

Idar-Oberstein, Germany, 1939

The lights in the workshop glowed brightly, even though the shop had been closed for hours. From the clock near the door, a single chime echoed, signaling the early hour. Even though the candles had nearly burned themselves into puddles, the two brothers huddled over the workbench remained wide-awake as ever. With a tool in each hand, each brother worked frantically over their piece, eyes glistening with excitement like children opening a long-awaited present. Several minutes more passed in the flickering candlelight with only the scraping of metal on wood to break the silence.

All at once, the taller man, muscular, with dark-hair and a bristly beard, dropped his tools and gave his brother a hearty pound on the back. His brother, of leaner build and fairer complexion with a smooth boyish face, grinned broadly back. Then, slowly, one after the other, they let their tools drop to the table, clattering with a satisfied finality. Starting with a low chuckle, their mirth grew contagious and swelled until both brothers bellowed with triumphant laughter.

“It is finished, Jorgen! Our masterpiece!”

Jorgen nodded jovially. “Right, my brother. All except one thing.”

The older brother picked up their handiwork and etched the familiar inscription on the underside with his ancient tool:

*J und K Müller
Frankfurt, Deutschland*

Setting their masterpiece on the table, they sat and admired it, the product of many painstaking hours of labor. For many years, the brothers had earned a living with their woodwork, but this piece was something much more special than their usual fare.

“Well, my brother,” muttered Jorgen. “I think we should turn in for the night. We can give it a test run in the morning. We wouldn’t want to disturb the others.”

They finally blew out the pitiful candles and retired to their respective rooms. For a long while afterwards, the darkened interior of the shop remained still and silent. A chill winter wind rustled the shutters, whistling and howling like a band of ghouls.

Long after they had retired to bed, a quiet creak sounded, and a shadow slunk down the stairwell, taking each stair individually. As the form reached the bottom of the stairs, it dared to move a little bit faster, emboldened by the nearness of his prize. With carefully measured steps, the figure reached the table and brooded over it.

“You’re mine,” it whispered.

Frankfurt, Germany, 1940

A heavily bearded man sighed as he entered the bank, carrying a tightly wrapped bundle under his arm. It had been a long, hard month of travel, and his muscles ached from the strain. He’d been up to a Nazi rally in Berlin, down to the University of Zürich in Switzerland, and over to Vienna to attend a number of concerts. By his estimation, he had sampled the best and brightest the German-speaking world had to offer and had gone away with everything that he had come for.

He smiled and hummed a jaunty waltz tune to himself as he stepped up to the teller at the first window he saw. The teller looked up disinterested and droned. "Welcome to the First Bank of Frankfurt. How can I help you?"

The bearded man glanced furtively from side to side, as if to make sure that no one else was watching him. He lifted the bundle and placed it in front of the teller.

"I would like to place this in my special safe-deposit box. Here are my papers confirming my account number and identity."

The teller took the papers and examined them slowly, his eyes lingering on each line as if scrutinizing each letter for mistakes. Finally, satisfied, the teller returned the papers and grunted. "Yes, yes, everything seems to be in order. Right this way, please."

The teller led the man down a dimly lit corridor, stopping at the end of the hallway in front of a heavy metal door. The teller removed a key ring from his pocket, rifled through the assortment of keys, and selected the correct one. The door swung open to reveal a completely empty gray room. The teller ushered the bearded man in. "Take as long as you like. I'll escort you out when you're finished."

The bearded man nodded and closed the door behind him. The teller stood outside and waited as the minutes quickly piled up to over an hour. The teller impatiently tapped his foot, wondering silently what on earth could be taking him such a long time.

After another twenty minutes had elapsed, he finally lost patience and rapped sharply on the door. "Sir, is everything all right in there?" He received no response. Suspiciously, he knocked again, and when no one answered, he reinserted the key and slid open the door. The teller gasped. The bearded man was gone. Only his strange, rectangular parcel remained in the center of the floor, still wrapped tightly in a dark cloth. Sweat broke out across the teller's brow. Should he report this? Was the man trying to steal something from the bank? Frantically, he tapped on the floors and walls, trying to find some alternate route of escape that the mysterious man could have used. His search revealed nothing. He glanced down at the package and made up his mind. He would get rid of the evidence and forget the incident.

Hastily, he snatched up the package, clumsily fumbling with the wrappings. He took one glance at the object inside and bit his lip in confusion. Why had the man gone to all the trouble to protect this? His questions lingering unanswered in the air, he stuffed the package under his arm, exited the room, and locked the door. He returned to his window, concealing the parcel in the shadows by his feet. Perhaps today was not such a bad day after all. The package might come in handy. At the very least, it would fetch a good price.

The Canticle Kingdom

The chamber window burst open, flooding the room with icy air and eerie shadows. Lightning roared from the open window, striking simultaneously with the clattering shutters. The feeble woman shot up in bed, clasping her chest as if her heart threatened to give up its life-sustaining labor.

"Your Majesty!" cried the man, Rufus, by her side. "You must remain calm! You are safe here."

The queen's breathing slowed, and she slowly reclined to her previous position on her back. From the corner, Camilla, the queen's calico cat, jumped up on the bed and snuggled up next to the queen. She was the queen's favorite pet, and only rarely were they ever seen apart. The cat had been Rufus's only supporter during these midnight vigils.

“Thank you, Rufus. I know I am safe. My sleep was troubled enough without these storms.”

Rufus nodded solemnly and removed a small vial of red-brown liquid from the night-stand adjoining the bed. “Here, your Majesty,” he whispered, holding up the vial to her pale lips. “Drink this. It may not help as much as it used to, but at least it will do something.”

Her lips trembling softly, the queen slowly sipped the liquid until the entire contents were gone. In desperate anticipation, the young chamberlain gazed at the queen’s wrinkled face, looking for any signs of relief. None came.

Nothing made sense. Only a week before, the queen had been the epitome of health: young, fair, energetic, and hopeful.

“My lady, I don’t understand! Cornelius prepared the draught as he always has. He’s the best there is! I don’t know why—”

A feeble gesture from the queen silenced Rufus’s futile speculation. For several seconds, only the fierce pounding of the raindrops could be heard. The queen once again opened her sunken eyes and began to speak, her voice barely audible. “I am afraid we must do what—” A fit of coughing wracked her flimsy frame. Rufus placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her until the fit subsided. “—what we have worked so hard to avoid all this time.”

Rufus’s gaze darkened, his face lined with worry. “No, my lady! You will recover! You will remain . . .,” Rufus let his words trail off into nothingness. He did not believe them himself.

Silence reigned for a few moments more, and then the queen continued. “No, Rufus. Your faith is admirable. Your loyalty is unsurpassed. But it avails us nothing. I do not understand why this great change has gripped me so suddenly, but. . . .” She gazed wistfully into the distance. “I can feel the life leaving me. I have tried in vain too long for something that I cannot obtain. In a matter of days I will be gone, and there seems to be little else we can do to stop that.”

Rufus’s eyes filled with tears. “But with that option, you will be lost—forever.” The queen’s eyes closed in resignation. “I am afraid that cannot be avoided.”