extends to him as well."

Understandably *Stephano* was getting anxious and hesitant of Alicia's increasingly ominous warnings.

- "Young mistress, I don't think this is a good idea. We'll find a way to survive. I might be no good at protecting you, but I do not mind throwing this old body at whatever threatens you."
- "Thank you, but that is not something I can accept. I consider you part of my family. Don't worry, I know she won't hurt us willingly... if she wanted me dead she could have done away with that a long time ago without any of this hassle... There must be a reason for all of this, obscurity... I knew this already but... you're a ruthless negotiator, madam. But my decision remains unchanged."

Stephano you may leave, your service to the house has ended, this doesn't concern you anymore."

- "If that is true then I absolutely cannot let you go alone with a foreign stranger I barely know. I refuse."

Amused, she inquired.

- "When did you become so rebellious? I thought loyalty and obedience to the house was your greatest virtue that you always prided in."

- "As you have said before... this coachman is no longer in service to the house."

Tittering for a brief moment.

- "I guess I walked into that one myself."

Alicia again relegated to the background interrupted.

- "Uh hey, I hate to break up this a grand old time with that heart to heart conversation going on but let me ask again. Do you really want this?"

Deep breath and a long pause Rosalia answered.

- "Indubitably."
- "I will follow the young mistress wherever she goes."

In a subdued tone, almost as if to convince herself:

- "Well, no one can say I didn't give them adequate warning..."

She held out her right hand towards Rosalia standing to her left, and her left right hand - going underneath her other outstretched hand - to Stefanos. An invitation for a handshake, even if it was a completely foreign custom, they could infer what she wanted. In a voice louder than her previous.

- Then grab my hand. Remember... you might never be able to go back from this."

Alicia concentrated her magical energy in preparation. Unnerving aura of oppression grew around her. Never has Rosalia seen her like this, she knew for sure, Alicia was serious. They stared into the limitless depths of the abyss for the first time, as an overpowering emptiness swept over them, bent on devouring everything that made them who they are, through Alicia's platinum white. Nervously gulping down the growing unease, they took the leap of faith and grabbed her hands in unison, firmly shaking it.

- **"Henceforth, what you learn of me, my kin and kindred, you will keep it to yourself, into the grave and beyond and into your next goddamn life if you must."**



「 Domination 」
