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ONE

The Austrian horses glinted in the moonlight, their riders standing tall in the saddle, swords raised. Behind them two ranks of diesel-powered walking machines stood ready to fire, cannon aimed over the heads of the cavalry. A zeppelin scouted no-man's-land at the center of the battlefield, its metal skin sparkling.

The French and British infantry crouched behind their fortifications—a letter opener, an ink jar, and a line of fountain pens—knowing they stood no chance against the might of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But a row of Darwinist monsters loomed behind them, ready to devour any who dared retreat.

The attack had almost begun when Prince Aleksandar thought he heard someone outside his door. . . .

He took a guilty step toward his bed—then froze in place, listening hard. Trees stirred in a soft breeze



outside, but otherwise the night was silent. Mother and Father were in Sarajevo, after all. The servants wouldn't dare disturb his sleep.

Alek turned back to his desk and began to move the cavalry forward, grinning as the battle neared its climax. The Austrian walkers had completed their bombardment, and it was time for the tin horses to finish off the woefully outnumbered French. It had taken all night to set up the attack, using an imperial tactics manual borrowed from Father's study.

It seemed only fair that Alek have some fun while his parents were off watching military maneuvers. He'd begged to be taken along, to see the mustered ranks of soldiers striding past in real life, to feel the rumble of massed fighting machines through the soles of his boots.

It was Mother, of course, who had forbidden it—his studies were more important than "parades," as she called them. She didn't understand that military exercises had more to teach him than musty old tutors and their books. One day soon Alek might be piloting one of those machines.

War was coming, after all. Everyone said so.

The last tin cavalry unit had just crashed into the French lines when the soft sound came from the hallway again: jingling, like a ring of keys.

Alek turned, peering at the gap beneath his bed chamber's double doors. Shadows shifted along the sliver of moonlight, and he heard the hiss of whispers.

Someone was right outside.

Silent in bare feet, he swiftly crossed the cold marble floor, sliding into bed just as the door creaked open. Alek narrowed his eyes to a slit, wondering which of the servants was checking on him.

Moonlight spilled into the room, making the tin soldiers on his desk glitter. Someone slipped inside, graceful and dead silent. The figure paused, staring at Alek for a moment, then crept toward his dresser. Alek heard the wooden rasp of a drawer sliding open.

His heart raced. None of the servants would dare steal from him!

But what if the intruder were something worse than

a thief? His father's warnings echoed in his ears. . . .

You have had enemies from the day you were born.

A bell cord hung next to his bed, but his parents' rooms were empty. With Father and his bodyguard in Sarajevo, the closest sentries were quartered at the other end of the trophy hall, fifty meters away.

Alek slid one hand under his pillow, until his fingers touched the cold steel of his hunting knife. He lay there holding his breath, grasping the handle tightly, repeating to himself his father's other watchword.

Surprise is more valuable than strength.

Another figure came through the door then, boots clomping, a piloting jacket's metal clips jingling like keys on a ring. The figure tromped straight toward his bed.

"Young master! Wake up!"

Alek let go of the knife, expelling a sigh of relief. It was just old Otto Klopp, his master of mechaniks.

The first figure began rifling through the dresser, pulling at clothes.

"The young prince has been awake all along," Wildcount Volger's low voice said. "A bit of advice, Your Highness? When pretending to be asleep, it is advisable not to hold one's breath."

Alek sat up and scowled. His fencing master had an annoying knack for seeing through deception.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"You're to come with us, young master," Otto mumbled, studying the marble floor. "The archduke's orders."

"My father? He's back already?"

"He left instructions," Count Volger said with the same infuriating tone he used during fencing lessons. He tossed a pair of Alek's trousers and a piloting jacket onto the bed.

Alek stared at them, half outraged and half confused.

"Like young Mozart," Otto said softly. "In the archduke's stories."

Alek frowned, remembering Father's favorite tales about the great composer's upbringing. Supposedly Mozart's tutors would wake him in the middle of the night, when his mind was raw and defenseless, and thrust musical lessons upon him. It all sounded rather disrespectful to Alek.

He reached for the trousers. "You're going to make me compose a *fugue*?"

"An amusing thought," Count Volger said. "But please make haste."

"We have a walker waiting behind the stables, young master." Otto's worried face made an attempt at a smile. "You're to take the helm."

"A walker?" Alek's eyes widened. Piloting was one part of his studies he'd gladly get out of bed for. He slipped quickly into the clothes.

"Yes, your first night lesson!" Otto said, handing Alek his boots.

Alek pulled them on and stood, then fetched his favorite pilot's gloves from the dresser, his footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

"Quietly now." Count Volger stood by the chamber doors. He cracked them and peered out into the hall.

"We're to sneak out, Your Highness!" Otto whispered. "Good fun, this lesson! Just like young Mozart!"

The three of them crept down the trophy hall, Master Klopp still clomping, Volger gliding along in silence. Paintings of Alek's ancestors, the family who had ruled Austria for six hundred years, lined the hallway, their subjects staring down with unreadable expressions. The antlers of his father's hunting trophies cast tangled shadows, like a moonlit forest. Every footstep was magnified by the stillness of the castle, and questions echoed in Alek's mind.

Wasn't it dangerous, piloting a walker at night? And why was his fencing master coming along? Count Volger preferred swords and horses over soulless mechaniks, and had little tolerance for commoners like old Otto. Master Klopp had been hired for his piloting skills, not his family name.

"Volger . . . ," Alek began.

"*Quiet*, boy!" the wildcount spat.

Anger flashed inside Alek, and a curse almost burst

from his mouth, even if it ruined their stupid game of sneaking out.

It was always like this. To the servants he might be "the young archduke," but nobles like Volger never let Alek forget his position. Thanks to his mother's common blood, he wasn't fit to inherit royal lands and titles. His father might be heir to an empire of fifty million souls, but Alek was heir to nothing.

Volger himself was only a wildcount—no farmlands to his name, just a bit of forest—but even he could feel superior to the son of a lady-in-waiting.

Alek managed to stay quiet, though, letting his anger cool as they stole through the vast and darkened banquet kitchens. Years of insults had taught him how to bite his tongue, and disrespect was easier to swallow with the prospect of piloting ahead.

One day he would have his revenge. Father had promised. The marriage contract would be changed somehow, and Alek's blood made royal.

Even if it meant defying the emperor himself.

TWO

By the time they reached the stables, Alek's only concern was tripping in the darkness. The moon was less than half full, and the estate's hunting forests stretched like a black sea across the valley. At this hour even the lights of Prague had died out to a mere inkling.

When Alek saw the walker, a soft cry escaped his lips.

It stood taller than the stable's roof, its two metal feet sunk deep into the soil of the riding paddock. It looked like one of the Darwinist monsters skulking in the darkness.

This wasn't some training machine—it was a real engine of war, a Cyklop Stormwalker. A cannon was mounted in its belly, and the stubby noses of two Spandau machine guns sprouted from its head, which was as big as a smokehouse.

Before tonight Alek had piloted only unarmed runabouts and four-legged training corvettes. Even with his



"STEALING AWAY."

sixteenth birthday almost here, Mother always insisted that he was too young for war machines.

"I'm supposed to pilot *that*?" Alek heard his own voice break. "My old runabout wouldn't come up to its knee!"

Otto Klopp's gloved hand patted his shoulder heavily. "Don't worry, young Mozart. I'll be at your side."

Count Volger called up to the machine, and its engines rumbled to life, the ground trembling under Alek's feet. Moonlight shivered from the wet leaves in the camouflage nets draped over the Stormwalker, and the mutter of nervous horses came from the stable.

The belly hatch swung open and a chain ladder tumbled out, unrolling as it fell. Count Volger stilled it from swinging, then planted a boot on the lowermost metal rung to hold it steady.

"Young master, if you please."

Alek stared up at the machine. He tried to imagine guiding this monster through the darkness, crushing trees, buildings, and anything else unlucky enough to be in his path.

Otto Klopp leaned closer. "Your father the archduke has thrown us a challenge, me and you. He wants you ready to pilot any machine in the House Guard, even in the middle of the night."

Alek swallowed. Father always said that, with war on the horizon, everyone in the household had to be prepared. And it made sense to begin training while Mother was away.

If Alek crashed the walker, the worst bruises might fade before the princess Sophie returned.

But Alek still hesitated. The belly hatch of the rumbling machine looked like the jaws of some giant predator bending down to take a bite.

"Of course, we cannot force you, Your Serene Highness," Count Volger said, amusement in his voice. "We can always explain to your father that you were too scared."

"I'm *not* scared." Alek grabbed the ladder and hoisted himself up. The sawtooth rungs gripped his gloves as Alek climbed past the anti-boarding spikes arrayed along the walker's belly. He crawled into the machine's dark maw, the smell of kerosene and sweat filling his nose, the engines' rhythm trembling in his bones.

"Welcome aboard, Your Highness," a voice said. Two men waited in the gunners' cabin, steel helmets glittering. A Stormwalker carried a crew of five, Alek recalled. This wasn't some little three-man runabout. He almost forgot to return their salutes.

Count Volger was close behind him on the ladder, so Alek kept climbing up into the command cabin. He took the pilot's seat, strapping himself in as Klopp and Volger followed.

He placed his hands on the saunters, feeling the machine's awesome power trembling in his fingers. Strange

to think that these two small levers could control the walker's huge metal legs.

"Vision at full," Klopp said, cranking the viewport open as wide as it would go. The cool night air spilled into the Stormwalker's cabin, and moonlight fell across dozens of switches and levers.

The four-legged corvette he'd piloted the month before had needed only control saunters, a fuel gauge, and a compass. But now uncountable needles were arrayed before him, shivering like nervous whiskers.

What were they all *for*?

He pulled his eyes from the controls and stared through the viewport. The distance to the ground gave him a queasy feeling, like peering down from a hayloft with thoughts of jumping.

The edge of the forest loomed only twenty meters away. Did they really expect him to pilot this machine through those dense trees and tangled roots . . . *at night*?

"At your pleasure, young master," Count Volger said, sounding bored already.

Alek set his jaw, resolving not to provide the man with any more amusement. He eased the saunters forward, and the huge Daimler engines changed pitch as steel gears bit, grinding into motion.

The Stormwalker rose from its crouch slowly, the ground slipping still farther away. Alek could see across the

treetops now, all the way to shimmering Prague.

He pulled the left saunter back and pushed the right forward. The machine lumbered into motion with an inhumanly large step, pressing him back into the pilot's seat.

The right pedal rose a little as the walker's foot hit soft ground, nudging Alek's boot. He twisted at the saunters, transferring weight from one foot to the other. The cabin swayed like a tree house in a high wind, lurching back and forth with each giant step. A chorus of hissing came from the engines below, gauges dancing as the Stormwalker's pneumatic joints strained against the machine's weight.

"Good . . . excellent," Otto muttered from the commander's seat. "Watch your knee pressure, though."

Alek dared a glance down at the controls, but had no idea what Master Klopp was talking about. *Knee pressure?* How could anyone keep track of all those needles without driving the whole contraption into a tree?

"Better," the man said a few steps later. Alek nodded dumbly, overjoyed that he hadn't tipped them over yet.

Already the forest was looming up, filling the wide-open viewport with a dark tangle of shapes. The first glistening branches swept past, thwacking at the viewport, spattering Alek with cold showers of dew.

"Shouldn't we spark up the running lights?" he asked.

Klopp shook his head. "Remember, young master? We're pretending we don't want to be spotted."

"Revolting way to travel," Volger muttered, and Alek wondered again why the man was here. Was there to be a *fencing* lesson after this? What sort of warrior-Mozart was his father trying to make him into?

The shriek of grinding gears filled the cabin. The left pedal snapped up against Alek's foot, and the whole machine tipped ominously forward.

"You're caught, young master!" Otto said, hands ready to snatch the saunters away.

"I *know*!" Alek cried, twisting at the controls. He slammed the machine's right foot down midstride, its knee joint spitting air like a train whistle. The Stormwalker wavered drunkenly for a moment, threatening to fall. But long seconds later Alek felt the machine's weight settle into the moss and dirt. It was balanced with one foot stretching back, like a fencer posing after a lunge.

He pushed on both saunters, the left leg pulling at whatever had entangled it, the right straining forward. The Daimler engines groaned, and metal joints hissed. Finally a shudder passed through the cabin, along with the satisfying sound of roots tearing from the ground—the Stormwalker rising up. It stood high for a moment, like a chicken on one leg, then stepped forward again.

Alek's shaking hands guided the walker through its next few strides.

"Well done, young master!" Otto cried. He clapped his hands once.

"Thank you, Klopp," Alek said in a dry voice, feeling sweat trickle down his face. His hands clenched the saunters tight, but the machine was walking smoothly again.

Gradually he forgot that he was at the controls, feeling the steps as if they were his own. The sway of the cabin settled into his body, the rhythms of gears and pneumatics not so different from his runabout's, only louder. Alek had even begun to see patterns in the flickering needles of the control panel—a few leapt into the red with every footfall, easing back as the walker straightened. Knee pressure, indeed.

But the sheer power of the machine kept him anxious. Heat from the engines built in the cabin, the night air blowing in like cold fingers. Alek tried to imagine what piloting would be like in battle, with the viewport half shut against flying bullets and shrapnel.

Finally the pine branches cleared before them, and Klopp said, "Turn here and we'll have better footing, young master."

"Isn't this one of Mother's riding paths?" Alek said. "She'll have my hide if we track it up!" Whenever one of Princess Sophie's horses stumbled on a walker footprint, Master Klopp, Alek, and even Father felt her wrath for days.

But he eased back on the throttle, grateful for a moment of rest, bringing the Stormwalker to a halt on the trail. Inside his piloting jacket Alek was soaked with sweat.

"Disagreeable in every way, Your Highness," Volger said. "But necessary if we're to make good time tonight."

Alek turned to Otto Klopp and frowned. "Make good time? But this is just practice. We're not *going* anywhere, are we?"

Klopp didn't answer, his eyes glancing up at the count. Alek pulled his hands from the saunters and swiveled the pilot's chair around.

"Volger, what's going on?"

The wildcount stared down at him in silence, and Alek felt suddenly very alone out here in the darkness.

His mind began to replay his father's warnings: How some nobles believed that Alek's muddled lineage threatened the empire. That one day the insults might turn into something worse. . . .

But these men *couldn't* be traitors. Volger had held a sword to his throat a thousand times in fencing practice, and his master of mechaniks? Unthinkable.

"Where are we going, Otto? Explain this *at once*."

"You're to come with us, Your Highness," Otto Klopp said softly.

"We have to get as far away from Prague as possible," Volger said. "Your father's orders."

"But my father isn't even . . ." Alek gritted his teeth and swore. What a *fool* he'd been, tempted into the forest with tales of midnight piloting, like luring a child with candy. The whole household was asleep, his parents away in Sarajevo.

Alek's arms were still tired from fighting to keep the Stormwalker upright, and strapped into the pilot's chair he could hardly draw his knife. He closed his eyes—he'd left the weapon back in his room, under the pillow.

"The archduke left instructions," Count Volger said.

"You're *lying*!" Alek shouted.

"I wish we were, young master." Volger reached into his riding jacket.

A surge of panic swept into Alek, cutting through his despair. His hands shot to the unfamiliar controls, searching for the distress whistle's cord. They couldn't be far from home yet. Surely *someone* would hear the Stormwalker's shriek.

Otto jumped into motion, grabbing Alek's arms. Volger swept a flask from his jacket and forced its open mouth to Alek's face. A sweet smell filled the cabin, sending his mind spinning. He tried not to breathe, struggling against the larger men.

Then his fingers found the distress cord and pulled—

But Master Klopp's hands were already at the controls, spilling the Stormwalker's pneumatic pressure. The

whistle let out only a miserable descending wail, like a teakettle pulled from the fire.

Alek still struggled, holding his breath for what felt like minutes, but finally his lungs rebelled. He scooped in a ragged breath, the sharp scent of chemicals filling his head . . .

A cascade of bright spots fell across the instruments, and a weight seemed to lift from Alek's shoulders. He felt as though he were floating free of the men's grasp, free of the seat straps—free of gravity, even.

"My father will have your heads," he managed to croak.

"Alas not, Your Highness," Count Volger said. "Your parents are both dead, murdered this night in Sarajevo."

Alek tried to laugh at this absurd statement, but the world twisted sideways under him, darkness and silence crashing down.