

HEINRICH'S PROLOGUE:
BERNARD FROM BAUDRECOURT

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“Master Heinrich?” a woman's voice whispered from the darkness.

Bernard hesitated at the doorway, placing a steadying hand against the frame as he processed the sound of his alias. He had let himself drink more than was good sense, certainly more than he normally would when sizing up a new target community, but the townsfolk had been generous and one beer had quickly turned into another. And then another. And then—how many had there been? Townspeople, especially Germans this deep in the Holy Roman Empire, were never so hospitable the first night.

“Hello?” he called back, his eyes searching the dimly lit room as they slowly adjusted from the torch light of the hallway. Silhouetted by the moonlight from the open window, he could make out the petite, feminine figure standing by his bed. One of the barmaids? Was it the buxom raven-haired girl? No, he reasoned, too short to be her.

It must be the brunette who had interspersed the night with quick, furtive glances and the all-too-knowing smiles.

“Come in. Close the door,” she instructed. Her voice was throaty and soothing to hear, but there was a quaver to her words that betrayed a sense of nervousness. Or maybe excitement.

Yeah, he thought with a self-satisfied smirk, definitely the brunette.

He stepped inside, placing his valuable bag of merchandise to the side as he closed the door. Taking a deep breath, he moved towards the girl. The room's old wooden floor squeaked softly with each step.

“My name is Gertrude,” she whispered quickly. “I came as soon as I could.”

“I bet you did.”

“I was worried you wouldn't come to your room in time.”

“I bet you were.” He stepped close to her, almost brushing against her body. He placed a hand up against her cheek. “But I'm here now, aren't I? So there is no need to worry any more, is there?”

“What do you think you're doing?” she hissed at him, slapping his hand away from her face.

“Well, what... um... what we're supposed to be—I don't know, what do you think you're doing, huh?” Bernard sat down on the straw bed. A rat scurried from underneath the blanket across the room to a wardrobe across the room. His thoughts felt hazy, though with some effort he could still bring them into focus. He was not drunk, but he could tell he had only been a few more beers from losing any sense of perspective. The whole night had fast become confusing.

“My lady sent me to get you.”

“Your lady? Maybe things are looking up.”

"She said you'd be back. Honestly, I didn't think so, but here you are."

"So I am," Bernard answered cheerfully. "Who's your lady?"

"The lady Kirsten," Gertrude said.

She looked at him, waiting for a reaction. He stared at her in silence. Had he met a Kirsten down in the beer hall? No. At least he didn't think so. "Who?"

"The lady Kirsten," Gertrude repeated slowly.

A general sense of uneasiness took over his stomach. There was something to that name, after all. Something significant. His silence grew more awkward as he plodded through half-remembered thoughts and images. It was somewhere deep inside, at the fringe of his mind. God, what was it? That the name triggered any memories at all was disconcerting enough to set off half a dozen mental warning bells. It was a common enough name, but there was... something.

The young woman coughed uncomfortably. "Your lover?"

There it was! Oh god.

He felt as though he had been struck. The haze lifted and was replaced with a sobering and panicked clarity. He'd been in this town before, he realised. And within the last two years. He'd used the same name as his first visit and hadn't changed anything about his appearance. He'd used the same name? He had broken the rules of any good confidence man. He closed his eyes, desperately trying to remember his last visit. What had he sold? Was it enough to get him in any serious trouble? Fake saint relics? The milk of the Virgin? Was it his ground rat bones that were supposed to cure tuberculosis? Carefully carved "mandrake" root to cure infertility? His acidic teeth whiteners? Goose droppings to cure baldness? No, he realised with a relieved sigh, he hadn't sold any of his usual artifacts or cures.

"We have to go," she said, tugging at the sleeve of his shirt. "You're not safe here."

"What? Why am I not safe?"

"The Burgomeister has a price on your head. The whole town knows. But he wants you alive. He says he wants to tie the rope around your neck himself."

"What? He wants me dead? But why?"

"He won't tell people much details, but does say while you were a guest you stole a family treasure."

Bernard's eyes widened. "What? That's ridiculous! I never took anything from him. There isn't anything in this town even worth taking." As an afterthought, he added with less sincerity "And I never steal."

"It's just his story, because he doesn't want others to know the real truth." She cleared her throat before continuing, "It isn't what you stole from him. It's what you took from his daughter."

"Look, I never—Oh. I see." Even in the dim moonlight from the window, he could see the unimpressed gaze directed his way from the small woman. "God, I have to get out of here now."

"Don't go out that door," she ordered him. "If you try to leave out the front door, I can't help you. Everyone down there knows that the burgomeister wants you. They'll be rewarded for keeping you occupied."

"Why not just catch me and hand me over?"

"They remember that you have managed to be good friends with both the pope and the anti-pope. They are concerned with the being the one to actually hand you over."

Forged indulgences, he remembered. That's what he'd been selling the last time he was in the region. Those beautiful little pieces of paper had been blessed by God after all. "What do I do?"

"Follow me," she said, motioning to the open window. "Lady Kirsten will get you safe."

He hesitated, looking at the open window as the beginnings of doubt began to trickle into his thoughts. Was it an elaborate ruse? To what end, he could not fathom, but it seemed far too convenient that this young servant would be sent to save him on the orders of a one night stand. Something was still wrong and it bothered him. Somewhere outside, he heard the faint and distant barks and growls of dogs. Angry dogs.

Gertrude gasped. "It's the burgomeister's hunting mastiffs."

Suddenly, Bernard felt the hesitation flow away. He grabbed his pack of merchandise from the door and tossed it over his shoulder. "Let's go."

Gertrude slipped over the windowsill and quickly started down an old, rickety ladder perched against the two story inn. Bernard was amazed at the speed and ease her small frame travelled the ladder, especially as his own alcohol-dulled reflexes faltered with each precarious rung.

"Hurry!" she hissed at him from the ground.

"I am hurrying," he grumbled. Light from the candles and torches in the main hall streamed out from the windows on the first floor. There was singing and laughing. He had to admire those people, they had managed to gain his confidence with as much skill as any man in his profession. Free mugs of the local beer. Loud, pleasant laughter at every one of his bad jokes. Encouragement for each unlikely story he told. They had done fantastic work.

His bag slipped from his hand and landed in the grass with a soft thud. Something rolled free and into the woods. He winced as he continued down the ladder, hoping that his acids and more expensive items would be unharmed. The moment his feet touched the ground he rushed to his bag. He had spent years collecting and purchasing the right materials for his travels, he knew what would sell in volume and what would bring in the most profit. Starting over could only be a last resort.

“Something escaped,” Gertrude said, pointing into the woods.

Bernard nodded, feeling a sense of relief as he closed the bag tightly. Most of it was in good order. “It was just a skull of John the Baptist as a child.”

“Sweet saints. Such a miracle?” Gertrude crossed herself. “I’m so sorry I rushed you. We must find it. I think it rolled in the bush.”

“Don’t worry about it. I still have five left,” he said casually, slinging the the pack over his shoulder. “What now?”

They pulled down the ladder from the side of the building and dropped it in the blades of the high grass at the edge of the trees. The sound of the dogs drew nearer. She waved him to follow, motioning towards the trees. Lifting up her skirts to her knees, she ran into the thick woods that surrounded the community. Bernard glanced back into the town proper, towards the main road, and could see the movement of torchlight drawing close to the inn. Taking a deep breath, he pulled his eyes away from the approaching lights and plunged in after Gertrude.

There was no path, but that did not seem to slow down the young woman. She turned and weaved around the trees and bushes with practised ease. Bernard felt the branches and pine needles scratch his face as he desperately tried to keep up, stumbling more than once over the roots exposed throughout the forest floor. She seemed to pull

farther and farther ahead of him. Only the moonlight streaming through the open canopy let him keep the shadow figure in view.

His heart was pounding fast and his breath already felt weak and shallow. His life had always meant dealing with the possibility that they were coming for you. Given a long enough time frame, luck would eventually be on the other man's side and his had been well past due. He had never let the threat stray too far away from his mind, but it had always been nothing more than a hypothetical fear only—like the existence of a chimera, a dragon or a vengeful God—and lacked enough reality to strike much day-to-day concern in him. Confronted with it for first time, he found his mind locked and unable to think. All the plans he'd made over the years for such a situation seemed ludicrous, hopelessly naïve, and constructed on the foundation of overly confident self-delusions that rapidly diminished with each step deeper into the woods. It was comforting, almost primal, to just run after the girl claiming to be his guide.

They ran for what felt like hours to Bernard. She kept pushing onward, making so many turns he began to wonder if she really knew the way at all. He could feel the dogs and the burgomeister's men breathing down his neck. The sense of panic began to seep back into his mind. Every step they took seemed impossibly loud. They must have heard them running through the woods, the sticks breaking under their feet and the rustling of the branches might as well echo back to the town. Oh, God.

He pushed the thoughts down and focused on the pain his body was feeling. The tightening chest. The throbbing, burning in his legs. The bitter, iron taste in his mouth. The pain knotting in his stomach from the beer. He had gotten lazy living as a parasite off the work of others, doing little more than walking from town to town. So wonderfully lazy, he thought fondly. I can't keep up if she keeps going. I'll be left

behind. To die at some angry father's hands, assuming the dogs didn't want a meal first. If only she would stop.

She slowed to a walk as the ground began to slope upward. When Bernard caught up, he bent over to catch his breath, resting his pack on the ground. He felt comfort in the fact that she was also breathing hard. "Tired.. huh? I.. don't blame... you," he said between desperate breaths. "We can.. rest a moment.. How long did we run?"

She looked up in the sky. "Not long. The moon hasn't moved nearly at all. Look, she's up there." Gertrude pointed between the trees up along the slope. A long shadow, barely visible in the moonlight, was marching back and forth impatiently on the hilltop beside a short, thick tree. "Let's go."

They walked up the hill. His was able to control his breathing as they drew closer. Why had this woman done this for him? He had been with a number of women throughout his homeland of France and across the vast Holy Roman Empire—some were beautiful conquests, most were plain and merely bored with their small existence—but he would never have counted on any of them to go to such lengths for him. He had always assumed that when he moved on to the next town they forgot him as quickly as he did them.

"Lady Kirsten?" Gertrude called softly as they near the small grove on the hill. "I've brought Master Heinrich, as you requested."

The woman waiting at the top turned at the voice. The moment he saw her, Bernard remembered Kirsten instantly. Young. Innocent. Almost bashful. Long, straight blond hair and big, pale blue eyes. She'd been a romantic, obsessed with minstrels' tales, and made every moment of her life an elaborate drama. She had wanted to play a part in every story that came her way and was filled with a deep-seated desire to divorce

herself from the reality of her place in a small, unimportant town in the eastern part of the Empire. He had played to that and played to it well. Even if he could not recall the names, he never really forgot the pretty ones.

Her mouth opened to say something, but no words came out. She closed her mouth and tears started to well in her eyes. Then she ran to him and tossed her arms around him, pressing her head down against his chest. "Oh, Heinrich, my love."

Bernard raised his arms and awkwardly placed them around her in a comforting gesture. The situation was so new and uncomfortable. "Yes, it's me. Heinrich. That's me."

"I always had confidence you would return to me," she said through her sniffles. She tilted her head up and looked into his eyes. Large tears streaked down her face. "Just as you did promise."

"Yes," he said, gently, turning his eyes away rather than look directly at her. He ran a comforting hand through her hair. "I came back just for you."

"Ha." Bernard and Kirsten both looked sharply towards Gertrude. She had a hand covering her mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to be so loud."

"Lady, you'd best hurry," came a deep male voice, startling Bernard. The long, lanky figure he had mistaken as a short tree was actually a man of enormous height. His features were largely hidden in the deep shadows, but the depth and unconcealed irritation of his voice made Bernard very nervous.

Kirsten nodded, rubbing at her eyes. "You're quite correct, Hans." With a sigh, she stepped away from Bernard's arms. "Oh, Heinrich, my love, there is but few moments, but I am so very glad that God has given me this opportunity to see and hold you one last time before..."

"Before?"

"Before I am wed," she said, struggling with the words. "I am so sorry. It is my father's will. I would that it were you, but I dare not break faith with my father again. We have so little time. My father has set loose his hounds."

"I had noticed that."

"And word of your description has already gone out to the county. We must move with haste. Hans, please come closer."

Hans walked forward with long, slow strides. Bernard inadvertently stepped back. The man's face looked as though it was carved into the side of a tree, with harsh lines marking his skin like the ridges in the bark and a long often-broken nose like the end of snapped and twisted branch. Two coal-coloured eyes never wavered from the smaller man and held such contempt and fire that Bernard believed the giant was mentally breaking every bone in Bernard's body twice. In his massive hands was a small bundle of dark cloth.

Kirsten smiled and took the bundle from the giant, handling it like precious glass. "Come closer, my love."

Bernard hesitated. If he stepped just a little closer he would easily be within Hans' reach. If he remained where he was, however, he felt certain from the man's dark eyes that Hans would make it his business that Bernard was within his reach. He moved to Kirsten's side.

She pulled the cloth from the bundle, revealing a young, sleeping baby only a few months old. His round face looked at peace and thick blond hair was already sprouting across the top of his head. "This is my pride and joy. He looks so much like his father that I gave them the same name," she said warmly, kissing the baby on the forehead. "My little Heinrich."

"That's sweet," Bernard answered in a bored fashion, his thoughts still slow and distracted as he considered how best to portray the character he had created for her months earlier. Then, suddenly, all concerns about the role he was to play in Kirsten's drama seemed unimportant and were quickly forgotten. "Wait. You mean me? You mean me! Are you sure?"

A pained expression crossed Kirsten's soft features. "Are you suggesting I've been less than loyal to you? That I'd forget what we swore to one another?"

"Well... yes. No?"

"There has never been another. Neither have I had the inclination or the opportunity. Father kept me in seclusion to hide my developing problem from the town. It has only been in the last months that I've returned. I've always been visiting someone someplace distant or ill for any number of excuses. It has been a lonely time. But I've gladly endured it for this symbol of our brief love together." Bernard winced at the earnestness of her answer. She had been, if nothing else, completely sincere in her own melodramatic manner. "Have you not also been loyal to me, as we vowed?"

Bernard nervously looked up at Hans' harsh, immobile face. Trying to swallow, he found his mouth was dry. "Of course. No one else."

She smiled and it was as though the sun had broken through a storm. "Here, hold our son."

"Ah, no. No. Don't do that. I—Hey boy."

His son. It terrified him to look down at the small face sleeping awkwardly in his arms. So serene, relaxed, and so unencumbered by the world. Where could she see him in this little creature? Heinrich yawned and shifted in his hands, smiling as he fell back into his deep sleep.

"He smiled," Bernard said in surprise, his voice almost a whisper.

"He has been doing that more and more of late. I think he knows who you are," she said, sighing gently. She pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve as her eyes began to water again. "He has your brown eyes."

"Lady," Gertrude said, moving to her mistress' side. "Time is getting short."

Kirsten nodded, fighting back her tears. "The marriage is nothing but politics, Heinrich, but such is everything. I just desired you to be aware of that. So, this is very much our good-bye." She leaned forward and placed her hand on Bernard's face, running her fingers across his cheek and brushing his moustache. She kissed Bernard with salty, tear-stained lips, as she struggled to keep her emotions under control. She pulled away slowly and then bent down and kissed her son on the forehead. "Such a good boy."

Then he certainly doesn't take after me, Bernard thought as he looked down at the infant.

With a deep breath, Kirsten turned and began to walk away. "Take good care of our son."

It was not until her second step that the words made any sense. "Whoa. Hold on. Wait. You're forgetting... um... Heinrich, here."

"He must be with his father now," she answered, keeping her back to him. "I'll miss him dearly."

"No, no. He can't come with me. Where does a child fit in my life? So I'll just pat him on the head, like so, and give him back to you and the walking tree there."

"He has to be with you, Heinrich my love."

"Look, I really think--" Bernard's words were cut short as Hans placed a hand on his shoulder. The giant's grip was not painful, but it had the hints of strength and of potential violence that effectively silenced Bernard's protests.

“They will kill him if he remains with me,” Kirsten said calmly, still dabbing at her eyes as she turned to look at him. “My husband is unaware and should he discover the truth about my frequent absences, he will murder our son. My father has only suffered his existence because I’ve gone to great lengths to keep him hidden so as not to constantly remind him. I need to know that at least one of his parents is with him. I don’t want him to be alone.”

Bernard did not answer. In the distance he heard the sound of excited barking. They could not be far.

Gertrude tugged at Kirsten’s dress. “Milady, we have to go now.”

She nodded her agreement and then looked back towards Bernard. “Trust in Hans. The bridge is already well guarded with my father’s men. The river is impassible but for a single area. Hans will lead you there. When our son is older, explain to him why it is I let him go. That I desired so much he might grow up happy and knowing his father. Tell him I loved him so very much.” She turned away from him, looking down the hill. Her posture was stiff, but Bernard could see the faint shudders along her shoulders. “I’m so glad we had this one last opportunity, darling Heinrich. You’ll never be far from my thoughts.”

“Now wait--” Hans’ grip tightened and Bernard felt his knee buckle under the sudden spasm of pain. “I mean, yeah. Me too, Kirsten.”

“Good-bye,” she said in a hushed tone before running away from the hilltop and disappearing into the darkness. Bernard watched as she fled, her blonde hair flying as a banner in the wind. Did she understand what she had done? Her nobility and irresponsible stupidity was just another part of the role she’d assumed during their ‘courtship’. There was no way she understood who he was—she still believed the lies

with all the desperate tenacity of a child faced with the hint of reality—or what she had done.

He looked up at Hans. The man was glaring down at him with narrowed eyes, measuring Bernard against some unseen scale and finding him wanting. He understood, Bernard knew, even if his lady did not. The implicit threat and promise in his silences made that clear. He said so much in his silences.

One of the hunting dogs howled, making Bernard keenly aware of how much distance they had bridged in his short time with Kirsten. There was little time left—he and the giant were exposed and vulnerable on the hilltop—he had to escape now while the opportunity was present. He could worry about the consequences of everything later. It had always served him in the past to put things in that order, he thought as he clutched his son close to his chest. “So... Hans. Where is that way out?”

There was a hesitation. Was he considering the reward from the burgomeister? Was he clever enough to betray Kirsten? He released his hand from Bernard's shoulder and pointed to the east. “Down there. Follow me.”

Running down the hill, the baby in his arms woke and started to cry. “Shh, shh. Come on, be quiet little Heinrich,” he whispered to the child. “I know how you feel, believe me. I feel the same way. Just be calm, at least for a little while longer. Until daddy knows he'll survive.”

