

ONCE UPON A TIME, ON THE COLDEST NIGHT OF MIDWINTER, IN the darkest heart of the forest, Death and Fortune came to a crossroads.

They stood tall and unfathomable in the glass-smooth snow, Death in her shroud of pyre-smoke and shadows, and Fortune in her gown of gold and bones. More than that cannot be said, for no two souls see Death and Fortune the same way; yet we all know when we meet them.

On this night, a woman had come to do just that: meet them. Her dull carrot-colored curls twisted from under a woolen cap, her wind-burnt red face as worn as the threadbare cloak over her shoulders. One hand clutched a dimming iron lantern, which smoldered just bright enough to catch the snowflakes flitting by like fireflies before they melted back into the shadows.

Her other hand was locked around the ragged mitt of a little girl beside her.

"Please," the woman said, shivering in snow up to her shins. "We're stretched thin to feed the twelve other mouths already, and this one—she's ill luck. Wherever she goes, the milk spoils, the wool tangles, the grain spills. Whatever she touches falls to ruin."

The little girl said nothing.

"She's only . . ." Fortune tilted her head, and the wreath of coins about her brow shimmered and flipped, changing from copper to coal to silver to gold. "Three? Ten? Forgive me, I never know with you humans."

"Four," Death said in her soft, dark voice, for Death always knew.

Fortune wrinkled her nose. "Young. The proper age to be spilling grain and breaking things."

"She's the thirteenth," the woman insisted, shoving her lantern higher as if to drive her point home. Weak firelight caught on Fortune's

coin wreath, on the wispy hems of Death's hood. "Like me. That makes her the thirteenth daughter of a thirteenth daughter. Her luck's rotten to the core."

"You told your other children you'd take her into the woods to seek her fortune." The Low God herself plucked a coin from her wreath and let it dance about her fingers, flashing copper and silver, gold and black.

"In truth, you were seeking me," Death said in her dark-velvet voice, and the woman's features crumpled with shame. "Yet here you have found us both. You have come far, through the dark and through the frost, to ask our favor."

"Asking a blessing of the Lady of Luck. Risky. No way to know what that would be." Fortune's face slipped between cruelty and sympathy as her coin slipped through quick fingers, flashing day and night, red and white.

Death, on the other hand, did not stir. "You know my gifts, and so you know though there is plenty I can take, little can I give. But I will tell you: Only one of you will go home."

The woman drew a sharp breath.

Fortune smiled, and her coin flashed like the sun and the snow, like shadow and like blood. "You sought Death in the woods. Did you think the way back would be easy?"

The woman said nothing. The flame in the lantern burned lower.

"Ask," Death commanded. "What will you have of us?"

The lantern shook in the woman's hand, her knuckles cracked with callus and cold. "I want what's best for—for everyone."

"Choose," Death commanded again. "Which of you will return?"

The woman let go of her daughter.

Fortune lifted the girl's chin. She found two eyes of sharpest

black in her pale, freckled face, two braids the color of the lantern flame tied off in bits of rag.

“What is your name?” Death asked as the woman turned and fled the crossroads, stealing away the last scrap of firelight.

“Vanja,” was the first thing I said to my godmothers, “my name is Vanja.”

CHAPTER ONE



CARD GAMES

IT HAS BEEN NEARLY THIRTEEN YEARS SINCE DEATH AND FORTUNE claimed me for their own, and I have come far enough through winter and cold that almost no one calls me Vanja now.

Thump-thump. Two raps of gloved knuckles against the carriage roof. The driver's muffled voice carries down to me inside. "Almost there, *Prinzessin.*"

I don't reply. I don't have to; I learned long ago that princesses don't owe their servants answers.

And for most of the last year, that's the face I've worn: the princess.

Or to be precise: Gisele-Berthilde Ludwila von Falbirg of the Sovabin Principality, *Kör-prinzessin* of the Blessed Empire of Almandy. Soon to be *Markgräfin* Gisele you-get-the-idea von Reigenbach of the

empire's largest territory, the border march of Bóern, once the margrave gets around to a wedding.

Though not if I can help it.

(We'll come back to that.)

I squint out the gilt-trimmed carriage window, studying the timber-and-plaster blocks of Eisendorf Manor as the horses draw us closer. Shadows pass behind the first-floor windows, turning them to rosy eyes winking into the frosty twilight gloom. It looks crowded already, even for a Sunday night party. Good—a princess ought to be the last of the von Eisendorfs' guests to arrive. There was a reason I dawdled in my bedroom at Castle Reigenbach: to make sure we hit peak Minkja traffic when we left an hour ago.

But I have more motive to search the manor's façade than just making sure I arrive fashionably late. Lit windows are fewer on the third floor, but I still spot two bracketing the double doors where the master bedroom lets out onto its telltale grand balcony.

The real question tonight is whether it's the *only* balcony.

It is not. Balconettes frame it on either side. Lamplight gilds only one of the balconettes, spilling from an adjacent room that looks to share the fat main chimney with the master bedroom.

That chimney is currently chugging smoke into the dimming sky. One might wonder *why* the von Eisendorfs would keep a fire going up in their bedroom when they'll be busy entertaining guests downstairs all evening.

I'd bet three solid *gilden* that they're heating the guest chambers next door instead, in case I—well, in case the *prinzessin* needs a respite. An opportunity to suck up to the margrave's bride-to-be can't be missed.

One also might wonder why I would care about chimneys, balconettes, and suck-ups. It's because tonight, the Eisendorfs are handing me an entirely different sort of opportunity.

And I would *loathe* for either of those opportunities to go to waste.

The faint reflection of my grin cuts across the glass. A moment later it vanishes as my breath clouds the pane in the late November chill.

I should play it safe, settle back into my seat, resume the serene, graceful façade of the *prinzessin*.

Instead I size up the remaining distance between us and the first guard we'll pass, and quickly draw a simple, distinct set of curves in the fogged glass. *Then* I sit back and smooth my grin down to a placid smile.

When we pass the first guard, I see him do a double take. He elbows the guard beside him, pointing to the carriage window, and I'm pretty sure I hear: “. . . *an arse!*”

“And no one will ever believe you,” I hum under my breath as the fog melts from the glass.

The jingle-stamp of the horses stops when we draw even with the manor's bulky oaken front door. I sneak a look under the opposite seat and confirm my satchel, an unassuming toilette bag, is still stowed away. For now, it will stay there.

Then I close my eyes, swaying with the carriage as the footman jumps off, and think of three playing cards dancing facedown across a table. It's time to begin my oldest game, Find the Lady.

There are many tricks to running the game, but the absolutely ironclad one is this: Only one person should know where the Lady is at all times. That person is me.

I run my fingertips over the string of heavy, perfect pearls around my neck. It's habit more than anything; I would know if they're unclasped. I would *know*.

The carriage door opens. In my mind, I flip the first card faceup.

The *prinzessin*. Silver eyes, pale golden curls, pristine pearls under glacier-blue velvet and burgundy brocade, a gentle smile with a hint of mystery. Even the name *Gisele* is an intrigue, shunning sturdy Almanic

for the Bourgienne pronunciation, with its honeyed vowels and a butter-soft *G*. It's just the sort of pretentious affectation Dame von Falbirg loved to dish out, knowing people like the von Eisendorfs will eat it up.

This is how the game begins, you see. Step one: Show them the card they're looking for.

The *prinzessin* descends from the carriage like a vision. Ezbeta and Gustav von Eisendorf are hovering in the entrance hall, faces lighting up when they see me finally gliding toward their open door. It's not just about arriving on my own schedule, of course. It's about making sure the *other* guests see Ezbeta and Gustav waiting for me.

I alone see the surest sign that this night is going to go off without a hitch, for when Fortune is your godmother, you can always see her hand at work. Faint, dull clouds like coal dust are coalescing around the von Eisendorfs as they flutter in the hall. It's an omen of the ill luck I'm about to bring upon their house.

The Count and Countess von Eisendorf are celebrating their twentieth anniversary tonight—well, commemorating, at least. “Celebrating” may be too strong a term. All I'm saying is that there's a reason *Gräfin* Ezbeta is already ruddy-cheeked and hastily stashing a goblet behind an urn on the entrance hall's credenza.

Something about her always put me in mind of a stork, though I've never put my finger on it. She's pale-skinned like much of the Blessed Empire, with middling brown hair and angular features—*aha*. That's it. Ezbeta has a habit of pointing with her chin, and with her long neck and a tendency to cock her head, it gives the impression that she's scouring the area for a frog to snap up.

She's dressed to impress, at least, her wrists and throat gleaming with a small fortune in gold and emeralds. It's almost certainly the most expensive jewelry she owns. My fingers fairly itch: It's another opportunity, perhaps.

“Oh, *Markgräfin* Gisele, how good it is of you to come!” Her voice carries like a trumpet, and I hear a fleeting hush of anticipation dart through the crowd inside as the countess sweeps her forest-green samite gown into a curtsy.

“It was ever so kind of you to invite me,” I reply, extending a hand to Gustav.

He mashes his lips to my doeskin-gloved knuckles. “We’re absolutely delighted.”

Graf Gustav is a withered ghoul of a man in a tunic pricey enough to feed Eisendorf Village through Winterfast, and yet *incredibly* it does nothing to help the piss-puddle where his personality should be. Nor does the wet smudge he leaves on my glove.

I pull free and bounce a teasing finger against the tip of Ezbeta’s nose. “I’m not the *markgräfin* yet, you know. Not until my darling Adalbrecht returns and makes me the happiest woman in the Blessed Empire.”

My *darling* betrothed, Adalbrecht von Reigenbach, margrave of the sprawling march of Bóern, has spent the entirety of our year-long betrothal at battle, instigating skirmishes along his share of the southern and eastern borders of the Blessed Empire of Almandy while I wait in his castle. For all I care, he can stay there.

“Well, you’re already the most generous,” *Gräfin* Ezbeta simpers as a servant takes my cloak and gloves. “The cushions you sent are positively divine!”

“I could hardly let such an occasion go by without gifts. I’m just glad they arrived safely.” It isn’t even a lie, I *am* glad. Just not for the reason they expect. “Was the spiced mead also to your liking?”

Gustav clears his throat. “Indeed,” he says with a faintly strained air. “I thought to serve it tonight, but my dear wife took a . . . significant liking to it, in fact.”

"I can't help it if Princess Gisele has impeccable taste." Ezbeta winks. Saints and martyrs, if she's already soused enough to be winking at me, she might just hand me that absurd necklace herself before the party's over. "Come, come! Everyone's waiting for you!"

I let her lead me into the manor's main parlor, which is overflowing with minor nobility. Much of the crowd are knights and landed gentry who serve the counts, but the von Eisendorfs have also managed to attract a handful of Adalbrecht's vassals equal to their own rank. I see *Graf* Erhard von Kirchstadtler and his husband, and Lady Anna von Morz in a plum satin atrocity that could charitably be called a gown. Even Minister Philippa Holbein has traveled into Boérn from the nearby Free Imperial State of Okzberg.

I scan for one particular face and find it thankfully missing. Godmother Fortune may have tilted the odds in my favor, or maybe Irmgard von Hirsching thinks she's too good to get drunk with the von Eisendorfs. Either way, that's one less problem to deal with tonight.

"I hope the guards didn't give you too much trouble, *Prinzessin*," Lady von Morz cackles, sauntering up to me with a goblet of *glöhwein* in each hand. She tries to pass one off to me and fumbles a bit until I steady her grip. "Really, Gustav, even the margrave doesn't post this many soldiers at his front door."

Gustav gives a disgruntled wheeze. "No such thing as too cautious these days. They say the von Holtzburgs lost nearly fifty *gilden* to the Penny Phantom."

We all gasp. That's no trifling sum; a skilled tradesman would be lucky to amass fifty *gilden* over one season. "I'd no idea the *Pfennigeist* struck them too," I say, wide-eyed.

Ezbeta nods, leaning in closer. "Oh, *yes*. Holtzburg Manor was robbed back in January, but they didn't know what the red penny meant until Dowager von Folkenstein said they'd found one after

their burglary. We think the von Holtzburgs may have been the first victims.”

“How dreadful,” I murmur. “And their bailiff never found anything?”

“No. He swears only a ghost or a *bösling* could have broken in without a trace.” The delight-tinged pity on the countess’s face coagulates into syrupy comfort. “But never fear, Princess Gisele. We’ve taken every precaution, just as we promised you. The *Pfennigeist* won’t take so much as a button off your gown.”

Lady von Morz snorts into her *glöhwein*. No one has ever caught the Penny Phantom. No one has even *seen* the Penny Phantom. Not even my betrothed could keep the devil from Castle Reigenbach, where Greta the maid found my jewelry box cleaned out, with a single red penny left behind as a calling card.

And if even the margrave’s walls can be breached, what chance do the Eisendorfs have against such a creature?

I make my rounds through the crowd, clasp hands and admiring outfits, discreetly emptying my goblet into a vase when the coast is clear, only to make sure everyone sees me flagging down servants for many, many refills. *Graf* von Kirchstadtler wants to know when the wedding will be (not until Adalbrecht returns), Sieglinde von Folkenstein natters my ear off about how poorly she’s felt in the mornings (I make a note to commission a baby rattle), and Minister Philippa Holbein offers apologies for her husband’s absence.

“Kalsang’s absolutely inundated in paperwork,” she sighs. I know an excuse when I hear one, but I can’t blame her. Her husband’s a soft-spoken Gharese tea merchant, who’s much happier at home fussing over the silky long coats of their two little *apso*-hounds. Being crammed into a stifling parlor with a bunch of red-faced, competitively self-important Almanic aristocrats would be his personal hell.

His absence is fine by me. I like Kalsang and Philippa. I know

exactly what's about to befall Eisendorf Manor, and I'd rather their part in it be minimal.

I spend the rest of the hour making small talk and seemingly chugging *glöhwein* like it'll cure boils. (Not that Princess Gisele ever gets blemishes. The pearls see to that.) All the while I keep an eye on *Gräfin* Ezbeta.

At last, I see my opportunity and start moving toward the parlor door.

"Nooo, Gisele!" A hand latches onto my brocade sleeve: Ezbeta has taken the bait. By now, she has had at least one glass of *glöhwein* for every glittering emerald in her heavy necklace. That would be roughly seven more than I've had, and judging by her flaming face, about five too many.

And that is why I waited until now to head for the exit, when I knew she would make a tipsy scene.

Ezbeta, of course, obliges me. "You cannot leave us so soon! We've a five-course supper, just for you!"

One might wonder why I'm about to visit such misfortune upon my gracious hosts. Why tonight, on their anniversary? Why them, when they've been nothing but eager to please?

And the truth of the matter is this: If they saw me without the pearls and the face of the *prinzessin*, if they had *any* idea who I really was, they wouldn't give a damn if I was staying for supper or scraping it out of the swine trough.

That's why.

I hiccup in her face, then burst into giggles. My billowing skirts rustle as I wobble in place like a ship in an uneasy harbor. "Of *course* I'm not leaving, silly goose! I simply need . . . I need . . ." I trail off, twirling a pale blonde curl around a finger. The goblet of *glöhwein* lurches in my other hand and spills a few drops onto my bodice. Not enough to

ruin it, of course, only to sell the idea that I am at least as drunk as the good *Gräfin* Ezbeta.

Sure enough, Lady von Morz shoots me an amused look and mutters something to *Graf* von Kirchstadtler.

“What was I saying?” I ask, my gaze sliding dreamily around the room.

“You should lie down a moment, perhaps,” *Gräfin* Ezbeta says, “to recover your faculties before we dine. We have a lovely settee in the guest parlor. *HANS!*”

Half the room gives a start, staring at both of us. Ezbeta is too drunk to notice. I take the opportunity to pat my cheeks as if marveling how warm they are. In reality, there’s a layer of rouge beneath my talc face powder, and as I dab the talc away, my cheeks redden like Ezbeta’s. While everyone’s eyes are still on us, I let off another round of sloppy giggles for good measure.

I need every guest here to witness this mess and think it prudent to exile Gisele von Falbirg from the party. To take the *prinzessin* off the table. I need twenty minutes to myself, and since Gisele cannot leave a party without notice, she will leave with good cause.

“*HANS!*” Ezbeta bellows again. A beleaguered man in a servant’s uniform is already at her elbow, wincing at his name being sounded like a bugle.

“What does m’lady desire?” Hans asks with a bow.

“Escort the *mar* . . .” A befuddled look muddies the countess’s face as she tries to remember the proper address. You can almost see her doing the math, in fact. Too soon for *markgräfin*, not officially a princess-elect; you could say I’m in between titles. For now Ezbeta plays it safe. “Escort the princess to the guest parlor.”

I take Hans’s arm and stumble toward the door, hiding a smile. Ezbeta von Eisendorf has gotten many things wrong tonight: I am not drunk. I do not need to lie down.

I am not Gisele-Berthilde Ludwila von Falbirg.

But the countess has gotten one thing correct: As far as everyone knows, I'm still Gisele, not a baseborn peasant imposter. And that means for now, they call me *Prinzessin*.

As a final touch, I discard the goblet of *glöhwein* on a table by the door, perched haphazardly on the edge. A moment later a clang tells me it's crashed to the floor.

Now everyone behind me will swear to the High Gods and the Low that tonight, Gisele von Falbirg was a senseless drunk, and utterly incapable of the villainy to come.

Poor Hans endures a lurching stroll with me through the dim upper corridors of Eisendorf Manor as I sing praises of his master and mistress. The sour look on his face tells me that praise is wholly unfounded. I can't say I'm shocked.

"Greta," I slur as Hans opens the door to the guest parlor. A maid is stoking the roaring fire inside, but she scurries away as he walks me over to the settee Ezbeta had boasted of. It truly is a lovely thing, stuffed spring-green velvet warmed by the fire.

Even better, it's been adorned in the gold-tasseled cushions I sent them for an anniversary gift. Just as I'd expected.

I flop gracelessly onto the settee, flapping my arm at Hans. "My maid, Greta, fetch her for me. She'll be in the scullery. Or the chapel, pious as she is. She wears a . . ." I make a vague gesture toward the crown of my head, staring glassily at the ceiling. "A cap. Reigenbach blue. I need her *at once*."

"Right away, *Prinzessin*." Hans bows and excuses himself, shutting the parlor door behind him. I wait in place, holding my breath, until the clipped beat of his footsteps fades down the hall.

Then I roll off the settee and onto the floor. I yank my skirt up to free a tiny knife tucked in my elegant leather boots.

For this first part, I have five minutes at least, ten minutes at most. Last time I hosted the von Eisendorfs, Gustav would *not* shut up about their new chapel, so I know it's on the opposite side of the manor from the scullery. Hans, tragically, will not find Greta in either. And that means I have at least five minutes until he returns to apologize.

I snatch up one of the cushions I sent and carefully slice it open. Cotton batting blooms from the gash. When I reach inside, I find a small linen drawstring bag, dark cloth sash, and two slipcovers identical to the one I just slit open, down to the silken tassels.

I gut the other cushion just as quickly. This one holds a linen shift and simple steel-blue woolen servant dress, which I stashed inside before gifting the cushions to the Eisendorfs. Tucked in one sleeve is a dark gray kerchief. Hidden in the other is a modest little cap of distinct Reigenbach blue.

Five minutes later, the new cushion covers are stuffed with my kirtle, petticoats, chemise, expertly folded gown, most of my jewelry, and a respectable handful of *other* people's jewelry. Anna von Morz's slim gold bracelet, nabbed while she passed me the *glöhwein*. Minister Holbein's earring, to help her avoid suspicion. Rings and baubles picked from the crowd, just enough to let them know the thief passed through their midst.

There's a chance they blame the servants of Eisendorf Manor. It's happened before. The bailiff comes in, lines them up, shakes down sleeping pallets and turns out pockets. But not so much as a trinket will fall to the flagstones, so they'll walk away more or less unscathed.

And I know terribly well that that is far, far from the worst thing that can be done to a servant.

I chuck the ruined slipcovers into the fire, where they catch almost instantly, giving off a faint singed-hair smell from the silk. I try not to breathe it in as I braid my hair and tuck it under the Reigenbach-blue

cap. One of the burning cushion covers also has the smears of my face powders on it, for no handmaid would own such things . . . and my time as the *prinzessin* is waning.

The final touch, though, demands a mirror—not because I need to see what I’m doing, but because I need to be sure it works. Luckily, Gustav von Eisendorf loves nothing so much as showing off, and expensive full-length mirrors are well in supply in his guest parlor.

I stand before the nearest one and look my reflection over: From the neck down, I am a maidservant in an unobtrusive Reigenbach uniform, filling it out nicely with curves that would be called *ambitious* in a maiden of nearly seventeen like myself. From the chin up, a few wisps of platinum hair twist from under the blue cap, and silvery eyes blink back at me from a heart-shaped face. Even without powders or rouge, twin roses bloom in my smooth ivory cheeks, and my pert lips flush with a natural shell-pink glow.

The hair like sunshine, the eyes like moonlight, they are all key to the image of the girl the march of Bóern knows as Gisele von Falbirg.

So is her signature string of perfect matched pearls.

I reach back and unclasp it from my neck. The effect is immediate.

My face lengthens, thins, mottles with a dusting of freckles; my eyes darken to black; the few loose tendrils of hair burnish rusty orange. The uniform dress hangs a little looser, though I’ve put on weight from a year’s worth of finally eating my fill, and it hangs a little longer, for eating well still cannot replace the inches I lost to years of meager fare in Castle Falbirg.

I am plain. I am forgettable. I am what I was for ten years: Gisele’s perfect servant.

I slip the pearls into a pocket and button it tight. I will not risk leaving them hidden in a cushion. Not when I’m so close to being free of them, and of Gisele, for the rest of my life.

Right on cue, Hans's footsteps echo down the hall. I hunch my shoulders forward, lower my head, and slip outside, donning a look of worried vexation.

In my mind, the second card turns over: Greta the Maid.

"*There you are,*" Hans says. "*Greta, ja?*"

I jump as if he's startled me, then shut the parlor door and bob into a curtsy. My voice takes on a high, whispery rasp. "My apologies, it seems my mistress sent a few people to look for me in her need. I'm afraid she's had"—I watch as the smell of burnt silk reaches Hans—"an *accident*," I finish with just enough peevishness to suggest this is not an unusual occurrence. Hans's face softens with camaraderie. "I can't leave her, but I need my toilette satchel from the carriage."

Hans sighs, and his voice lowers. "Fine, I'll fetch it. And if the von Falbirg brat has any further accidents, try to make sure they're cheap ones."

I curtsy again. "My thanks." Once he's started down the hall, I duck back into the parlor and call in my drunken-Gisele voice, "*Greta!* What in the Blessed Empire of Almandy is taking so long?"

It is *certainly* loud enough for Hans to hear. If he is a dutiful man, he will hurry to the carriage house, which is even farther away than the new chapel.

But if Hans is as spiteful a servant as I was in Castle Falbirg, he will take his time.

Ten minutes at the least. Fifteen minutes at the most.

Greta the Maid and Gisele the Princess fall back into their dance on the table in my mind's eye, circling the third and final card I've yet to reveal.

This is how you win the game, you know. Show them what they want to see, let them think they can win, let them follow the cards. Keep their eyes where you want them.

And never, ever lose sight of the real mark.

I trade the cap for the dull gray kerchief to cover my inconveniently bright ginger braid. Then I take up the linen drawstring bag and fold it into another pocket, checking one corner for a familiar weight: a single red penny.

It's there. And it's time.

I turn my final card. It is a shifting shadow, a blur in the night, a faceless specter. It could be a ghost. It could be anything.

After all . . . no one's ever seen the *Pfennigeist*.

Once upon a time, there was a girl as cunning as the fox in winter, as hungry as the wolf at first frost, and cold as the icy wind that kept them at each other's throats.

Her name was not Gisele, nor was it Greta, nor even *Pfennigeist*. My name was—is—Vanja. And this is the story of how I got caught.