

Gottfried stepped through the Gate and found himself in the bright noonday sun, the grounds were beautiful and quite familiar to the young man accustomed to a life of wealth and comfort. Though the walls were different from his country home in the Papal estate, which had them only for privacy's sake rather than security, it wasn't strange 'so far'. He was nonplussed by the undead horses he saw arrayed in front of him, and quickly stepped aside to allow the elven laborers to pass by and begin laying out the kits of equipment in neat order.

They were otherwise alone, and Solution slapped him hard on the back. *'That might leave a bit of a bruise.'* He thought with only mild annoyance, since he knew full well on a weaker person it might have snapped their spine. If anything however, he felt more relaxed, familiar, her roughness was as close as she came to affection, and it did get his attention.

"Now that we're alone," she said as if the other servants didn't exist, "I'm going to deliver this warning before I go let them know you've arrived. This is *not* your home. The laws of the Empire have no power here. My student is undergoing her test, success or failure is on her. I won't tell you what to do, but I will remind you Gottfried, you're a *guest* here. Their guest. Going on a killing spree will not help anyone, no matter how justified you think you are, or how much you want to be like your mothers. Try... acting more like your father, relax a little and let things happen. You trust me, don't you, my boy?" Solution put forth the rhetorical question, and Gottfried silently took it in.

"I'm going to see things I won't like... and lots of them... won't I? That's why you waited until we got to the other side." He asserted.

"Yes. You're not a little child anymore. By most standards you're a man, or about to be. You don't get to live in the world of absolutes anymore." Solution said and put a hand on his shoulder, "Do you understand?"

He closed his eyes, deep in thought, the weight of her hand's pressure would have made most others kneel, even to him, the heavy placement was illustrative. Of all his 'aunts' among the Pleiades, Solution was one of his favorites. Her bluntness and harshness much like that of his birth mother, her ruthless demand for excellence pushed him to improve, and her

truthfulness led him to trust her as much as anyone could ever trust anyone else.

"Alright... I'll keep that in mind. I understand, thank you." He replied, and she squeezed his shoulder hard one more time.

"That's the Son of Terror I know." She said with a wink when his eyes opened again.

She then departed, leaving him to supervise the layout, which he was still doing several minutes later, utterly lost in his work and his thoughts until a noise caught his ear.

A voice behind him which drew his attention.

"You are... Gottfried, aren't you? I am Kaiji." A feminine voice asked, he turned around, and for once the unflappable young man was struck nearly dumb. Deep, rich purple skin, like royalty enfleshed, red eyes, solid as rubies, long silky black hair, and horns like a demoness. Her bright red lips cracked a smile when he gaped a little longer than he should have. "You're younger than I thought you'd be." She said and bent her knees in a quick bobbing motion before straightening up.

"I-I'm thirteen, you know. And yes, my name is Gottfried Baraja, my mother set me to thi-" He stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Kaiji asked and cocked her head, approaching with a demure downward gaze and held her hands in front of her waist. Solution walked past her to stand just behind Gottfried again.

He pointed his finger to her neck. "You're wearing a collar." Behind him, Kaiji could see the silent smirk that threatened to become a full blown laugh from the monster.

"What do you expect a slave to wear, Master Baraja?" Kaiji asked with a little silvery laugh she hoped would preempt Solution's own.

Gottfried flushed red, at first Kaiji thought it might be embarrassment. But it was quickly obvious that his face was red with wrath. *'I shouldn't have laughed at him! I've angered my Mistress' ally!'* She immediately went to her knees and bowed her head. "Forgive my temerity, sir, I hadn't meant to laugh at you."

Gottfried was briefly stumped until he realized what she was doing, and he quickly acted to reassure her. "No, no that isn't it!" He shot out in haste, "I'm just... it's... I didn't know... to keep slaves is a grave sin for us and I thought... wait you said..."

Kaiji gave a contented little smile up to him from where she knelt near his feet. "Yes... I am the property of the House of Aiwenor, young master. She bought me... what feels like a long time ago, though now that I think about it, it can't have been that long, and saved my life by doing it too." Kaiji said with a winsome smile on her face.

"Ah... you can stand up." He said, rubbing the back of his head and looking away uncomfortably at her subservient posture.

Kaiji rose to her feet again, and he looked at her once more, before addressing her in an almost adorably confounded voice, "If you want... I'm absolutely sure I can have you set free. My mother would never have sent weapons and armor to protect a slaver... she *kills* slavers, or used to, so I'm told. I've never actually seen a slave before so... excuse me. Listen if you want to go free I can make it happen. Your... Prince, he won't ever hurt you, beat you, or do anything bad to you ever again."

In the stories Gottfried knew, captives were grateful to those who offered them liberation, the horror stories of the Theocracy formed the foundation of entire military units of 'penitents'. So of all the reactions he expected, the one he got was not among them.

Kaiji laughed, she touched a hand to her breast, threw her head back, and laughed until little red tears fell from the corners of her eyes and she had to wipe them away.

Gottfried looked at her with a quizzical eye, "What? What's funny? Don't you want to be free?"

Kaji waved a hand in a hasty sort of way, "Young master, to begin with, my Prince is *very* much a woman. 'Prince' in this part of the world refers to who rules a city, no matter their sex. Next, try to take me from this house by force, and I will use all my magic to stop you. I love my mistress, she saved my life, my beloved's life, and tens of thousands of my people. I know the articles of the faith in the Black Book, but Mict'aratz is very different from your homeland. Please, get to know my country before you treat it as if it were your own."

"But... people can't be property. That's wrong." Gottfried answered by rote, and she gave him a sweet smile.

"My Prince has never, ever hurt me, and while I admit I once feared her, now I treasure her. I'm an extension of her will, and have aligned myself to her vision. Please, young master," she implored him again, at her core a fear that her presence ruined her lady's intent, "learn a little bit of us before you judge my Lady or my homeland poorly. I realize you're coming here to help us, but we aren't without our pride, our virtues, or our strengths. You're staying with us for a few days, so... broaden your view, you traveled across the world, look at us as much through our eyes as you can, that isn't too much to ask, is it?" Kaiji sought his eyes, silently pleading, and though he looked at her through the eyes of idealistic youth, she felt the shift in him before he spoke.

"I've been rude... haven't I? I'm sorry." Gottfried said, the dark expression on his face was rapidly retreating, she simply sounded too reasonable to not consider what she had to say, and she did not fit with what he'd been taught.

"A little, but it came from a kind place, such misunderstandings happen when worlds collide young master. Consider it forgotten." Kaiji said with diplomatic grace. "If the worst I can say is that on first meeting me, the son of the Dark Savior wanted to help me, then that speaks well of your mother and your home."

*'Such an earnest young man, lean, strong looking, he'll be quite handsome in a few years.'* She kept her teasing laughter to herself, and politely ignored the way his eyes went up and down her body when she walked past him to look the equipment over. The elves kept up a steady pace of delivery, laying out five hundred sets in full before the gate closed.

"Things are busy for now, runes are being carved at a rapid rate, but not to worry, there will be another five hundred delivered in a month." Gottfried promised and walked past her to crouch over a set of armor, he went from top to bottom from helmet to boots, explaining everything, then moving on to the pike, spear, bow, sword, shield, and knife. He was crisp and professional in his words, far beyond what Kaiji expected of one so young. She followed a step behind him, acutely conscious of the power that seemed to flow from him as if he were the source of a great river. *'So this is a 'godkin' and he's just a boy still. What will he be in seven years if he trains hard?'*

She reached down and touched the equipment, it was smooth as polished marble, with a practical black coloration. Gottfried's entire body practically trembled, his words poured out rapidly as water from the rainy season's floods. When he finished chattering, he popped up with a broad boyish grin on his face and put his hands on his hips saying, "What do you think?"

Kaiji almost jumped back from his sudden movement, *'He's so fast...'* She thought and then said in a more measured tone, "I think ten thousand of these will save many lives."

"I think you're right... forgive me," he pursed his lips, then took a slow breath, "I find your... station, hard to grasp just yet, may I call you simply 'Kaiji'? I'm not comfortable referring to you as simply 'slave'. And can I ask you to call me just 'Gottfried', I'm nobody's master. Besides," he glanced at her long, beautiful... twitching ears, "I'm guessing you're probably considerably older than I am, and it's got to be uncomfortable to address a mere boy as if I were a superior."

Kaiji smirked, "Even here, Gottfried, it's rude to guess a lady's age, even if she is a demon-elf. But yes, you may call me Kaiji, I will call you Gottfried, if you insist. I will be attending to your needs pertaining to your stay, and

we will assign a maid to your room for anything else. Per my Mistress' order, everything you want is to be provided to you."

"For now, I'll settle for a room, a meal, a bath, and a few minutes with the Prince." Gottfried said, his shoulders briefly slumping, "It was exhausting getting all this ready for today and I haven't had a break in weeks."

"As you wish, but... you don't intend to do anything hostile to my Mistress, do you? I can't have that." Kaiji replied, stopping in mid step when she gestured toward the palace as servants emerged to come and carry off the equipment.

"No... no I don't. The faith tells us there's enough time for death in this world, I should be patient and as you say, at least get to know this place." Gottfried answered, and Kaiji's tension melted right away.

"Then this way... Gottfried." She said with a sweet smile spreading from her ruby lips again, and leading him toward the palace rear entry.

As Gottfried followed the demon-elf through the doors, he listened with half of one ear to what Kaiji said about the history and heritage of mighty Komestra going through her many, many years of living there and looking after the royal family, all the way up to its collapse. Gottfried followed, her silvery voice was impossible not to pay some mind to, but what drew his eyes most was the clothing, his own and Kaiji's had a vague similarity that he was able to chalk up to the common tie they had through the Prince. However three things threw him for a loop. The maids and butlers wearing collars of silver were disconcerting and he had to bite his tongue to keep from offering freedom to every one of them that they passed. He had the distinct impression that they'd be more offended than thankful.

More than that, the butlers and maids wore clothing almost identical to those of his home, which was difficult to explain unless he used the same answer for why his and Kaiji's outfits were of similarly practical bent. *'In the stories, slaves are always strongly sexualized, and I heard this place was a lot more lewd than home... but while the maid and butler outfits are a little more form fitting...'* He coughed to clear his throat, and Kaiji stopped talking, walking, and turned around.

"Is there something I can help you with, Gottfried?" She asked, the inviting smile still on her fine featured face.

"Yes, ah, the outfits, uniforms I mean... for the maids and butlers... they're just like home, is this something your Prince had done...?" He asked, and she shook her head.

"No, you'll find these all over the city-states, nobody really knows the whole story, but... one of the starfathers from a long ago time, he proclaimed these outfits were 'justice' and it became the norm. You'll note that the maids and butlers you've seen are all exceptionally well cared for, we've taken that admonition from above to heart, and nobody but scum would abuse their own maid." Kaiji explained.

"It's considered a sin against divine justice to harm someone in a maid or butler uniform. Even when a city falls, they are 'relatively' safe. Such servants are sacred, rare, and highly prized." Kaiji answered him with a note of pride, raising her chin as if to show off her status, the little purple tag dangling from the bronze collar, and resumed the walk to his quarters, explaining more of the history of her home city until she got to the fall and the final defeat of Prince Sado.

"I'm sorry for your loss, I hope he died without pain." Gottfried said with sympathy, only for Kaiji to shake her head.

"Oh, he isn't dead. He fell into my Prince's power, and now serves her house as a bodyguard to her adopted daughter, Diana, in Hanak'sen. From what Prince Aiwenor tells me, Gottfried, brutal deaths were the norm in the west, entire houses exterminated, peasants starved, and even in your slave states, the worst and most brutal violence was routine... Brutal deaths are common here too... but it comes from our neighbor state. From the Tlalmok. Or sometimes from the south, the Tlachopan. We kill each other in violent wars, as you used to. But we have always understood that this," she touched the bronze around her neck, "was one bad day away for anyone, and whatever I can say of our Starwatchers... they never encouraged brutality against people in my position. They have even opposed the brutality once common to you. Not many truly vile could live well here.

Talent is too valuable to waste, so she spared his life and put him to use. It took some doing, but... here we are, readying ourselves for the coming storm." Kaiji replied and touched her hand to a heavy oaken door.

"This will be your room, I will alert my Mistress to your desire to speak with her, and send someone to fetch you after a meal, bath, and change of clothes. Should I send some pleasurable company to you as well?" Kaiji asked, pushing the door open.

Gottfried stopped dead at the last question, halfway through the door. "Ah... pleasurable company? Just... what does that mean?" He asked, not daring to turn around to reveal his expression.

"You're a state dignitary, we have very skilled courtesans who would be delighted to show off their talents to a young man of the west who has come so far with the means to save many lives. I'm sure you'll be quite popular." She said with an encouraging smile he could feel, even though he couldn't see it.

"No-Yes-No! No, that will be fine. I- ah, a bath, rest, dress, food... all those things... thank you." He said and moved to shut the door behind him.

The door closed a little faster and harder than he meant it too, with an audible clap against the stone frame. "Well spoken, Gottfried, well spoken indeed. Your mother's most eloquent son... you are not." He said to himself as he began to disrobe. "But who can blame you... by the bones of God... she's the most beautiful... *exotic* woman I've ever seen..."

Gottfried was still musing over that when he put on his robe, rang the bell, and a servant appeared to escort him to the baths after picking up his clothing and holding it waist level in front of her during their walk. *'Oh come off of it, she's somebody's property, and she seems happy at least. But that happened too, didn't it? Mother told me about slaves who protected their owners... and didn't she say the Prince here once belonged to and protected a cardinal? This whole thing is just too much.'* He kept his thoughts to himself and followed a young girl in a silver collar and a maid outfit. She looked to be about his age, and human, with long dark hair and delicate features. "Excuse me, can I ask you something?"

The young maid stopped and turned around, giving him her full attention, "Sir?" She asked, "Do you need something?"

"Yes... are you... happy here? Are you all treated well?" Gottfried asked.

"Forgive me, sir," she said, raising a dark eyebrow as if he were speaking backwards, "is there something wrong?"

"No-No, nothing. It's just that all this is strange to me. Everything I know seems 'off'. I'm just trying to end my ignorance." He said as diplomatically as he could.

She took that in and thought for a moment. "I eat good food, have my own bed, I am safe. I even get to go and learn things four days out of the week, and Mistress' mercy... Saved me." She added with a hint of reluctance.

"Saved you?" He asked.

"Is it your command that I speak of it, sir?" She asked, slowly closing her eyes and bracing herself for the lie she was about to tell.

"No, not if you don't want to." Gottfried replied and gestured down the hall, "Please, lead on."

She resumed the walk until several minutes later when she asked, "If I were to explain... would that help you favor the Lady Aiwenor?"

"I can't know the answer to that unless I know the answer to the other thing." Gottfried answered, and for a moment she furrowed her brow to riddle out the meaning of his words, then when she did, she nodded.

Her lie flowed smooth as cream poured from a pitcher, "I was living in this city with my family when it fell. They all died. I lived long enough to wish I didn't. I was bought in Pas'en, and if it were not for her mercy and defiance of the Starwatcher's faith, I would be a mother to my family's murderers' spawn. We may be her possessions, sir, but she sees us as her children, and we matter to her. If we're injured, we're healed, if we're killed, we're

avenged, if we die, we're mourned. We've been told something about life where you're from, sir, but please don't say anything bad about her, because she isn't as bad as I'm sure they'd say where you're from." The maid replied, then put her back to him to walk on.

"Oh." Gottfried answered, unable to think of what else to say.