

# Wicked Sisters

Loki Renard

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## Chapter One

A swishy pointer slapped down across the curvaceous flesh of a buxom young woman projected against a white wall. The mustachioed officer strode back in front of his men, wagging his pointy rod for additional emphasis.

“How do you solve a problem like the Minkes?” he began his briefing in serious tones.

“Harpoon 'em,” a guard grunted from the back of the room, arousing chortles of amusement from his fellow guards.

“This is NOT a joke!” The officer silenced the assembled men with a staccato bark, and then began listing the crimes of the Minkes, so as not to leave anyone in doubt as to the quality of foe they were up against.

They were a series of crimes and thefts so bold, so daring that even the most hardened of the guards had to force themselves not to gasp in reluctant admiration. There was the great diamond heist of Suliksalar, in which a hundred thousand dollars worth of precious jewels had been stolen by the sisters, who had cleverly posed as a donkey and carried the jewels out in their saddlebags. There was the sacking of Supremurk, in which the sisters had donned wet suits and swum upstream under cover of darkness to steal an entire year's yeast supply. Then there was the notorious Whyne Agenda, in which criminal records had been burned atop a pyre of stolen judge's wigs. The Minke sisters were the worst kind of thieving anarchists Illirhellir had ever known and they were to be dealt with, swiftly and thoroughly.

Young Adele Minke sat crouched on the corner of a high ledge outside the briefing room, listening to the litany of crimes with a half smile on her pale lips. Her glossy dark shoulder length hair had been bound up at the top of her head to keep it out of her eyes and out of her way. On a corresponding tower several blocks across the old stone city of Illirhellir, she could see the glinting of sunlight shining across the void, sprung formlessly across the air by the glass knife her older sister Mardoll twisted skillfully in her leather bound hand.

A frown blemished the skin of the young woman. It was the sort of frown no pretty young thing should have to wear, but it was far from the first frown she had ever frowned. Already the lines of many frowns past were tracing themselves into Adele's alabaster forehead.

As amusing as it was to hear cohorts of strong men rumbling with disbelief, the fact that the city guards had been informed of their presence was not a good thing. That rather ruined the element of surprise. Stealing the book would be much more difficult now.

Having heard enough, she stepped lightly into the void and tumbled down, catching another ledge on the way past with all the easy grace of a Capuchin. A shuffle here, a drop there and in a matter of less than a minute, Adele had escaped the scene noiselessly and entirely undetected –

or so she thought.

Whilst most of the city had turned an entirely blind eye to her rooftop antics, Adele had not escaped the notice of all the city's inhabitants. As her shapely rear disappeared around the corner, a tall, well built fellow who had been standing on a crumbling stone ledge of the old Law building not twenty feet away smiled a flashing cruel smile. It was a smile of genuine pleasure that reached his ice blue eyes, briefly transforming his expression into something that resembled humanity and warmth.

Looking down at his brawny forearm, he twisted his timepiece three degrees to the right and spoke into it. "Did you see that?"

A brass piece in his ear crackled into life. "God yes. Follow her, man!"

The good natured expression faded from the fellow's face and he became thoroughly predatory once more as he stepped off his ledge and plummeted straight down towards the ground, held only by a strong iron cable that took his weight admirably. He landed on the street and unclipped himself, eliciting gasps of surprise and inevitable admiration from the passersby who had not been expecting a heavily armed, incredibly debonair hero to drop amongst them.

A woman clutched at his sleeve, arresting his progress and he turned for a moment to glare at her in irritation.

"Frederich Hanz? I can't believe it's you!" She simpered at him, her ruby red lips agape in adoration.

Under other circumstances Frederich might have been more charming. He might have smiled and engaged in a little light banter, he might have autographed her handkerchief. On this occasion he had no time for such pleasantries. He quickly took her hand and pressed his lips to the back of it.

"Excuse me milady, I am on business."

He left her with a flickering wink that made her swoon against her thoroughly put out male companion and attempted to work out where the Minke had gone.

Unfortunately, when he rounded the corner, there was no sign of the daring young woman. She had melted into the city, perhaps into the very walls, as the Minkes were rumored to have the ability to do. But Frederich harbored no such supernatural beliefs. There was a perfectly logical explanation for the way the Minkes appeared and disappeared at will and it could be summed up in two words – talent and desperation.

"Lost her, brother," he informed his watch.

"Ah, never mind, we'll get 'em later," Seph drawled back. Frederich shook his head. If the

situation had been reversed, if Seph had been the one to be distracted by a pretty lady, he'd have torn strips off his younger brother. But Seph always had been more laid back – and he wasn't the sort of fool to start a fight with his older, much bigger, brother.

When Adele returned to their secret lair Mardoll was waiting for her with more bad news. Adele did not know how she had arrived there so quickly, Adele fancied herself speedy, but Mardoll's speed seemed to on occasion defy the laws of physics. That was because Mardoll did not rely solely on her well toned rump and thighs to propel her about the place, but instead on native trickery and wiles, and a nose for finding secret ways.

“Things are about to get difficult, Dally.” There was a perverse grin of pleasure on Mardoll's porcelain features and Adele knew that in spite of the tense tone with which she was conducting their private briefing, her older sister was once more thrilling to the sport of evasion. “They've sent the hunters after us. There was one after you, but you gave him the slip.” She fingered the brilliant tip of her glass knife with dark intent in her eyes. “Fortunately for him.”

Adele's expression reflected pure confusion. She'd been seen? She hadn't noticed anyone following her. Cold fingers began to play about her spine, having been followed without knowing it was very, very bad.

“Hunters?”

Mardoll slammed an open manila folder down on the charred table that stood between them. It had once been a rather nice piece of carved Westland work, but now it barely managed to hold itself together. The edges of the table were entirely ash and though the center was still strong, the entire table top leaned to the side at a drunken angle. The scent of dirty old soot and smoke hung in the air, tempting Adele to sneeze. Their new hideout was not the most palatial of places. The building had been gutted by fire months earlier, but nobody came down here now and that meant that Mardoll and Adele had a place to stay for a while, until they got paid for their latest job, then they might spend a few nights in a hotel. Washing with a rag and a bucket was both draining and demoralizing.

The wall of text in the body of the folder dazed Adele momentarily, but her eyes were quickly drawn to the full length photo of the hunters clipped to the cover. Two men glared out at her with ice cold expressions. Both were dressed in an archaic fashion, wearing tailored black suits that hinted at perpetual formality. Adele immediately spotted resemblances between them that could only mean that they were family. They had the same straight, hard nose, the same jutting jaw and the same shaggy locks of blonde hair barely tamed by fedora hats.

The first male's suit fitted his broad shoulders perfectly, tapering down to narrow hips. He stood with his hands in his pockets, an arrogant curl on his lip. He was the taller of the pair, and judging by the lines that traced around his mouth and eyes, the older.

The younger brother had a little more flair. He was of a slimmer build, more like a gymnast than a raging bull and he held himself with a foppish sort of style that made Adele grin. Though he was less serious looking than his brother, there was a brilliant light in his eye that suggested determination and courage. She felt a curious tingling in the pit of her stomach as she gazed at the younger hunter, a tingling she quickly turned tail and ran from mentally.

“They look like a music hall act,” Adele found refuge in mockery. “All they need are a couple of guitars and string ties to make a mariachi band.”

Mardoll grinned at her younger sister's humor. “They're Frederick and Seph Hanz. They're brothers, and they've got a reputation for being the best at what they do.”

“What a coincidence...” Adele murmured, flicking her gaze up towards her sister.

“....so do we.” Mardoll finished the thought.

Later that evening, whilst Adele slept, Mardoll kept watch. Now that the ever trusting eyes of her younger sibling were not on her, she allowed herself to feel the merest tremor of concern as she flicked through the Hanz file.

Had they gone too far? At first it had been gratifying to earn a reputation that made their names famous throughout the land. The wicked Minke sisters, daughters of the Lady Seraphina Minke who had been imprisoned by the state for so long, they had become vigilantes wreaking revenge against the rich who had betrayed their once proud family. Being welcomed into many homes simply for who they were was a welcome change from begging on the streets as they had been forced to do when mother was first taken away. But fame came with a price, it seemed; a price that could very well go as high as their heads.

Mardoll didn't really need the file to learn about the Hunters. The Hanz brothers were well known as ruthless hunters for the king. They captured and, according to the stories told in taverns, killed mercilessly according to their orders, and Illirhellir was their home turf. This was beginning to feel like a trap.

Leaning back in the ruined stone archway, Mardoll gazed up to the stars, hoping for some kind of inspiration. If only mother were here, she would know what to do. But mother was long gone, Mardoll thought, remembering that her mother had not been all that much older than she was now when she had been taken from her young daughters and imprisoned for high crimes that remained nameless.

When the sisters were old enough to look for her they had searched all the archives they could find, looking for evidences of any crimes, but they could not find a single one. Finally, a few months ago, word had reached them that there was a book in Illirhellir, a record of prisoners and the reasons for which they had been placed there. There was already a buyer, a Count from overseas who was interested in the tome. They would steal the book, find what information they

could, then sell it on. They'd known at the outset that this mission would be more dangerous than most. They'd be walking into the arms of the enemy to get what they needed.

It didn't matter if they'd gone too far, Mardoll concluded. They couldn't abandon mother. They needed money and information to free her, and they would free her. Mardoll wished that Adele did not insist on being part of the schemes, but she could not have carried them out alone, and she knew full well that Adele was just as dedicated to the cause, if not more so, than she was. Having Adele by her side also made it much easier to keep an eye on her. Lord only knew what she would get up to if left to her own devices. She was in the full bloom of youthful beauty and Mardoll knew all too well that her sister would find great favor amongst men folk. Sidelong glances and muttered lecherous comments already followed her whenever she went out on the streets. Only the fierce readiness of her sister to slice off any wandering hands had kept her safe from the uncouth groping that many beautiful young women were often forced to suffer.

Somewhere in the darkness, a pebble skipped against stone floor, interrupting Mardoll's defensive thoughts and bringing her quickly back to the present moment. Adrenaline shot through her system. They were here. She didn't know how they'd found the place, and she didn't have time to think about it. Thinking about things was dangerous. She would think later. Right now, they must escape.

Without making a sound, she crept over and roused Adele. Both sisters had long ago learned to wake totally and silently when they were disturbed, so it was no surprise when, with the merest touch from Mardoll, Adele's eyes snapped open, immediately awake and alert.

In the darkness, the two sisters crouched close to the floor and listened with their entire bodies. After a life time of being chased, they no longer relied only on what their ears and eyes told them – every inch of their bodies was attuned to their surroundings. A slight musk scent alone was enough to let them know that there was at least one man invading their hideout, and a soft scuffling outside made it obvious that there were not one, but two men here. They could only be Illirhellir's famous hunters. They made no obvious sound now, but their presence was as obvious to the sisters as if they'd come in flashing lights around and stamping their feet.

Many would have crumbled at that point and given themselves up, or perhaps tried to hide themselves under the table or in an alcove in the hope that the hunters would not see them. But the Minke sisters were not like many people. They had learned long ago that the art of evasion relied heavily on movement. If one stops to hide, one is lost.

In spite of the fact that heavy shadows were already creeping towards them, escape was still possible. Silently, Mardoll gestured to a high window they'd reserved for escapes. It leads out onto surrounding rooftops, their preferred medium of travel. Rooftops were fast and provided protection from the myriad of eyes on the streets below and they put off chase by merit of being high enough to break one's neck if one fell from them.

Without needing to be told again, Adele took a run at the wall opposing the window and, leaping as high as she could up the wall, turning as her feet touched the old stone and pushing off again, catching the lower ledge of the window and hauling herself up and out of it in one smooth

movement.

“Impressive,” a dark male voice commented from the shadows.

Mardoll stopped breathing for a moment and shrank down where she was. They had been even closer than she had expected. Peeking up over the ledge of a charred old wine rack, she found herself looking directly at a pair of suit clad legs.

How in Hades had they managed to get so close before being detected? Mardoll cursed herself as her heart pounded in her chest. She had underestimated these men. She had underestimated them badly. Usually when people came to capture the sisters, they came heavily armed and in great numbers. But these two had come light and alone. She couldn't tell from where she crouched which brother was standing right next to her, or where the other one was. Suddenly, the darkness which had always been her friend was a deadly enemy.

Was there time to reach the same window? The hunter was blocking the main door where he stood, and the only other way out was down through the sewers. Mardoll didn't fancy her chances of being able to lift the heavy iron grate before the hunter was on her.

The sudden sound of a muted scuffle breaking out on the roof above them answered the question about the location of the second hunter and made her decision for her. Adele was in trouble. With a sudden burst of protective speed, Mardoll launched herself towards the wall, barely missing the outstretched arm of the hunter, whose sudden cry of surprise told her that he had not known where she was any more than she had seen him coming.

It was too late for him to catch her, she had already z- turned and launched herself towards the deep blue portal beyond which the sounds of Adele doing her best to fight off the other hunter could still be heard.

Mardoll came barreling out of the window at high speed, launched like a jumping monkey and hurled herself at the dark bulk of the man who even now was trying to drag Adele off the roof. She connected to his body with a hard kidney punch that made him not only release Adele, but reel backwards in pained surprise.

There was only one command she needed to give. “Run.”

“Behind you” Adele warned Mardoll a moment before a pair of strong arms caught her around the waist.

“Run!” Mardoll screamed. The situation was now bad, two against two. The Minke sisters were not fighters, they were evaders. They would not win in a two on two. She was lost. All that mattered now was ensuring that her baby sister was not captured.

Twisting in the man's grasp and cursing the fact that she did not have her knife on her; Mardoll bit him as hard as she could. Immediately she drew blood. He swore, but his grip did not loosen in the slightest. As she struggled, she saw Adele hesitate for a moment, almost long enough for

the second hunter to recover and lay hands on her again.

“For fuck's sake, get the hell out of here before I kick your ass!” Mardoll shouted aggressively.

Faced with two foes and an angry older sister who had always called the shots, Adele did not wait any longer, she took to her heels with her customary speed and grace. The weakened Hanz brother tried to go after her but he was still reeling from Mardoll's well placed blow and he had no hope in catching up with the young woman who vaulted lightly across the open roof spaces and was all too quickly lost from view.

“Leave her. We've got what we need.” A gruff voice above Mardoll's head spoke, provoking her into another fit of evasive wriggling. She bit, she kicked, she threw herself around and did her best to reach the man's most sensitive places, but he was well trained and all she got for her trouble were aches and pains inflicted on her from trying to fight a man of stone.

“Relax.” The command was uttered in her ear.

Mardoll laughed bitterly. “Relax? Are you fucking insane?”

“That's no way for a lady to talk,” her captor remarked mildly.

Mardoll began to struggle again, but chloroform on a soaked 'kerchief applied delicately to her face soon put an end to that.

## Chapter Two

From a comfortable armchair in a well secured room. Frederich pulled on a cigar and regarded his captive with quiet pleasure. She was stirring now, moving slightly. He had her unbound; she was of no flight risk, not in this well appointed but highly secure cell.

At first one would have been forgiven for thinking that it was not a cell at all. Indeed, it bore more resemblance to a private lady's boudoir than a jail. The bed his captive laid on was merely a single bed, but it was covered in fine cream colored silk sheets and the pillows were stuffed with the softest goose down. The walls of the room were paneled with dark wood and the floor was covered in a deep green baize carpet. The arm chair Frederich sat in was dark plush velvet, perhaps a little too plush for his tastes. He did not like things to be so soft, but he knew very well that the fairer sex often appreciated little luxuries.

He was rather enjoying watching Miss Mardoll Minke sleep. When awake she was a rather feral mass of flailing limbs and flashing eyes. In sleep her face took on all the sweetness of a porcelain doll. It was a pleasure to watch her shapely bosom rise and fall, even in the simple shirt she wore, which Frederich was fairly certain, must have originally belonged to a man at one point or another.

“Mardoll, my doll, whatever shall we do with you?” He murmured to himself, casting his mind back to the moment of capture. What a triumph it had been to finally have her in his grasp, to feel her shapely, strong body in his arms. This woman inspired a rather strange emotion in him. He was used to being inspired to passion by beautiful women, indeed he rather enjoyed indulging in their company on a regular basis, but Mardoll Minke inspired something besides the usual intrigue and lust with which he regarded the fairer sex – she inspired respect.

Frederich was forced to put his idle thoughts on hold as Mardoll began to fight her way back to consciousness. His captive's eyelashes fluttered a few times, and then she was awake all of a sudden, leaping into life. She laid eyes on him almost immediately and made a hissing sound like a feral kitten as she sat up quickly and curled her body back against the corner of the room. Her eyes darted around quickly, looking for some means of escape, but of course, there was none.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Minke,” Frederich said with a charming smile. He did not move from his cross legged position in his chair. He wanted to appear non-threatening, after all, he could use her help in capturing her sister and the woman was quite wound up enough as it was.

At his words, she turned her feral eyes on him. When she looked at him with her furious green gaze, it was like being kicked in the stomach. She was goddamned beautiful, though it was a different kind of beauty to the primped and pampered kind that Frederich was used to. It was a beauty that came from a life lived in utter rebellion, and whilst Frederich certainly wouldn't abide that now, he could still admire the woman it had created.

“This is a pretty cell for a prisoner set to be hanged,” Mardoll said bitterly.

Frederich smiled slowly. He had no intention of letting that lily white neck go to the noose, but she did not need to know that yet.

“We like to keep our guests in comfort.”

“How very kind of you,” Mardoll bit back with dripping sarcasm.

“I hope your stay here will be a pleasant one, Miss Minke,” he said, leaning forward in his seat, his blue gaze earnest.

“I hope my stay here will be a short one,” Mardoll rejoined.

He could not blame her for her anger. The Minkes had not been captured before; it stood to reason that the elder of the pair would blame herself for her situation. Her anger at herself would most likely be directed outwards however. Something would have to be done about that before she could be pressed into helping them find her younger sister, the sister she had sacrificed herself to save.

“Are you hungry?”

Mardoll looked at him with mistrust. “A little,” she admitted after a moment or two.

Frederich pressed a button on a shiny brass pad of buttons that sat on the little glass table next to him.

“Some vittles, if you would be so kind,” he spoke to it.

“Right away, Sir,” another voice replied, floating through the air from the box.

Mardoll had tilted her head to the side and was gazing at the entire process in utter confusion.

“What magic is that?”

Frederich allowed himself a small smile of amusement. “It is not magic, my dear, it is technology.”

“Tik-no-ligy?” Mardoll tried to form the strange word. “I am not your dear,” she snapped as an afterthought.

“Technology, yes,” Frederich graciously ignored her snapping. “It allows me, in this case, to communicate with members of my household staff at a distance.”

“Never heard of such a thing,” Mardoll said suspiciously, as if he might be making the whole thing up.

There was a tap on the door and a tray was slid through a brass slot onto a little ledge that slid out for the purpose. Frederich stood and took the tray in his hands. "Well, as you can see, it works admirably well."

"Hmph," Mardoll replied, watching ravenously as he placed the tray on a low table and removed the lid, revealing freshly cut fruits and pastries.

Frederich felt a small pang when he saw the way she looked at the food. She was thin... too thin. Clearly a life of running had taken a toll on her. Somewhere in his breast, a protective sentiment was beginning to breed.

"Ladies first," he said kindly, pushing the small table over to the bed that she might be able to reach the food without approaching him too closely. He could see in her eyes that although she was putting on a brave face, she was afraid. Indeed she had reason to be. If the authorities got wind of the fact that he had captured her, they would surely have been battering at his doors, demanding he release the infamous Minke sister into their custody.

She picked at the food, glancing nervously up at him between bites until he could stand it no longer.

"I will leave you to your repast, my lady," he said graciously, standing and bowing out of the door,

The moment he was gone Mardoll she ran to the door, but the handle would not move for her. She frowned, slamming the door with the flat of her palm. What trickery was this? Perhaps it was more of that Tiknology Frederich had spoken about.

With no obvious means of escape open to her, she returned to the tray of food and began eating voraciously. She was hungry indeed. Their latest mission had seen them skulking day and night and that meant very little time to buy food or even steal it from the street carts in the markets.

When her stomach was full, she turned her attention to the other aching void within her. She had been captured, but Adele was still free; though all alone. Though she knew that Adele was fully grown and more than capable of taking care of herself, Mardoll still remembered her as the wide eyed little girl who had clutched at her hand and asked where their mother had gone.

Fighting back anger, Mardoll tried to calm herself. She needed to find a way out, and raging wouldn't get her out. Raging would only anger her captors, who, for the moment, were doing their best to make nice with her.

Sitting back on the comfortable bed, Mardoll tried to make the best of a bad situation. She thought about Frederich. He had not bothered to introduce himself; he probably knew very well that she knew who he was. The file on the Hanz brothers had still been sitting out when Frederich and Seph had arrived to capture her and her sister.

Was Frederick perhaps the weak point? Could she somehow manipulate him into freeing her? Certainly he had made her comfortable that was a good start. But there was something in his eyes that told her he was not a native pushover. In fact, thinking about that icy gaze made her tremble a little. He was a foe to be reckoned with, no matter how polite or charming he might be. She had to keep her guard up. She had to get out of there.

“How is she?” Seph's wicked grin belied the pain he was in. The eldest Minke had done a pretty damn good job of putting him out of commission for a short while, but he wasn't the type to hold grudges. All was fair in love and capture according to Seph.

Frederick shrugged as he poked the fire in the grate of the office the brothers shared. “She's awake and eating.”

“Then why do you look like somebody kicked your favorite puppy?” Seph teased. Frederick always had been the more serious one of the two brothers, but he surely had no reason to be serious now. They had captured one of the sisters. Now all they had to do was wait for the other one to try some kind of daring rescue; easy.

“I don't feel right about this one,” Frederick admitted, decanting some fine brandy into a glass. “It feels wrong.”

“Because she's pretty?” Seph teased.

Frederick raised a brow in his younger brother's direction. “So you noticed?”

Seph grinned and raised his glass to his brother. “To more cases like this one; I could get used to chasing beauties about the place.”

“Could you get used to consigning them to death?”

Seph's face fell. “Well, that part of things is admittedly less enjoyable.”

The discussion was interrupted by the appearance of Jakes, a faithful old fellow who had carried the meals and prepped the maids and turned down the tablecloths for as long as the Hanz brothers could remember. He was an eternally poker faced old gentleman with a bow tie sitting directly under his chin and an effervescent twinkle in his eye that gave him an ageless quality.

“Excuse me Sirs,” the esteemed old fellow coughed gently. “I think your prisoner may be escaping.”

“What?” Frederick laughed, resting his elbow on the mantle. “That's not possible.”

“I'm afraid it is possible sir, you see, you appear to have left the control pad in the room with

Miss Minke, who appears to be a rather quick study, sir.”

“Damn! Damn and blast!” Frederich slammed his tumbler down. He had not given two thoughts to the pad. She hadn't even known what it was, how could she possibly have used it? She had used the situation to her advantage, there had to be some way for him to do the same thing. He thought quickly, his mind whirring through thoughts quicker than even he was aware of them.

“Sir, she appears to be making good her escape,” Jakes intoned mildly.

Click. The plan fell into place.

“Let her escape,” Frederich smiled darkly.

It had been an accident, of course. Left alone in the room with no obvious route of escape, Mardoll had settled down next to the strange brass covered box and begun pressing the little buttons in no particular order. There had been a variety of clicks and hums about the place and then suddenly, a particular and fairly familiar click nearby. The door had opened!

Mardoll wasted no time in leaving her little prison and creeping down the dark halls of her captor's home. What kind of man had a dungeon built into his residence? A dangerous one, she thought to herself.

To her disappointment, there were no windows in the dark halls and something about the place gave Mardoll the distinct impression that she was underground. At least it was quiet down there, quiet enough that she was sure she would hear anybody if they came, and the winding corridors also provided some means of secreting herself should she need to do so.

After a few minutes of wandering around, she found some stairs that lead upwards. Standing between her and this stairway to freedom was a pair of very solid doors. A small glass panel in each of them allowed her to see through far enough to determine that she was undoubtedly looking at the means of her salvation, but the doors would not open. Indeed, they would not budge even when she put her shoulder to them. Even more strangely, there were no handles to pull or locks to pick on either side of the doors as far as she could tell.

Perplexed, Mardoll looked around for some means of opening the doors by force. There was very little in the hall, but her gaze did alight upon another small brass plaque with similar buttons to the one that had been in her room. What had she pressed last time? Furrowing her brow, Mardoll began working away at the plaque, pressing the buttons in what she hoped was the same manner she had pressed them in her room earlier. Her initial efforts resulted in very little, but a few tried later there was a soft buzz. With a satisfying series of clicks, the doors slid open for her and Mardoll was free to seize the next obstacle between her and her freedom – the stairs.

This was the dangerous part. You were always exposed when heading upstairs. Always. Anyone could be waiting above. In this case, the only thing for it was to take the stairs as quickly as

possible, which she did in a few leaping bounds before secreting herself in a large pot plant.

Already this new level of the building looked better. Sunlight streamed in windows, promising escape. Out of the windows, Mardoll saw a high cast iron fence armed with many high spiking points. That would be enough to deter a typical criminal, but Mardoll was not a typical criminal. The fence couldn't have been less of an obstacle to her if it were made of cotton candy.

“Time to get out of here,” Mardoll said, smiling grimly. Picking up a small, but handy pot plant, she hefted it through the window, sending glass shards shattering everywhere. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she cleared the remnants of glass out of the frame with the solid sole of her boot and then leaped out the window, vaulted over the fence and disappeared into the streets full of people who wouldn't have given her a second glance if she'd paid them to.

Mardoll was thinking of only one thing – finding Adele and getting the hell out of the city. She had suspected that they were walking into a trap, and this only confirmed her suspicion. Perhaps the book would bring them closer to getting mother released, perhaps not, but it wouldn't matter if they were in prison – or worse. It was time to get right out of town; time to lie low for a time, time to regroup.

If Mardoll hadn't been so concerned with finding her sister, she might have paid more attention to the fact that she was being tracked inexorably by two lean hunting machines, two men who enjoyed the thrill of the chase more than anything else in life.

Her hurried glances over her shoulder every now and again were not enough to spot Frederick or Seph, who blended into the crowd seamlessly, following at enough of a distance that the bustling public acted like a moving disguise, allowing them to track their panicked quarry easily.

Mardoll knew where she was going – to the place she and Adele had agreed to meet if anything should go wrong – at the train station, where they would regroup and make their escape from the city.

If only she had taken a little more care to double back on her route as she normally would have done. If only she had paused in her hurried rush to take stock of the situation. But she was panicked, thoroughly panicked. Being captured had struck a deep fear in her heart. So she rushed towards Adele, who she could already see waiting for her on the platform they'd agreed upon, a curved figure in an oversized trench coat and a wide brimmed hat that hid her features from the eyes of the world.

As Mardoll approached, Adele looked up towards her and smiled. Mardoll smiled back, but her smile faded when she saw Adele's expression change from relief to fear. What was she afraid of? It was all okay now.

Reaching out for her sister, Mardoll tugged her into action. “Come on, the ten o'clock to 'let's get the hell out of here awaits!’”

“Mar....” Adele still looked stunned.

“What?” Mardoll turned around to see what it was that her sister was gaping at.

Approaching through the bustling crowd were two tall, familiar figures; Frederick and Seph Hanz. They seemed to melt out of the people. Now that they wished to be seen, they were all that could be seen, two dangerous wolves finally emerging from the flock.

Frederick's expression was one of pure determination and perhaps recrimination. Seph on the other hand, slightly less broad than his brother, and a great deal less intense than he, winked at Adele as if he were a suitor.

The color drained from Mardoll's face as she backed away. “Run Adele,” she urged in low tones. “Go North, I'll go south.”

Adele did not need telling twice, she ducked north even as Mardoll burst out in a Southerly direction, but it was too late. Trapped between two trains, they did not have the space to escape their hunters. In fact, the moment the sisters began to run, the brothers exploded with bursts of far superior speed.

As Mardoll and Adele clawed through the crowd, both looking for an opportunity to climb, to escape by means of their superior agility, they were caught by the brothers. Adele was caught first, gripped by the upper arm by Seph, whose bright blue eyes smiled down at her.

“Milady, what a pleasure to make your acquaintance again,” he said, sweeping her backwards over his arm and claiming her mouth in a deep and thoroughly inappropriate kiss. Adele did her best to fight him, but though he was not as brawny as his brother, Seph was far stronger than her and he held her firm as he escorted her out of the train station, making the capture look for the entire world like the aftermath of a lover's quarrel. Adele could perhaps have fought him a little harder, but she appeared to have been more dazed by his kiss and his touch than she would have been had he knocked her over the head.

Mardoll did not go so easily. When Frederick's hand descended on her shoulder, she kicked him as hard as she could and did her best to inflict a serious bite wound. Neither gambit worked, he simply moved aside to let her kick pass him by and when she attempted to bite him she was rewarded with the thick fabric of his suit pressed into her mouth as he pressed his forearm against her open jaws.

Squealing with anger, Mardoll knew precisely what he was doing. She'd seen this technique used to stop biting before – in puppy dogs that didn't know better. She colored crimson with embarrassment as Frederick stepped behind her and lowered his head to murmur in her ear.

“Will you come nicely, Miss Minke, or would you prefer to continue making a scene?”

Mardoll grunted curses into the suit sleeve that seemed to be quickly forcing its way halfway down her throat, then squealed with outrage as a new source of embarrassment and pain was added to the mix. Behind her, Frederick had drawn his hand back and then brought it down hard

across her cheeks, slapping her bottom in front of all the people who had turned to see what was going on.

“I can spank you all the way home, would you like that?” he purred in her ear.

Mardoll shook her head. She did not want that at all. He had won this battle. She had to go with him regardless – he had Adele, and there was no way she would leave Adele to the tender mercies of these dangerous men.

At the first sign of assent, Frederich removed his forearm from her bite and took her firmly by the hand instead. Around them, people were whispering and giggling. “Right this way, milady,” Frederich said with customary charm, leading Mardoll back to the prison from which she had escaped.

## Chapter Three

Back in the safety of his home, Frederich felt better. With his two pretty prisoners lined up before him with expressions of churlish rebellion on their faces, he now had to determine the best course of action. It was entirely possible that they had been seen by someone important at the train station – indeed, if they had not been seen and reported to one authority or another it would be a minor miracle. The authorities would no doubt be paying him a visit soon. It was imperative that the Minkes be subdued to the good, and quickly if they were not to head to the gallows.

Running a critical gaze over the pair, it was clear how the dynamic worked between them and who the leader was. Even now Adele was clinging to her older sister's arm, doing her best to fight back tears. She might have been adept in the ways of crime, but she was far from a hardened criminal. The younger Minke seemed far more intimidated than the older, perhaps without Mardoll's influence she might be convinced quite easily to behave herself.

At any rate, it was clear that the sisters could not be suffered to share the same quarters. Together they were unbreakable. Apart, there was some hope that they might come to see reason.

“Separate them,” Frederich ordered cruelly.

“No!” Mardoll cried, reaching for her sister, who immediately burst into tears.

“Please Sir, please don't,” Adele begged Seph, who came forward to take her away.

Seph wore a pained expression. “It will be okay, I assure you,” he reassured the weeping young woman. “You will see your sister soon enough and she will not be harmed,” he said, looking over Adele's head at Frederich with a pointed expression.

Frederich nodded curtly replying, “Of course not.” He was secretly pleased to note the way that Adele rested her head on Seph's chest as he lead her from the room. The young lady had already taken quite a shine to his younger brother, that much was obvious. He could now afford to turn his attention to the more troublesome of the pair.

“You will regret this; you will regret this I swear!” Mardoll declared, glowering at him fiercely.

“Turn us in and we will escape and you will not rest again. I will hunt you down.”

“Listen to me, Miss Minke,” Frederich said in deep, authoritative tones, ignoring her threat for the moment. “I do not wish to turn you over to the authorities.”

“You don't?” The revelation seemed to surprise Mardoll greatly.

“I don't. I intend instead to take you as my wife.”

“As your... wife,” Mardoll repeated him incredulously.

“Quite, I will take you as Seph will take Adele. In that fashion, you will be safe from the consequences of the state.”

Mardoll laughed. “We are not women of the marrying kind, Mr. Hanz.”

“Don't worry, you will be,” Frederich assured her with a charming smile.

“And how will you explain to your friends that you have married women who are not allowed to leave the house for fear they will run away?” Mardoll mocked the idea.

Frederich's eyes gleamed with some secret. “I won't have to worry about such matters. You will not run away.”

“I won't? How very interesting. And why, pray tell, will my sister and I not escape?” Mardoll looked up into Frederich's clear blue gaze with amusement on her beautiful features. “It is not exactly a difficult task, as I recall,” she said, reminding him of how easily she had escaped the first time he had attempted to keep her against his will.

Frederich leaned down and the timbre of his deep voice traveled through Mardoll, making her shiver with the words, “Because you'll know better.”

Again, Mardoll seemed to miss his point entirely. “Do you intend to always speak to your wife as if she were a particularly troublesome child?”

“I do not. I expect that my wife will learn to take her place by my side with good grace.”

“It will never happen,” Mardoll declared. “I am leaving now, and I am taking my sister with me.”

Frederich looked at her sternly. “I really must insist that you forget any such plans, they are more dangerous than you know. There are many who wish you dead.”

“I am very well aware of that, Frederich,” Mardoll replied with disdain. “There have been many wishing me dead for quite some time.”

Frederich's expression grew more grim. Why wouldn't this blasted woman see what was good for her?

“You are under my protection now,” he informed her. “And you will do as you are told.”

“I most certainly will not,” Mardoll replied, drawing herself up to her full height.

“You certainly will, or you will not like the consequences,” Frederich threatened softly.

“What? Will you beat me? Is that the sort of man you are after all?” Mardoll's upper lip curled in distaste.

“I will not beat you, my dear. I will take you over my lap and see that you understand where your place is.”

It took a moment or two for Mardoll to come to some understanding of what Frederich was saying. He could all but see the pretty cogs turning in her head. When realization dawned, it did so with a fierce blush that made her look entirely adorable.

“You certainly will not,” she choked.

“I certainly will,” Frederich replied smoothly. “But now, it is time for bed. You have had a big day.” He did not wait for the inevitable disagreement that he was sure that statement would bring; instead he simply took Miss Mardoll Minke by the hand and lead her back downstairs to the secure area she had escaped from earlier that day.

To her credit, she did not attempt to fight him this time. She followed him to the new room set aside for her, a room which was fitted not with the electronic locking system she had managed to crack earlier, but which was secured with a good old fashioned heavy lock and key.

“In you go, my dear,” he urged her gently, guiding her into the room with his palm on the small of her back.

“You may use the intercom here to communicate if you have any needs,” he said, showing her the small metal grille and the button that operated it. “You are familiar with these types of machinery, I believe.” He arched his brow down at her and for a moment, thought he saw a hint of a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“I will see you in the morning,” he said. “Sleep well.”

He left the room with a chivalrous bow and made sure to lock the door very securely indeed. This time she should be safe. A keypad could be hacked, but it was much harder to hack sturdy lock, he mused to himself.

Seph was waiting in the office upstairs when he arrived, striding back and forth as if he were determined to wear through the rug. Frederich regarded his brother's state with no small measure of surprise. Seph never looked concerned as a rule.

“How is Adele?” Frederich inquired.

“Tearful, she wishes to be with her sister,” Seph replied, his brow furrowed.

Ah, so that was it. Frederick shook his head at his younger brother. “Do not let her wrap you around her little finger just yet.”

Seph smiled slightly. “Do not worry about me in that regard. Pray tell, how is your hellion?”

Shaking his head, Frederick stepped over to the monitor that took pictures of the cell and sent them upstairs where they might be viewed in rapid succession, creating the illusion of a moving picture. Now that she was alone, Mardoll sat on the bed with her legs curled up under her. She looked tired, Frederick thought; Tired and small. His heart went out to her, he knew very well the stresses associated with being hunted, and to think that this woman had endured these stresses almost all her life. It was no wonder that she was so prickly.

“She will be fine,” he said with his typical reserve.

“I think that one would be fine in a volcano – nothing touches her,” Seph observed. “I can't say I envy you there. She will wear your palm down to a nub.” He laughed heartily at his own joke, and Frederick laughed too.

“Just you worry about your own lady, little brother. I doubt she is as delicate as she appears.”

Twisting the bedclothes between her fingers, Mardoll worried over her situation. She had already tried the door, it was firmly locked and as usual, there were no windows in the room. She was concerned, deeply concerned, and not just for herself, but for her sister. Poor Adele, she was imprisoned in the same way, all alone. Mardoll's brow was deeply furrowed as she pondered a way to get out of the place with her sister.

With no thoughts coming to mind on that score, she let her mind drift to Frederick Hanz, the man who had declared his intention to make her his wife. When he had captured her for the second time, along with her sister she had thought only of doing him violence. If only she had her knife. If only.

But Frederick was not afraid of her, and why should he be? He was obviously an accomplished weapons man, had an admirable grasp of this newfangled technology and physically he was superior to most men. He was possessed of an admirably broad chest, brawny arms and long, athletic legs. She imagined that he had never had to fear anyone. Why would he fear a woman?

Reaching over, she turned out the lights and lay in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. Mardoll was used to being alone, but this was a new kind of alone – a kind of alone that mixed with helplessness to create a veritable void in her gut. Yet again, she cast her mind back over the years to that fateful day when the soldiers had come and torn apart everything she'd ever known.

“Mother...” she whispered. “Where are you?”

In a separate wing, Adele was not nearly as alone as Mardoll. Unlike Frederick, who had elected to leave Mardoll to her own devices for the evening, Seph had decided that he wanted to get to know his future bride a great deal better.

Adele watched him with interest as he entered the boudoir in which she was ensconced. He smiled at her and she smiled back. He was a handsome fellow, only a couple of years older than her. He looked a great deal like his brother, but he did not have his brother's severe expression. She much preferred him due to that fact alone. She certainly didn't envy Mardoll having to deal with the other big brute, though she had no doubt that Mardoll would be equal to the task. Adele had never known Mardoll to be unequal to any task.

"I trust you are well?" Seph inquired, slinging himself into an arm chair.

"Tolerably well," Adele replied. Once she conquered her initial fears, she discovered that she was not nearly as concerned as Mardoll was at being captured. Perhaps it was because she knew her elder sister was not far away, or perhaps it was because this golden haired man had captured her imagination almost from the moment she first laid eyes on him. Adele was a young woman, a woman full of passion yet to be indulged. Mardoll made a very efficient chaperone, and as much as Adele had wanted to pursue the company of men over the years, her protective elder sibling had often stood in her way. Now she saw a chance to discover what her body told her it was missing.

"You do not seem afraid, that is good," Seph noted, resting his long arm along the back of the armchair and fixing her with a half quizzical look.

"Do I need to be afraid?" Adele inquired sweetly.

"Of course not, we are gentlemen after all," Seph grinned in a manner that suggested he clung to gentlemanly ideals only barely.

Fluttering her eyelashes in a maidenly display of vulnerability, Adele asked the question that mattered. "Will you hand us over to the authorities?"

"And lose the pleasure of your company? Never!" Seph charmed.

The pair smiled at each other for long moments, mooning into one another's eyes. "So am I to remain locked up in your chambers for all time, a prisoner to your whims?" Adele asked as a smile played across her lips. She stood up and walked towards Seph, perching her curved young body on the arm of his chair and looking down at him coquettishly. For a young woman who had never been allowed to spend much time in the company of men, Adele possessed an impressive talent of seduction. Perhaps it was her mother's blood that ran through her so strongly, making her high irresistible to men.

"That prospect is not entirely unpleasant, I must admit," Seph admitted, allowing himself to

stroke Adele's arm with the tips of his fingers. She had shed her trench coat and now wore a sleeveless fitted tunic and tight, dark pants that hugged every curve. His pupils dilated with desire, trying to take her all in.

Adele allowed him to touch her soft skin for a few moments before moving slightly and depriving him of her body once more. He growled softly, instantly understanding what the little minx was up to.

“So you like to play games, do you dear?”

Adele giggled softly. She was enjoying his attentions a great deal.

“I will take that as a yes, naughty girl.” He purred the chastising words, making Adele blush. “What shall I do with such a very naughty girl?”

He reached for her again and this time she did not pull away as he guided her gently first onto his lap and then over it. She shot a questioning look over her shoulder at him as he held her with her rump placed high over his thighs. He ran his strong hand over her upturned cheeks and smiled down at her reassuringly.

“Let me show you what I do with naughty girls,” he said, slapping her rump just hard enough to sting, but not nearly hard enough to cause any real pain.

Adele half squealed, half giggled and continued to look over her shoulder with a pout on her pretty face as Seph spanked her so gently indeed that what he was doing could barely be called love taps.

“Are you learning your lesson?” he asked her with mock sternness.

“Oh yes Sir, I promise I'll be good,” Adele giggled breathlessly.

“I am sure you will be,” Seph growled as he swept her back up onto his lap and claimed her in a deep, passionate kiss.

“Miss Minke, would you do me the honor of joining me for dinner?”

It had been three long days since Mardoll had seen anyone. It had been three long days of having dinner trays pushed through the slot in the door, three long days of worrying about her sister. Now Frederick Hanz was standing in the open doorway dressed in a spotless tuxedo as if he weren't some kind of monster. As if he were a gracious host concerned about his guest's well being. What a joke, Mardoll thought to herself as she looked him over. His hands were in his pockets and he lounged against one side of the door frame casually. His hair hung around his ears in a shaggy, attractive sort of way, setting off the broad line of his jaw in a way that was both masculine and very appealing. All of this only served to incense Mardoll completely.

“Fuck you,” Mardoll growled. She was not in the mood for dinner invitations. She was in the mood for murder.

Frederich loosed one of his hands from its pocket and held it up in a placating fashion. “Before you become too incensed, my dear, you should know that your lovely sister will also be in attendance.”

Mardoll did not need asking twice. “Let's go.”

“Would you like to change for dinner?” Frederich asked, running a critical eye over the rumpled, dirty shirt she still wore. There was a bath and a closet in the room, but aside from cursory inspection to gauge their contents, Mardoll had not bothered herself with them. She was not there to look pretty, she was there as a prisoner.

“No,” Mardoll said simply, pushing past him brusquely. He wrinkled his nose in distaste as she went past, but did not repeat the offer. He lead her quite graciously to a dining room, a room Mardoll noted was underground in the secured area of his home.

It was a fine room done up in the French style with pleasant white and blue paneling and a charming long glass table. As he had promised, Adele was already there, as was Seph. Mardoll's eyes lit up at the sight of her sister as she rushed into the room and crouched down before her.

“Adele, are you okay?” she asked, her eyes filled with concern.

“I am fine, Mardoll,” Adele replied, clasping her sister's hand.

As the initial burst of relief at seeing her sister in one piece faded, Mardoll frowned. There was something wrong. Adele was smiling, and not a false smile that would indicate some kind of trickery being afoot, but a genuine smile of warmth. She was... happy. Mardoll's eyes narrowed. She had expected to have to comfort an upset sister. Finding Adele instead curled up in the bosom of her enemy did not please Mardoll in the slightest.

“What's going on?” she said, standing up and backing away from her sister. For the first time she noticed how Seph had his arm laid over the back of Adele's chair, and how Adele was leaning towards him.

The pieces fell into place almost instantly. Mardoll had survived so long because she possessed the important talents of observation and deduction. Though a casual observer might not have picked it, Mardoll saw it as plain as if it had been engraved in the wall over the young couple's heads.

“You *slept* with him? How could you!” Mardoll was furious with her younger sister. She placed her hands on her hips and glowered down at her younger sibling.

“Mardoll...” Adele tried to explain, but Mardoll was in no mood for explanations. She was in no mood for seeing everything she had worked so hard for – their freedom, their very lives, being thrown away in a fit of maidenly lust.

“How could you!” Mardoll repeated herself.

“Seph wants to marry me, Mardoll,” Adele said defensively, leaning further back into the sheltering embrace of Seph's body. Seph and Frederich exchanged glances, but remained silent as Mardoll berated her younger sister.

“Don't be ridiculous. You can't marry him! We're supposed to be escaping – not shacking up like two bit whores!”

Mardoll's harsh words elicited an equally strong response from her sister. Emotional dams were crumbling, and Adele could hold back her feelings no longer. “I'm tired of running, Mar! I'm tired of being afraid and alone and scared!” Adele's eyes brimmed with tears.

Mardoll looked furiously around her sister and allowed her anger to land squarely on Seph's shoulders. “You! You took advantage of her! I am going to kill you!”

“Mardoll, no!” Adele begged.

The scene was quickly becoming dramatic in the extreme. Frederich approached Mardoll and placed a placating hand on her shoulder. “Mardoll, sit down,” he said calmly.

“You sit down!” Mardoll rounded on Frederich angrily.

A muscle twitched in Frederich's jaw. He was clearly not used to such impudence from the women in his life. “That is enough Mardoll. I would like for you to join us for a pleasant dinner. If that is not possible, you can return to your room and I will deal with you afterward.”

“You'll *deal* with me?” Mardoll was as incredulous as she was incensed. “I'll deal with you!”

She raised her hand to hit him, but viper-quick, he caught her wrist and spun her around so that her arm was now behind her back.

“We will be doing this the hard way, I see,” he murmured in her ear.

“Let me go,” she growled in response. It was pointless however, she found herself being marched back to her room like a petulant child being denied dinner. Seph and Adele watched her go and she shot them both angry looks. The traitor and the seducer, cuddling up together. Disgusting.

She didn't bother ranting as Frederich half walked, half carried her back to the cell she'd been stuck in for days. She knew well enough where his loyalties lay. At least he had loyalties, unlike

her sister.

“You can think about what you've done. I will see to you later,” Frederich said darkly before closing the door behind himself and leaving Mardoll all alone once more.

Dinner seemed to take forever. Mardoll wondered what was going on out there. Why had Adele turned on her so easily? If she had not wanted to take part in their missions, she had but to say the word. Feeling confused and more alone than ever, Mardoll sat on her bed with her head in her hands. How had her whole life gone so completely wrong?

For so long they had been on a roll. They had been making serious progress towards saving mother. And at the very first opportunity to shack up with some pretty boy, Adele had taken the chance. Very well, she had made her choice. That made things simpler in a fashion. She would leave Adele with her chosen lover and continue on her mission alone. The next opportunity she got, she would escape.

“I guess we're on our own now, Mother,” Mardoll murmured. She wasted no further thoughts on Adele, now her only thought could be of escape.

A time later, the door opened. True to her plan, Mardoll did not waste time with banter or false pleasantries. She rushed towards Frederich with a cry of fury, faked to the left in order to get him off balance, then dived between his long, strong legs and made a run for freedom.

Perhaps her emotions had gotten the best of her. Perhaps she did not truly wish to escape after all, for it was far from being the best plan she had ever conceived. Frederich was on her in an instant. Mardoll wasn't even sure that he'd had to run; he seemed to simply reach over and pluck her off the ground. He certainly wasted no time bundling her back into her room where he plopped her down on the bed, secured the door, and then looked down at her with a severe expression.

“Running won't help you now, my girl,” he said.

“But it would have helped you, because now I'm going to have to hurt you,” Mardoll promised aggressively.

Frederich's response was not what she had expected. He sighed deeply and looked down at her not with anger, but with some measure of sadness.

“Mardoll, why must you act this way? I am trying to help you.”

“It doesn't help me to be locked in a room,” Mardoll argued.

“It does when you would otherwise be running around the city streets probably getting caught,” he pointed out. “You don't understand. Things have changed. The authorities are out for blood

where your sister and you are concerned.”

Frowning, Mardoll tried to think. Could he genuinely be trying to help? Could Adele and Seph genuinely have found a love connection, and so quickly? Her cynically hardened heart had a hard time believing it.

“Hmm. Okay,” she said thoughtfully.

“Indeed,” Frederich said in stern tones. “While you're processing that, let's deal with your behavior at dinner. It was totally unacceptable.”

“Don't talk to me like I'm some kind of idiot child,” Mardoll snapped.

“Well then don't behave like one,” Frederich replied harshly, sitting down next to her. Mardoll attempted to get up, but he had already firmly grasped her by the arm and was pulling her over his lap.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I'm doing what somebody should have done long ago,” Frederich said grimly.

“Before or after they abandoned me and left me for dead?” Mardoll growled back.

She felt Frederich hesitate briefly. “I know you've had it hard, Miss Minke, but your life is going to be easier from now on. Adele has accepted that. You should too.”

“Adele is little more than a silly child.”

“She is showing a great deal more maturity and common sense than her older sister,” was Frederich's short reply.

Mardoll was stung. “Go to hell!”

Frederich did not go to hell. Instead he slapped her backside as hard as he could. Mardoll arched and howled in pain. The single slap sent a jolt of pain right down to her very bones.

“Stop!”

“So soon?” Frederich rested his palm on her bottom. “Do you think one little slap is enough to punish you for the scene you made at dinner?”

“Who are you to punish me?” Mardoll asked in outrage.

“I am your future husband, remember, dear?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!”

“But you don't. Even if you have no interest in saving your skin, I will not let you walk out of here and get yourself killed,” Frederich said, slapping her backside soundly once more.

Mardoll had never been disciplined before; she had certainly never been spanked before. The fact that she was being held down and hit by the big man was at once terrifying and incredibly painful. With the thundering of his palm, she lost the ability to argue. All that was left to her to do was to wail and cry and kick her legs to try to free herself and mitigate some of the pain. It was one of the most terrible experiences of her life, one that left her heaving with sobs even when it was over.

Frederich said nothing when it was done, he simply held her as she cried, then let her scramble away when she had gathered the composure to do so.

“Why did you do that?” she eventually asked tearfully.

He smiled sympathetically. “In an effort to teach you some kind of lesson.”

“What lesson is that? That you'll beat me if you don't get your way?”

“No my dear, that your actions have consequences – and perhaps more importantly,” he mused, “that I care about your actions and will be applying those consequences.”

“I don't like it,” Mardoll sniffed.

“That's the idea,” he nudged her with a warm smile. “Now come here.”

Mardoll didn't go there, but she did allow herself to be pulled into his embrace and to feel the strength of his chest. So this was what Adele wanted, was it? The sheltering arms of a man, the knowledge that she would be taken care of?

Shaking her head, Mardoll pulled away. “I can't.”

“Why not?”

“Because... mother...”

Frederich's expression cleared into understanding, though he did not seem pleased. “You are still concerned about your mother.”

“Yes.” It was an understatement. She was more than concerned about her mother, ever since the soldiers had taken mother away, Mardoll had sought her out. Her entire life had been lived in the service of the woman she could only barely remember; even now she only had a fuzzy recollection of what her mother looked like.

## Chapter Four

Life had changed, but Mardoll had not. In spite of the humanity Frederick demonstrated in their conversation following her first taste of discipline in well over two decades, he was iron firm in his determination that they be married and that she would play the part of the submissive wife.

Mardoll continued to rebel, but knowing the cause of her rebellion brought Frederick some peace of mind. He watched her more often than she knew, though he had abandoned the cameras now that he was sure she was not going to do anything direly desperate. He insisted on spending time with her in the quiet of evenings, at dinner times, and even sometimes during the day.

He thought of it like the process of taming a wild animal. Mardoll had never learned to trust anyone, and unlike her younger sister, who had at the very least been sheltered under Mardoll's wing, Mardoll had taken the brunt of the blows life had dealt the sisters.

She was bright though, and witty once she let her guard down a little. She still refused to talk to Adele, a fact which caused the poor young woman no end of pain, but in spite of the difficulties caused by her sister, Adele was adjusting quickly to her new life. She adored the pretty dresses Seph showered her with, and she often took dinner with the brothers, unlike Mardoll, who was still determined to sulk in her room alone.

Adele was a cheeky young thing, and once she became comfortable with Seph, who had never had any cause to impart serious discipline, she soon became rather boisterous.

Frederick enjoyed observing dinner time protocol. It was a time to chat politely about the day's events, to discuss politics, and to enjoy the company of friends and family. For Adele, it was more a chance to flirt with her affianced lover and tease his stern older brother.

Frederick was sharing his views on the current regime one evening when Adele, who had no real interest in politics, but plenty in stirring up trouble, interrupted the head of the Hanz household.

“Really Frederick, if you continue frowning that way the wind will change and you will be stuck glowering forever and little children will run from you in the street,” Adele smiled sweetly as Frederick shot her an incredulous look, then glanced over at his brother disapprovingly, as if blaming him for his fiancée’s outburst.

“Is it polite, where you come from, to interrupt people when they are speaking?” Frederick asked Adele.

“Where I come from it is considered polite if you merely leave people alive,” Adele replied, channeling her older sister's attitude, but with a much lighter delivery.

Frederick raised a brow at her, and saw the way she giggled and squirmed in her seat. Really the two sisters were just as much trouble as the other. He found himself wondering if Mardoll might

have been this naturally naughty if she had not had to grow up so fast and defend a little sister.

“Brother, your fiancée is asking for trouble,” he warned Seph.

Seph merely grinned and rested his hand on the back of Adele's neck. He began massaging her lightly as he defended her. “She is merely teasing you a little, brother.”

“That's right,” Adele agreed smugly.

Frederich's brows rose together now.

“I have a special treatment for young ladies who believe it polite to tease,” he informed the pair.

Adele looked slightly taken aback for a moment. “And what is that?” she inquired innocently.

“It is about ten inches long, a quarter of an inch thick and made of oak,” Frederich replied.

“Hm. Strange dimensions for a dildo,” Adele mused.

It was all Frederich could do to pick his jaw up off the table whilst Seph roared with laughter.

“Surely you do not intend to allow your fiancée to be so indiscreet,” Frederich chided Seph.

“Oh she is merely joking,” Seph waved his brother's objections away.

“Mirth is acceptable, however indiscreet behavior, unladylike language and outright cheek are not acceptable,” Frederich replied firmly.

“What is it you're actually threatening me with, Frederich?” Adele said pointedly, resting her pretty chin on her folded hands.

“A damn good thrashing, if you keep it up,” Frederich replied, smiling as if he rather enjoyed the prospect.

Adele blushed. “Seph would not allow you to lay a hand on me, would you Seph?” she looked to her future husband for support and saw that he too was smiling with grand amusement.

“Well if you continue to poke the bear, my dear, do not be surprised when the bear reacts,” he said.

Pouting, Adele frowned at him. “It is indelicate and inappropriate!”

“Like discussing dildos at the dinner table?” Frederich interjected.

“Damn and blast,” Adele muttered, returning her attentions to the lamb on her plate as both the brothers chuckled at her expense.

“You wouldn't really let him, would you?” she whispered to Seph during desert whilst Frederick was engaged in the heady and all consuming business of choosing the port for after dinner and was apparently out of earshot.

“Well he is the head of the household, you should show him respect, and if you do not, someone is certainly going to have to paddle your sweet behind,” Seph replied, running his hand down her back and patting the side of her cheeks.

Adele wrinkled her nose. “I don't want him to paddle me. He reminds me of a school master.”

“He used to be a prefect at school, I've no doubt he paddled many young miscreants,” Seph informed her.

Adele couldn't tell whether Seph was teasing her or not, but the question was soon resolved – by his older brother.

“Oh indeed, six of the best with the brat concerned bent over the desk – never fails to temper a wild spirit,” Frederick suddenly interjected from across the room.

“You have ears like a bat!” Adele gasped.

“Indeed,” Frederick smiled at her. “So perhaps Madame will be more inclined to behave herself during dinner time?”

“Perhaps,” Adele agreed reluctantly, cuddling into Seph's body, as if that would save her should the terrible Master of the house decide to take her to task for her cheek.

Watching with a gentle smile as Adele settled down and began to behave herself once more, Frederick cast his mind over to her sister and wished that the older Minke were so easily calmed. All it took to subdue pretty Adele was the stern threat of a spanking. Mardoll, on the other hand, took a thrashing and continued to rebel regardless. It wasn't good for her, and it wasn't good for their relationship. For one of the few times in his life, Frederick found himself envying what Seph had. Frowning to himself once more, Frederick determined that it was time Miss Mardoll was brought to heel.

He strode down to Mardoll's cell full of purpose. He was going to lay down the law. He was going to set things straight. He was going to show her once and for all that it was his way, or his way. He was going to... He was looking at an open door and an empty room. Mardoll was gone.

“Where is she?” He strode into the dining room full of controlled anger.

Adele and Seph had been in the beginning stages of canoodling on the dining room chairs and

sprang apart as he strode in. Adele hurriedly buttoned the front of her dress back up again as he glowered at her. She needn't have bothered with modesty, he wouldn't have cared if she had been entirely naked – nor would he have been interested. He had more important things to worry about it.

“Mardoll is gone?” Seph immediately joined his brother in a state of concern.

“Yes.” Frederick's eyes burned into Adele's. She was shifting in her chair, looking terribly uncomfortable. “And there's no way she could possibly have done it alone.”

Seph turned to Adele. “Do you know anything about this?”

Adele's face was quickly becoming a closed book. She did not answer. She simply sat there, staring straight ahead. Gone was the playful young woman who had teased him earlier. In her place sat an utterly composed creature, someone who was not threatened by him in the slightest. Frederick found himself wondering if this had been some sort of plan all along. Were the Minkes really that good actresses? He and Seph had made a serious error in judgment in allowing Adele free run of the place. She had fooled them both entirely. It was all he could do to not to drag her out of her chair and thrash her there and then.

“That's a yes,” Frederick said. “Where is she? Where did she go?”

Adele turned a dispassionate gaze toward him. “She is finishing the job we were contracted to do.”

“What job? Tell me everything.”

She obliged him by explaining what was going on with the manner of a schoolmarm spelling out a very simple concept to an especially slow child. “We were contracted to steal a book from the official archives. Once we turn it over to the client, we get paid.”

“And money is worth risking your sister's life over?” He was looming over her now, his palms placed flat on the table, his weight over them as he glared at the little wench.

“Mother is worth risking both our lives for,” Adele said calmly.

“Mother again. Damn it!” Frederick slammed his palm down on the table and stood up. Glaring at his brother, he pointed at Adele. “Get her out of my sight before I whip her behind so hard she won't dream of sitting for a month.”

“Come on,” Seph motioned for Adele to follow him. She did, albeit a little begrudgingly. By the way she stared daggers at Frederick, it seemed that she was tempted to try and address his attitude towards her then and there. Fortunately for her, Seph heeded his brother's warning. He had no desire to see his fiancée left to the tender mercies of his brother's idea of discipline.

As Mardoll wandered down the street towards the official archives, she wondered at why she did not feel more triumphant. Escaping from the Hanz brothers would usually have elated her – set her on a high she wouldn't come down from for weeks. For some reason however, she felt hollow inside, as if she'd left something important behind.

Doing her best to shake the feeling off, Mardoll focused on the job at hand. Get the book, deliver it to the Count, and hope that some light was shed on the situation. Was it even worth it? A sense of futility washed over her. For years they'd been trying to find information, trying to figure out where their mother was and why she had been taken. That sole goal had kept her motivated in the cold nights, on the days when they'd had no food, in the hours when it seemed easier to give up than go on.

Instead of going directly into the official archives, which loomed in imposing fashion and were surrounded by guard types, all of whom would have undoubtedly have been informed as to who she was and what she looked like, Mardoll approached a stall that sold coffee, pick pocketed a few dollars off one of the other customers waiting in line and bought herself a hot brew.

She sat down on a handy park bench and gazed up at the target from a safe distance. Inside the tall stone building was perhaps another piece of the puzzle, or perhaps a red herring. Perhaps the client who'd contracted the entire job was lying about what was really in the book. Perhaps there was no Count at all.

“You're getting paranoid,” Mardoll lectured herself soundly. She had good reason to be paranoid though – her sister was in custody and she herself had been twice captured recently. Either they were slipping or the net which had begun to close around them the moment they committed their first crime was soon to close.

She was losing focus, she knew that much. She was slipping. It wasn't good. That was how you got yourself dead. Caught up in her thoughts, Mardoll barely bothered glancing over when the bench she was sitting on dipped under the weight of another person.

“Hello, my dear.”

Mardoll smiled to herself. If she needed any more proof that she was no longer cut out for this life – that was it. This time she hadn't even heard him coming. She looked to her left and saw Frederick sitting beside her. He was wearing a long dark woolen trencher with a scarf knotted underneath his hard jaw and he was gazing straight ahead, barely looking at her.

“Hello Freddy,” she replied, taking a sip of her coffee.

They sat in silence for a time. “Is Adele okay?” Mardoll asked eventually.

“More so than she deserves to be,” Frederick replied, nodding curtly.

“I suppose you want to take me back to your lair and beat me,” she said with a sad smile.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he said, turning to look at her for the first time. There was an intense expression on his face, one that disoriented her. “I want to show you something. It will not be easy to see, but you must see it – and with your own eyes.”

A little tingle somewhere in her mind told Mardoll that this was important. “Okay,” she nodded.

Frederich offered her his arm and she took it, allowing him to steer her away from the building of official records and back onto the crowded streets. It was beginning to snow lightly, reducing visibility to a soft white haze. How strange that he now seemed to be acting as an ally.

“Why didn't you go into the offices?” he asked as they walked.

Mardoll shrugged. “Instinct?”

“You have good instincts,” he observed cryptically.

She frowned slightly. He knew something. He knew something that he was not telling her. “What's going on?”

“I want you to meet someone,” Frederich said. “Someone important.”

“Okay.” Again there was nothing to do but give her assent. The animal part of her brain, the part that existed beyond logical thought told her that this was indeed important. It also told her that Frederich Hanz, the man who had slapped her bottom until she cried her heart out, could be trusted. He could have killed her a thousand times over by now. He could have turned her over to the authorities too, if he were so inclined. Instead he had been as kind as he seemed to know how to be and even now he claimed to be helping her. In a world suddenly inundated with uncertainty and change, Mardoll clung to the straw he offered her.

They stopped before an impressively ornate stone building in the old part of the city. Gargoyles loomed over the upper reaches of the building, their spouted mouths pouring roof water into the guttering below.

Frederich turned to her, placed his hands on her shoulders and looked intently down into her eyes. “This may not be easy for you Mardoll, but it is essential if you are ever to be free.”

Mardoll steeled herself. Probably they would have to meet with some official, some politician who would have the ability to pardon her and her sister with the stroke of a pen.

“I am ready – whatever it is,” she assured him solemnly.

“Very well.” Frederich took her hand and began leading her into the building, which turned out not to be an office, but a rather stately and palatial home. A po-faced butler received them in the lobby and directed them to an overly furnished parlor to wait.

“Whatever happens next Mardoll, know that you are cared for,” Frederich murmured in her ear as they waited. She gave him a quizzical look. What on earth was he going on about?

At the sound of the brass door handle turning, Mardoll turned away from Frederich and towards the person they had come to see. But before she could even lay eyes on the mysterious person of great importance, she heard a voice.

“Mardoll.”

It was a dispassionate voice, but oh so familiar one. Mardoll looked up with a wild hope and let out a short scream of surprise. Standing before her, looking older and more lined but otherwise exactly as she imagined she remembered her was the Lady Seraphina, Mardoll's mother.

“Mother!” Mardoll cried. “I have found you!” She tried to rush towards her, but Frederich held her back. Filled with sudden fury, she kicked out and tried to bite him, but her mother interjected harshly.

“Be still! Is this what I have spawned?”

Stopping in utter surprise, Mardoll turned her gaze back towards her mother's face. It was strange to look at the Lady Seraphina. It was like looking into a mirror, but now that Mardoll looked properly she saw that it was a mirror image with cruel, cold eyes and a myriad of tight lines around the lips that indicated a life time of disapproval.

“Mother... we have been searching for you for years!” Mardoll explained, shooting annoyed looks over her shoulder at Frederich. Why wasn't he letting her go to her mother?

“I have heard. And I have been disgusted with what you have done. You have shamed your name and mine. I had hoped that you would have been tidied away sooner than this.”

The words seemed so utterly foreign, so entirely wrong that for a long, long moment, Mardoll could not believe that they had been spoken. Her own mother speaking about her capture and likely death with a household cleaning euphemism. Was this really the mother she had sought for so long?

“But you were taken away... the soldiers... we tried to find you...”

“Did it ever occur to you that perhaps I did not wish to be found?” Seraphina interjected harshly.

At the words, Mardoll's eyes filled with tears. This could not possibly be happening. This was not supposed to be happening. They were supposed to be embracing and celebrating. Instead this woman – this monster was cruelly tearing her apart from the inside out.

As the silence stretched on, the Lady decided that it had better be filled. “Motherhood never did suit me well,” she said by way of explanation, gesticulating casually, as if she were talking about a dress that she did not care for.

“You abandoned us!” Mardoll cried. “Adele was barely old enough to talk!”

An expression of total distaste passed over Seraphina's features as she was reminded of the small child she left behind. “Yes but she would have spoken soon enough and become just as tedious as you were. It was best that I went away to pursue ambition. You and your sister seem to have gotten on well enough. After all, you're here to spite me, are you not?” Seraphina's expression was vicious as she looked witheringly at the seed she so clearly wished had never sprung from her loins.

“What is wrong with you?” Mardoll could barely restrain herself from screaming. To think of all the times she'd risked her life in memory of this woman – of all the years of her youth wasted in the pursuit of her freedom. “We almost died for you.”

“Well that was silly, wasn't it. You should have been finding an appropriate station in life. Though,” here Seraphina's nose wrinkled in an expression of utter disgust. “It seems hard to imagine what station that might be. What on earth are you wearing?”

Mardoll stared blankly at the woman before her for a long moment. Her mind was full of jumbled words, screamed curses, and furious rage. For a time it seemed that they might overcome her. It took a great effort to force them all down, to replace the anger with sheer nothingness, but she did it. There was only one sure thing left in her life, and it was standing behind her, squeezing her shoulder comfortingly as she heard the terrible truth.

“Take me home please,” she said in stiff, mechanical tones.

Frederich did not speak a word to the Lady Seraphina, and Mardoll did not spare the woman she had once worshiped a second glance as he steered her out of the stately home under his arm.

“I am sorry, Mardoll,” he said as they began walking back towards his home. Mardoll shook her head. Sorry was a very small word that could barely begin to assuage the enormity of what had taken place.

The past two decades had been a total waste of time. A long, hard, soul shattering waste of time. The crushing weight of the reality that their mother had not wanted them, had never wanted them and would have been happy to see them dead was too much to bear – too much to feel.

Under eyes red from tears, snowflakes melted on her cheeks. Her body was warm, but her heart had gone cold.

“She betrayed us,” Mardoll's voice broke as tears of bitter pain began coursing down her face.

Frederich could do little but gather her up in his arms and comfort her. They had returned home, where the full realization of what had occurred was finally settling in with Mardoll.

Resting her head on Frederich's chest, Mardoll allowed herself to be comforted by the man she had once feared more than anything. His large, strong hand swept up and down her back, alleviating a little of the pain.

"I am sorry," he repeated himself. "I did not think you would believe me if you did not see her for yourself."

"You were correct," Mardoll sniffed. There would have been no way she would have ever accepted that the mother she had been seeking all her life, the woman half remembered from her childhood could possibly have been so intentionally cruel. It had been so much easier to imagine mother as a prisoner against her will, as someone who loved her daughters and who lived only for the day they would be reunited.

The fact that the Lady Seraphina had never wanted them, had left them to die and had been behind the recent plot to have them captured and killed was more than painful, it had stolen Mardoll's very identity away from her. She was no longer an avenger, she was no longer a faithful daughter – she was an abandoned, unwanted wretch. She was nothing. Nothing at all.

She said none of this as she curled up against Frederich, momentarily allowing herself to be comforted. But what was the point of his comfort either? He was a man employed to capture her, she was little more than a job to him. It suddenly seemed very certain in her mind that he too would eventually abandon her, once he had his fill of her, once he became bored he would toss her aside just as mother had tossed her aside.

Pushing away from Frederich, Mardoll tumbled onto the floor. "Get the hell away from me!" she growled with utter fury.

Frederich's expression of surprise was priceless. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, get away from me! Let me go!"

"I have no intention of letting you go," Frederich replied calmly.

She glowered at him, wondering how he managed to remain so composed. No matter what she did, he was always the same, constant Frederich.

Lies. It had to be lies. He was lying. She didn't even know what he was lying about, all she knew was that everything was so twisted there was no possible way that he could really be who he said he was, that he could really care for her, really want her. Who would ever want anyone spurned by their own mother?

“Don't you fucking!” Mardoll screamed senselessly, hurling herself at the large man in a wind milling mass of fists and feet. She wanted to tear him apart. She wanted to hurt him. She wanted the rage she felt to be exorcised from her body, and the only way she knew how was with violence.

Her attack was useless. As she had once surmised, Frederich had nothing to fear from a woman. Her flurried attack barely touched him. He easily deflected the bulk of her blows, a fact which spurred her into even greater fits of rage.

With one last burst of fury, she picked up a sharp, dagger shaped letter opener and did her best to stab him with it.

“Oh no my girl,” he said firmly, twisting her wrist painfully to force her to drop the knife. “That is quite enough,” he determined, hefting her over his lap easily.

“I know you are upset and sad, but violent outbursts will not be tolerated,” he informed her, speaking calmly.

His words were barely heard over her squeals and cries of anger and Mardoll was not listening anyway. She was unleashing years of pain and years of sadness on him, and she was being rewarded for her behavior by being held very firmly over his strong lap.

“I will listen to you, I will take care of you, I will comfort you, but I will not be your punching bag,” Frederich informed her as he tugged her britches down to expose her threadbare cotton panties.

“I don't fucking care what you do! I don't fucking care!” Mardoll yelled.

Frederich slapped her bottom hard, and then repeated the treatment several times, transforming her bottom into a mass of pain, physical pain that jolted through her body, met with her emotional pain and transformed it all into one wailing wave of anguish.

“Stop, it hurts!” Mardoll recanted her original position, but Frederich was not inclined to stop.

“It is supposed to hurt. It is supposed to teach you that we resolve issues by talking, not by hitting,” Frederich lectured her sternly, slapping her bottom hard.

“Then why the fuck are you hitting me?” Mardoll argued angrily.

Frederich paused for a moment, his hand hovering in mid air as he decided how best to resolve the cognitive dissonance. “Do as I say, not as I do,” he finally settled the matter and slapped her rump soundly once more.

Mardoll exploded into a series of expletives that were barely comprehensible because they were run into one another so much, and when she ran out of swear words she knew, she began to create entirely new ones.

Above her, with his palm setting her backside firmly to rights, a hint of a smile was teasing at the corners of Frederick's mouth, but Mardoll could not see the gentle amusement with which he absorbed her verbal abuse, she could only feel the thundering, punishing palm that landed over and over, sometimes slapping her cheeks, sometimes catching a flailing thigh.

He was inexorable in his punishment and as her bottom began to feel tender and swollen and throb in between the slaps, Mardoll's anger began to dissipate. It was only possible to rage for so long, and as it declined, so did her angry cries, which were replaced by great sobbing tears that racked her body.

As she dissolved into tears, the punishment began to slow and finally stop. She was swept up into Frederick's arms and there she cried until she thought she wouldn't be able to breathe. He held her gently, rubbed her poor red bottom and murmured soothing words into her ear until she finally fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter Five

One spanking alone was far from enough to reform Miss Mardoll Minke, though she did avoid antagonizing Frederich for quite some time after the event. Unfortunately for Frederich and for herself, the emotional wound inflicted with such casual cruelty by her mother took far longer to heal than most physical wounds.

For a time Mardoll became silent and reserved. She did not unleash her rage against Frederich again, but neither did she talk to him aside from polite references to the weather and the uncommon tastiness of almost every meal they ate. She became entirely self contained, walled apart from everyone else.

Adele took it upon herself to try to rehabilitate her sister, which seemed to have some positive effect. They would spend hours talking softly to one another in various corners of the great house and though Frederich would often pass them by with something like a wistful expression on his face, he was never suffered to join in the conversations.

The situation might have gone on indefinitely, had Adele not come up with a plan to snap Mardoll out of her dispassionate trance and return something of her fighting spirit. The plan came to a head one fine afternoon as the members of the household who were not mired in personal sorrow played cards to pass the time.

“Seraphina, what a heinous bitch,” Adele declared forthrightly, tossing an ace onto the card table and ignoring Frederich's sharp look.

“That's rather an understatement,” Seph agreed, trailing his fingers through his fiancée's dark locks and trying to peek over her shoulder at her cards.

It had been several weeks since the mystery of the missing mother had been solved to disastrous effect. Adele had taken the revelation of their mother's betrayal with relative equanimity, which was a very good thing considering the fact that Mardoll was still largely locked in the dark, silent place that was her mind. Everybody was worried about her, especially Frederich, who now wondered if he had done the right thing in allowing her to see her mother. Had he perhaps overseen the breaking of her very spirit?

The Minke sisters were no longer locked away in the lower reaches of the Hanz home, both of them had been given free reign of the place now that neither one of them posed a significant flight risk and now that the dogs of justice had been called off them. They were to be respectable women, and a respectable woman is never responsible for her behavior under the law.

Letting the sisters have free reign once more was not a risk that Frederich and Seph took lightly, but Adele was far too enamored of her fiancé to think about leaving his side and Mardoll, who once would have nigh chewed her way out of a room to escape would now barely move even if you opened a window and put her in front of it.

On that afternoon the two brothers and Adele sat in the drawing room, Adele and Seph cuddling together on the loveseat and Frederich firmly ensconced in his favorite armchair. Mardoll had once more asked to be left alone, and for the moment, her wish was being granted – though it was quite obvious from the flashing looks Frederich gave everything that moved that he was not overly pleased with the situation.

“Perhaps Mardoll will join us for dinner,” he toyed with his hand of cards and mused with a boyish hopefulness that made Adele and Seph smile.

“Perhaps you should make her,” Adele suggested.

Frederich snorted. “I should very much like to do so.”

“Then do it, stop treating her with kid gloves, she's not going to break, you know,” Adele laughed.

“I do not know if that is true,” he said heavily.

Adele rolled her eyes. “Now you sound just like her,” she chided him. “Why don't you both go and sit in a dark room and recite Gothic poetry at one another until one of you dissolves into a puddle of tears?”

A raised brow was directed at Adele. “Again, young lady, you overstep your boundaries,” Frederich warned her.

“Well somebody has to, she'll wither away before you do something about the situation,” Adele replied.

“Seph...” Frederich said tiredly. He did not understand for the life of him why Seph was not being heavier handed with Adele. He knew very well that his brother was more than capable of taking a forward young lady in hand, but for some reason, he seemed disinclined to do so when it came to Adele.

He did not have time to finish his inquiry however, for in the next instant, Adele had picked up the glass of water she'd been sipping from and tossed it all over him.

“There you go, you win at puddles!” Adele squealed gleefully.

A bellow of outrage issued from Frederich and he made to grab her, but Adele had lost none of her speed and agility and for once she managed to escape his grasp long enough to run out of the drawing room and down the hall in a flurry of falling cards.

Dripping water from his face and cravat, Frederich followed closely on her heels. The little madam had been pushing his buttons ever since he'd known her and now she had gone too far. Seph or no Seph, she was getting her impertinent backside warmed.

“Help! Help!” Adele squealed at the top of her lungs as she ran barefoot, her skirts picked up so that she would not trip over them. “He’s going to kill me!” She put just the right note of wild terror in her voice as she scampered past the bedroom where Mardoll had secreted herself.

The reaction she got was as reliable as it was predictable. Mardoll might have been caught up in the deepest sorrow she had ever known, but the protective feelings she had towards her baby sister had not abated in the slightest. Hearing Adele scream cut through the tedious layers of self pity and spurred her into action.

“What the hell is going on?” Mardoll exploded out of her room and tackled Frederich head on, bringing him to ground in a tangle of limbs.

“What the hell are you doing to my sister?” she growled angrily, scrambling atop him and attempting to pin him down by placing her knees on his arms. She had in actuality succeeded in very little other than shoving her crotch in his face, but ever the gentleman, Frederich did not like to complain.

“How nice to see you up and about,” he intoned dryly. “I believe I was the victim of a dastardly plot,” he said, looking over her shoulder to where Adele was standing in the hall, grinning from ear to ear.

Mardoll looked confused. “What plot?”

“I teased him so you’d come and save me. You’re my hero, Mar Mar,” Adele said in appropriately dramatic and adoring tones.

With a dramatic sigh, Mardoll rolled her eyes. “Maybe I’ll just help him beat you.”

“Now that is a good idea,” Frederich agreed from his position on the floor.

“Well if it will stop you moping about day after day, I’ll offer my ass in sacrifice,” Adele laughed.

“I’m not moping,” Mardoll bristled.

“Sure you are, and you’re leaving poor Freddy pining away without you too. That’s very naughty Mar, very naughty indeed,” Adele chastised her sister and then laughed at the looks of fury she received from both Mardoll and Frederich. “Now kiss and make up,” she giggled.

“Adele, quit it would you?” Seph finally appeared in the hallway after realizing that nobody was coming back to the drawing room any time soon. He was looking at his future bride with an uncharacteristic strict expression that indicated he might very well be reaching the end of his tether where her antics were concerned.

“I won’t quit it until MarMar Doll is in a better mood,” Adele teased, throwing out every kid

name she could think of for her sister.

“It would be nice if MarMar Doll would cheer up,” Frederick agreed, dryly using Mardoll's pet name in a last ditch effort to see her smile.

“Yeah, see! Don't let that dried up old egg donor get you down!” Adele urged.

Mardoll sighed deeply and looked around her. Perhaps Adele, poor, misguided, soon to be spanked soundly Adele was right. So what if her life's mission had turned out to be a waste of time? It had lead her here, to this place, to the arms of the incredibly handsome man who was even now patiently waiting for her to release him although she knew very well he could have gotten up at any time he chose to.

She had mourned enough and moreover, she had dedicated enough of her life to the woman who had betrayed her. It was time to live for herself now, for herself and her adorable little sister who even now was walking the very fine line between being amusing and probably having her backside blistered.

“Okay. Fine. I'll give you a head start, Dally; get out of here before they catch you.”

With another little shriek of glee, Adele turned on her heel and ran, leaving three people shaking their heads after her.

“Tell me you are going to deal with her this time, Seph, we can't have young ladies hurling water about the place, some of the paintings aren't waterproof,” Frederick asked his brother.

“Oh yes,” Seph said, rolling up his sleeves with a wide grin. “And I'm going to enjoy it too.” He strode confidently off in the direction Adele had run, leaving Frederick and Mardoll alone in the hall together.

“I like being up here,” Mardoll confided after a time, as if she'd come to a grand revelation.

Frederick chuckled deeply. “Well don't get too used to it, my dear,” he said, reaching up and plucking her off his body.

She smiled as he swung his broad, strong frame upright and placed her on the ground in front of him. “I want you to be happy, Mardoll,” he said sincerely.

“Why?” she shook her head in confusion. “I'm just a job – a really annoying job, who occasionally tries to kill you,” she smiled wryly.

“Oh you are so much more than a job my dear,” Frederick contradicted her. “You are my heart.”

Mardoll began to feel all weepy inside at his words. She didn't like feeling all weepy, especially when it didn't make sense to feel that way. “But I'm just some lady, you know?”

“Some smart, attractive, wickedly talented woman who will be my wife,” Frederick corrected her.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Mardoll passed the back of her hand over her eyes. How could he still want her after all she'd put him through? “You're still on about that?”

“But of course, my dear,” he said, drawing her into an embrace.

“It won't be easy for you, you know,” she said, looking up at him with a small, but wicked smile on her face.

“Oh I hope not,” he growled softly back down at her.

Somewhere in the distance sounds of slapping and yelping drifted to them. “Sounds like Adele is finally getting her comeuppance,” Mardoll mused.

Frederick looked at her with mild concern. “You're not angry about that?”

Mardoll shook her head vehemently. “Hell no, that girl needs spanking more than anyone else I know.”

He laughed. “Hm, I'm almost in total agreement with you there.”

“Almost?”

“Oh yes, there's one young lady I think deserves a very, very sound spanking,” Frederick purred, sliding his hand down to cup Mardoll's behind.

“I haven't done anything wrong!” Mardoll protested, her eyes fluttering wide with confusion.

“But you will,” Frederick said, nuzzling her neck.

“Mr. Hanz. You are being rather over familiar,” Mardoll said in her best old maid's voice.

“I am overcome at your beauty, my dear,” Frederick explained, drawing her into his embrace once more. As he gazed down into his future bride's eyes, his expression grew serious once more. “Are you okay my dear? I have been worried about you.”

“I have been grieving,” Mardoll admitted. “I lost my mother. But I cannot grieve forever.”

“You have lost, but you have gained too, you know,” Frederick reminded her.

“Yes, that is true. I have gained a tyrant,” Mardoll agreed with uncharacteristic humor.

Frederick's brow raised and she broke into a mischievous smile, a smile that made her look, just for a moment, like a young woman with not a care in the world.

“I will show you what tyranny is,” he growled.

She shivered in response, enjoying the elemental feeling of being held by a strong man whose desire for her was just barely contained.

“Will you now? Perhaps I will not let you,” she teased, pulling away from him slightly.

“Oh no, you are not getting away again young lady,” Frederich said, grasping her around the waist, lifting her quite off her feet and tossing her over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Mardoll squealed.

“Being a tyrant,” Frederich informed her, swatting her backside lightly.

Mardoll could do little but hang over his shoulder as he carried her down towards the wing of the house where he and his brother were quartered. He carried her right past Seph's room, where she caught a brief glimpse of Adele's pretty ruffled skirts lifted up all askew and her bare bottom wriggling over Seph's dark suited knee. It was already a deep pink hue, but Adele was not crying out or begging for mercy, instead she appeared to be lifting her hips up and taunting him to hit her harder.

“Is that it?” Adele's light, giggling tones floated down the hall after them, making Mardoll laugh at her younger sister's irrepressible nature. She couldn't even get spanked without subverting the entire affair.

An unexpected slap to her own bottom jolted her thoughts away from Adele.

“Don't worry about her,” Frederich said, kicking open the door to his bedroom. “You've got your own fate to be concerned about.”

His tone was full of mock threat, and Mardoll found herself responding to it.

“You'll never take me! Never!” she boasted boldly as he placed her on the floor, pressed his lips to her and kissed her deeply for the first time.

Mardoll had been kissed before, fumbling, awkward kisses that left her cold, but this was a kiss full of passion and heat. This was a kiss of conquest, a kiss that plundered her mouth and demanded everything of her. Frederich pulled her close to his body, making her feel the hard lines of his muscular frame.

“You are mine,” he informed her in low, gravelly tones. “And I shall take you when and where I please.”

The words should have been terrifying, but instead they sent red hot lust coursing through Mardoll's body. This was what she had waited for, a man who was not some simpering fool or

some violent oaf, but a man who was her equal, a man who could hunt her down and tame her to his will.

Frederich had undoubtedly done that, indeed, he had not only captured her body, but also her mind. He had not run from her violence, nor from her fear, nor from her pain, and now, as he pressed her back onto the wide swath of his bed, her instinctual response was to wrap herself around him, to acknowledge his conquest with her own sweet surrender.

He took her many times that night, first slow and gentle, inflaming her desires with soft kisses as he disrobed her and pleased her soft, sweet core with his mouth. When she could take the pleasure no longer, she begged for him to enter her and he did so with impeccable control, sheathing himself inside her with slow strokes that made her melt as he claimed her maidenhead.

She gazed up at him as he moved over her, taking in the raw beauty of his male figure. He was truly magnificent, rippling muscle undulating over her, pleasuring her so deeply she could barely stand it. She felt her eyes growing misty with emotion in response to the wonder of what was taking place between them, with the beauty of their union.

“Are you alright?” He stilled himself in her and looked down with concern.

“Oh yes,” she replied breathlessly. “Please, don't stop.”

He smiled down wickedly. “Miss Minke, are you asking me to take you, are you asking me to ravage your sweet body?” He supplemented the question with a short thrust that made her gasp.

“Don't torture me this way,” she begged, but he was enjoying himself far too much to stop. Remaining still once more, he lowered his head to her exposed nipple and began suckling at it as she moaned and did her best to writhe her hips against him. It was impossible though, with his hips pressed down against her and his manhood inside her, she was pinned in place, forced to wait until he decided to accord her pleasure once more. It was an exquisite act of domination, one that left her mewling pitifully like a kitten.

“Please,” she whimpered. She was rewarded with a series of agonizingly slow thrusts, thrusts in which he left her body, then gained her once more, making her feel every inch of him as he slid inside her, making her feel over and over how he took her, and how she loved him taking her.

“More,” she begged. It was not enough, this slow pleasuring. Her lust was growing wild, she wanted more of him, all of him, she wanted to feel him ravaging her as he had suggested. “Take me, take me...”

“Oh I will take you,” he growled, allowing himself to take her with more urgency. He reached for her slim wrists and pinned them above her head as he began to hammer in and out of her, giving her the harder, rougher love she had begged for.

She took every plundering inch of him and moaned for more, she needed nothing but him inside her, him taking her, his body thrusting over and over, filling her secret places, taking her in a

way that left her in no doubt as to the fact that she belonged to him.

He pulled out and she pouted, but he winked as he flipped her over onto her stomach and entered her once more, this time placing his hand on the back of her neck and pinning her in place as he fucked her with delicious thoroughness. She found herself grinding back against him and down against the bed, hungry for more sensation.

She was consumed by lust, by wanting; a slave to the rhythm of his pounding desire as above her, Frederich began to lose his masterful control. He pulled her hips up between his powerful hands and slammed himself inside her, making her wail with pure pleasure. She was rising quickly towards a peak the heights of which she'd never experienced. Her every nerve seemed to tremble and cry out as he drove her onwards and she wailed with total pleasure as she was finally consumed with pleasure, pleasure that rolled throughout her body and, for one, sweet, transcendent moment, removed her from the world entirely.

When she returned, he was lying beside her, smiling a wicked grin. "My my," he said, interrupting himself to press kisses all over her face. "You are a wild one."

"And I'm your problem now," Mardoll smiled back at him.

"I enjoy a good problem, especially one that wraps herself around me and begs to be taken," Frederich replied.

Gazing into her lover's eyes, Mardoll merely smiled. The future was yet uncertain, for they both knew the nature of the other, and that the spirit of wicked rebellion that had driven Mardoll to daring and dangerous crime had certainly not been quelled by love. It had been tempered perhaps, momentarily domesticated, but it would invariably rise in her again.

"What if..." Mardoll began to voice her fear, but was cut short when Frederich pressed a finger to her lips.

"Have a little faith in my ability to handle you my dear," he chided her softly. "Or I shall be forced to remind you yet again. Is that what you need? A reminder?"

"I don't believe so," she replied.

"Hm, I think perhaps one is in order," Frederich disagreed. "I think in her erotic haze the lady has forgotten who she is dealing with." His face had grown stern now, and although Mardoll knew he was not angry with her, she felt herself quiver at his countenance.

"I have not forgotten," Mardoll hastened to assure him.

"I should hope not," he said, tipping her head up towards him and brushing his lips across hers.

Mardoll took refuge in silence, wondering to herself why she was suddenly so eager to avoid trouble with this man. Less than a month ago she'd been happy to kill him with a letter opener.

Was this what happened to people who fell in love? Did they become soppy and weak willed and unable to rebel?

“Mardoll!” Adele's squeal cut through her thoughts and brought both Mardoll and Frederich bolt upright in bed.

“Mardoll! Get him, he's got a cane!” Adele shouted, bursting through the bedroom door and hurling herself under the bed with the alacrity of an alley cat.

Seph appeared a moment later, holding a cane in one hand and putting the other over his eyes. “Terribly sorry to bother,” he drawled. “I'm looking for a remorseless brat.”

“Haven't seen her,” Mardoll lied, smooth as silk as she shrugged on Frederich's shirt. This was starting to have all the hallmarks of a situation necessitating a quick escape. All concept of behaving herself went out the window as Mardoll's true nature resurfaced with a vengeance.

Frederich gave his future bride a dour look. “I might have to borrow that cane after you're done with it, Seph.”

“Hell no,” Mardoll shook her head and tumbled out of bed, propelling herself halfway across the room with an acrobatic forward roll. “Come on Adele!”

Adele did not need telling, hot on her sister's footsteps as always, she had emerged from under the bed and scampered out of the room before Seph had lowered his hand from his eyes.

“Your sense of modesty has been your downfall,” Frederich informed him as he put on a dressing gown.

“Damn. She's taunting me you know. I spanked her and she laughed, I slipped her and she made jokes. I used the paddle and she recited the criminal code,” Seph confided.

A grim smile established itself firmly on Frederich's features as he tightened the belt of his gown. “Then let us go and see if we cannot teach these impudent wenches a proper lesson.”

So it was that things ended much as they had begun, with the wicked Minke sisters leading the Hanz brothers a merry chase. Their flesh was on the line, but did they care? Not one whit, for as the tales of the Minkes had always told, they were as bold as they were beautiful, as spirited as they were smart and more wicked than any other women alive.

## The End

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