

OCCASIONS OF SIN

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To Sheila, who keeps our life going while I'm lost in Berlin.

1

The main gate was locked. At that hour just before dawn, the nuns were in chapel singing *Lauds*. Their combined voices, nearly one hundred strong, could easily drown out the gate bell, no matter how insistently it was rung. Shivering as much from lack of sleep as the cold, I considered what to do. Hours might pass before someone opened the gate. The morning air was unbearably cold. Not even my fur coat kept out the chill. I could run the motorcar engine for warmth but only briefly.

The most sensible option was to continue on foot. In the pre-dawn light, the path was indistinct, but my feet knew it well and could find the way. Even so, I stepped carefully. During the night, a late-season frost had glazed the stones, rendering them treacherous.

My key to the rear gate was ancient and threatened to break off in the rusty lock, but after some anxious moments and patient fussing, the hasp sprang open. The hinges of the chapel door liked to squeal, so I opened it carefully. A noisy entrance would only underscore my late arrival. As I ascended to the gallery, I paced my step to the ebb and flow of the chant.

From the front row of the gallery, the view of the chapel below was perfect. A white-veiled novice rose to intone the antiphon. The sisters answered—statement and response—as orderly as a syllogism. Their singing had a pure, flute-like tone, like that of a boys' choir. But for all its beauty, it was devoid of feminine warmth, as if the vow of chastity applied to the nuns' voices as well.

The repetition of the chant, combined with the familiar scent of molten candle wax and day-old incense, lulled me into a stupor. I resisted the urge to sleep by revisiting my school days. The convent school was in recess for the Easter holiday, otherwise I would be surrounded with fidgeting, sniffing girls. The memory was so vivid, I could practically smell the distinctive aroma of wool uniforms washed too infrequently.

"*Nunc Dimittis servum tuum,*" the nuns finally sang and began to depart in orderly columns. Eventually, I would be obliged to make my

presence known to their leader, but there was no need to hurry. I was already late, and in an ancient place like Obberoth, haste is absurd.

The superior general of the order stood at the refectory door to bless the nuns as they entered. The first glimpse of her after a long absence always gives me a little pain because she so resembles her sister, my dear grandmother, who now lies in the chapel crypt. Both had the great height that is usual in our family, eyes pale as ice chips, and a marvelous complexion that defies age. I am like them in all things, save the eyes. Mine are dark like my mother's.

My grandaunt gestured to the empty place beside her at the high table. As the hereditary patroness of the order and grandniece of its leader, I am always given a position of honor. Reverend Mother began the prayer before meals, and a hundred pairs of lips moved to join her, raising a noise like the buzzing in a great hive. At the conclusion of the prayer, the novices assigned to serving the meal emerged from the kitchen with loaves of newly made bread still warm from the ovens. This was accompanied by fresh butter, Obberoth's famous cheese, and thick, tart, plum preserves. There was no conversation. Speaking during the meal was forbidden except for an inspirational reading. The day's selection was taken from the writings of Elisabeth von Schönau. My grandaunt, reputed to have visions herself, has always been fond of mystical texts.

The side of my face, where curious eyes inspected me, suddenly began to tingle. Of course, any visitor in the cloister is a novelty, but in a scarlet Chanel suit, I was rather conspicuous. Surely, the culprit would be a postulant not fully trained in the custody of the eyes, but to my surprise, the curious nun wore the black veil of the professed. And she was uncommonly handsome, fine-featured, with good bone structure and intelligent eyes. When I returned her gaze frankly, she lowered hers at once. My grandaunt, who had noticed the exchange, gave me a mildly disapproving look. I returned my attention to my meal.

After breakfast, my grandaunt invited me to her study. Behind closed doors, she allowed an embrace, although the Rule states: "A sister shall not touch another person unnecessarily nor allow herself to be touched." How

curiously sexless nuns seem under all that serge and linen, and how inhumanly clean they always smell.

My grandaunt opened the conversation with the usual polite exchange, inquiring about the health of my father, which had been tenuous of late, and asking after my children. Finally, she got around to admonishing me for my tardiness. "You were to arrive last night...or is my memory beginning to fail?"

"No, *Tante*. No fault of your memory. I was detained by an emergency." I reached for her letter opener. The miniature rapier was a trophy from one of my youthful fencing tournaments. Her keeping such a sentimental item, however useful, was against the Rule, but where I was concerned, there were always exceptions.

"You might have telephoned."

"I was in surgery until midnight. By then your switchboard was closed."

My grandaunt, usually so reserved, permitted me to see a rare display of surprise. "You drove from Berlin...through the night? Suppose you had dozed and driven off the road?"

"But I am here and on time for the interview." She gave me a hard look, no doubt hoping to make her point without the need to elaborate. I shrugged. Having once been her student, I was quite familiar with this trick.

"Perhaps you will find this appointment more suitable, having a hand in the selection." There was no need to explain how rare this privilege was. In a hospital run by nuns, the superior appoints the senior staff. "Three head nurses dismissed...in less than a year. Margarethe, how could you allow this to happen?"

We had discussed the matter at length. Even for the sake of argument, I was not about to repeat my objections. "They were incompetent."

"I cannot promise you perfection."

"Competence is all I ask."

"There are many able sisters in the order, but precious few willing to work with you."

“You mustn’t believe everything they say,” I said brandishing her little rapier. For such a diminutive weapon, it had nice balance.

She shrugged. “I pay them no mind. I know you better than you know yourself.”

An exaggeration, but there was some truth in her statement. My grandaunt had played an important role in the formation of my character. When my parents had wrenched me, aged eleven, from my British school, my grandaunt was given charge of my education. Dear *Tante*, such a model of patience! What, after all, can one do with an extraordinarily bright child who torments the good sisters with ingenious pranks? One who tests recipes for explosives in the courtyard? Who rappels off the convent wall on a rope of bed sheets? Who puts washing powder in the nuns’ sugar bowls? Obviously, the solution is to provide her with a microscope, teach her the calculus, and give her Aristotle to read.

A great scholar in her own right, my grandaunt delighted in challenging my intellect until she realized that she had no more to teach me. She proudly sent me, just shy of my fifteenth birthday, up to Oxford. My father, a great Anglophile, had begun the tradition. He had studied military history at Balliol after a stint as student ambassador from Gross Lichterfelde to Sandhurst. And it was my grandaunt who encouraged me to study medicine. The idea appalled my parents at first, but she smoothed their feathers by explaining how fashionable it had become for the high-born of my generation to study for a profession. Left unsaid were the reasons—lack of reliable income and crushing mortgages on ancestral estates. The Great War had only made matters worse.

“I expected to have the candidate’s dossier by now,” I said, smiling to indicate tolerance, although the delay irritated me. “I prefer to be prepared for an interview.”

She smiled one of her shrewd, little smiles. “Yes, you always like to be prepared. I promise you will have it soon. For now, suffice it to say that Sister Augustine is our infirmarian and exceptionally well qualified.”

This was more than a recommendation. The infirmarian in the order’s mother house had great responsibility. She attended to the sisters’ ills and

looked after the elderly who had begun to fail. By tradition, she acted as a physician, prescribing medication, even performing minor surgery. There was a convent physician, but he was consulted only under the direst circumstances. For that reason, when I visited Obberoth, I always made a point of making myself available to any sister who wished a doctor's attention.

"I have no recollection of your Sister Augustine. Was her appointment recent?"

"Before Christmas."

"A rather brief tenure. Can you spare her?"

"Your need for a head nurse is urgent. And Sister Augustine requested this duty."

"*Really?*" This interesting news caused me to sit up straight. "Perhaps the rumors about me have yet to reach the infirmary."

Ordinarily, my attempt at irony would elicit a quick retort, but my grandaunt frowned. "Margarethe, I am doing my utmost to find you a suitable head nurse. It has not been easy. You could help me by keeping an open mind."

"An open mind?" I muttered to myself, as I undressed in the spare cell I would occupy during my stay. In the end, I had yielded to my grandaunt's argument that a well-rested mind makes better decisions. I would sleep a few hours before the interview.

After arranging my clothes in as orderly a fashion as one might in a place with no coat hangers, I lay down on the little iron cot. I forced all thoughts from my mind and instantly fell asleep. A physician learns this trick early in a career or soon collapses from exhaustion.

When I heard the soft rap at the door, it seemed but moments later, when, in fact, hours had passed. Awakened from the deepest sleep, my mind was in a fog. Another knock, louder this time. "A moment, please," I called, rummaging in my bag for something to wear. There was no time to be particular, so I dashed into a pair of moleskin trousers and shrugged on an old military sweater smelling faintly of cedar and the dampness in the cellars of Schloss Edelheim.

My mouth tasted like an army had marched through it, so I took a moment to rinse it with anise drops. There came another knock, sharper this time. Irritated by my visitor's impatience, I flung open the door. There stood the same nun who had been eyeing me at breakfast. Startled, she bowed and addressed me in the convent manner. "*Benedicite*."

"*Dominus*," I replied, correctly, which seemed to discomfit her even more. She stared at my trousers, although trousers for women were now all the rage. She took in my height, which always seems to make an impression. Even in stocking feet, I am taller than most men. Finally, the woman remembered her manners and lowered her gaze. "Reverend Mother has sent me to wake you."

"Thank you, Sister..."

"...Augustine."

The candidate! Obviously, my grandaunt hoped to give her an advantage through this unflattering preview of her potential employer. Anyone is less intimidating when disheveled and barefoot. No doubt, the perpetual cowlick at the crown of my head was standing at full attention.

Unfortunately for my grandaunt's scheme, I am not put off balance so easily. I pulled myself up to my full height and thrust out my hand in greeting. Such a worldly gesture is completely out of place in a convent, but after a long moment of hesitation, the nun took my outstretched hand. Her bones felt delicate under my fingers, so I moderated my grip. I must admit I held her hand longer than is usual for a greeting. She continued to regard me warily, while I allowed myself the pleasure of returning the inspection.

The woman's physical gifts were evident despite the concealing coif and veil. Her pale complexion was nearly translucent. Delicately arched, auburn eyebrows suggested that under the veil, her hair was red. Her bow-shaped mouth seemed to smile without smiling, and there was an ethereal look in her blue eyes. I found it difficult to imagine that a woman of such otherworldly beauty could be the competent administrator I sought. However, given my ever-shrinking pool of candidates, I was willing to be otherwise persuaded.

“Reverend Mother tells me we are to begin our meeting at eleven o’clock,” she said. “If that doesn’t suit you, we could meet later in the day. Perhaps this afternoon, after recreation?”

Something in the woman’s speech caused me to listen carefully. The lilting cadence and the rising note at the end of phrases sounded foreign.

“The earlier, the better,” I said in English, testing a hunch.

Her eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“How did I know? Only that you speak German with a brogue!”

She blinked, then frowned. “You’ve read my file.”

“No, I haven’t. Perhaps you’ll bring it to our meeting?”

A unidentifiable flicker of emotion crossed her face. “I shall meet you in Reverend Mother’s office at eleven o’clock,” she replied briskly.

A glance at my watch indicated there was little time to put myself in order. However, I could not face the interview without bathing. While the steam rose around me in the nun’s communal shower, I congratulated myself for having the good sense to provide the convent with a reliable boiler and modern plumbing. In my view, this counted as wiser patronage of the order than contributing to the nuns’ endless building funds.

I chose a dark suit to make a business-like impression and went about making myself presentable. Because my profession can demand my time at any hour of the day or night, my hair is short. It dries quickly and can easily be made right without consulting a mirror—an advantage in a convent where looking at one’s image is forbidden. A compact perched on a window ledge must do to apply makeup.

The reflection in the glass confirmed why my English friends say I am the quintessential Prussian. My blond hair has darkened only a little since childhood. In summer, it still bleaches nearly to white. The planes in my face are angular, the blue eyes deeply set, and the features, thankfully, regular.

When I arrived in the superior general’s office, the candidate was waiting, her eyes modestly downcast, her hands banished into her sleeves. She

cut the very image of a dutiful nun. To get my mental bearings, I took my time filling my fountain pen from the ink well on the desk. Opening my notebook to a fresh page, I wrote the date: *2 April 1931*.

“Have you brought me your file, Sister?” I asked in English.

She replied, to my satisfaction, in kind. “Reverend Mother tells me you shall have it in a few hours. The documents are being updated.”

“I see,” I said, making no attempt to hide my annoyance. “Then I must ask your patience with my questions. Describe, if you will, your professional background. As we are seeking a surgical nurse, please begin with your experience in the operating theater.”

She explained that she had been first surgical assistant at the order’s hospital in Munich and later at St. Clothilde’s in Bremen. We discussed postoperative protocols, which led to a lively debate over the care of surgical drains and eventually, the topic of breast cancer, a subject dear to my professional interests. Sister Augustine astonished me with her knowledge. When she was expressing a medical opinion, her convent modesty seemed forgotten. She looked me directly in the eye and spoke with great confidence.

“Sister, I find your strong opinions...” I hesitated, searching for a tactful way to express my impression, “...most refreshing.” At once, she cast down her gaze. I had paid her no compliment, of course. Nuns ought to be silently obedient and ever humble. Yet neither had I intended criticism. I liked the idea of a nun with spirit, and this one evidently also had a first-class brain.

“Where did you train, Sister?”

“St. Gertrude’s in Dortmund.”

“I hear that the nursing school in Dortmund is quite good.”

“You are well informed, Countess.”

“Please, Sister,” I said mildly, “in a professional setting, I am known only by my professional title. *Frau Doktor* will do.”

“As you wish, *Frau Doktor*,” she replied with undue emphasis. I studied her face for signs of insolence but found none.

“Tell me, Sister, about your most recent post, before you were assigned to oversee the infirmary.”

“I was assigned to St. Elisabeth’s, our hospital in Hamburg.”

I made a note of this. “In what capacity?”

She hesitated so long that I looked up to see why. Finally, she said, “I was the director of nursing.”

My surprise was difficult to conceal. The director of nursing in the order’s largest hospital had dozens of nurses under her charge and great administrative responsibilities. It was a prestigious role considered a stepping stone to higher office. Being Obberoth’s infirmarian was clearly a demotion. “What was the reason for your reassignment?”

She blushed fully crimson, having the sort of complexion that colors at the least embarrassment. “It was a spiritual matter.”

This response made me instantly wary. In the convent, the words “spiritual matter” were often code for psychological or disciplinary issues. “Please elaborate, if you will, Sister,” I said, setting down my pen and leaning on my hand.

“Reverend Mother thought the discipline of the mother house would be helpful, so she recalled me from mission. Eventually, the post of infirmarian became open.”

“I have no wish to tread on your spiritual affairs, Sister, but surely you understand why I must probe this matter.”

“*Frau Doktor*, if you have any doubts, you may ask Reverend Mother.”

She could count on it.

“Meanwhile, I have a patient with persistent bronchitis. Perhaps you will examine her?”

We went to the infirmary. I noted that the floors were spotless and the linens immaculate. While I listened to the ill sister’s lungs, I was keenly aware of Sister Augustine’s eyes on me. Was she evaluating my bedside manner? Surely, surgeons, who usually see their patients under the influence of ether, are not especially known for it. Whatever her thoughts, Sister Augustine seemed pleased that my examination confirmed her diagnosis.

One of the kitchen sisters rushed in, having just cut her hand with a knife. The towel that served as a bandage was soaked with blood, but there was no serious damage to the hand.

“Would you like to suture the wound, *Frau Doktor*, or shall I?” asked Sister Augustine.

It occurred to me that observing Sister Augustine at work could aid my evaluation. “You may proceed, Sister.” I watched as she deftly irrigated and closed the wound. Her work was quick and skillful, not a single wasted motion. She would be an asset in the operating theater.

She took me on her rounds. Most of her patients were elderly nuns living out their last days. Most were bedridden, some incontinent or suffering from dementia. All were nursed with the greatest tenderness and respect by the infirmary sisters.

She showed me the dispensary. I found it in excellent order, although I suggested, as tactfully as I could, that she consider replacing the herbal remedies with more modern alternatives. I certainly prefer Phenobarbital to Valerian as a sedative. Even Chloral is more reliable.

“I too doubted the efficacy of the old remedies,” said Sister Augustine, “but they have been used here for centuries.”

“Their potency cannot be controlled as precisely as compounds made by a chemist.”

“No, but the proof is empirical. One must use all one’s senses. Actually, I have been aided by the herbal written by your ancestor, Margarethe von Raithschau.” My grandmother, many times great, had not only been responsible for a pharmacopeia, for which she is justifiably famous, but also for involving my family with the nuns. Nearly seven centuries ago, the Countess of Raithschau and the superior of the Convent of Obberoth had become great friends, hence the oath that binds me to the order.

“Have you read Margarethe von Raithschau’s correspondence with Mathilde von Obberoth?” Sister Augustine asked.

“Years ago. When I was a girl.”

“You must read it again, now that you are grown and can appreciate it.”

I thanked her for the suggestion, although I found it rather imperti-

ment. It was highly unusual for the nuns to make recommendations, never mind engage me in such personal conversation. Seemingly unaware that she had overstepped, Sister Augustine smiled and went on with the tour. At its conclusion, she looked at me expectantly, no doubt hoping to hear that she had passed inspection. In fact, she had acquitted herself brilliantly. Yet I still sensed something amiss. I was determined to see her file before I made any decision. In its pursuit, I sought her superior.

At that hour, my grandaunt customarily took private meditation in her favorite oratory. The statue of the Madonna on the altar was admittedly an unconventional depiction of the Virgin Mother, especially for a convent. Instead of traditional blue, the Madonna of Obberoth wore red, white and black, and her belly was scandalously bulging with child. This bit of irreverence was my doing, of course. I had commissioned the carving as a gift on my grandaunt's golden jubilee as a nun. From the unusual colors of the statue's garments, she understood at once. "Apuleius," she said, with a little knowing smile and a wink. Translating *The Golden Ass* had been one of her favorite Latin assignments in my school days. I can recite it still. My grandaunt seemed nonplused by the statue's pagan inspiration, but she had no doubt learned long ago that acknowledging my mischief only encouraged me.

Mother Scholastica took no notice of my approach, enrapt as she was in contemplation of the image on the altar. She knelt perfectly erect, holding her arms outstretched in the form of a cross, a feat of athleticism she made to seem effortless—remarkable for a woman past seventy. Eventually, she rose from her knees in one graceful motion and stepped out into the light.

"What is it you wish, Margarethe?"

"Sister Augustine's records."

She rolled her eyes. "Child, you must learn patience! Now, find something constructive to occupy your time."

The idea of a brisk walk was appealing, especially after the long drive

from Berlin. So, I changed into my walking clothes and took the path up the great hill that forms the natural boundary between the convent's lands and my own. Just over the rise is my favorite spot, where on a clear day one can see the impregnable walls of Schloss Raithschau in the distance. While the present castle dates back to the sixteenth century, the walls are far more ancient. The house came with the title. Save for summers with my grandmother, I had never lived there. Since her passing, the place had been let to some wealthy tenants—noble Russians displaced by the Bolsheviks.

Often, when I gazed across the miles to the ancient keep, I wondered about my ancestor, also called Margarethe. How different her life must have been from mine. Although she commanded considerable wealth, there was precious little to be had—no indoor plumbing, nor reliable heat, nor even fresh vegetables in winter. Life was hard and all too brief. By my age, most women would have died of disease or in childbirth, and yet at thirty-four, I considered myself young.

But there were consolations. Margarethe's great friendship with Mother Mathilde, the prioress of Obberoth, was the stuff of legend. Their famous correspondence, now the great treasure of Obberoth's library, spanned nearly sixty years. In my student days, my grandaunt had insisted that I read it, as much to encourage my facility with medieval Latin, I think, as to learn my own history.

Their friendship was as passionate as it was enduring. Occasionally, the letters were so fervent, they made me blush. Far more troubling were the odd gaps in a flow that was otherwise constant. When I questioned my grandaunt about the lapses, she asked me to consider the many duties of a noblewoman overseeing a great house and a large estate. Moreover, Margarethe von Raithschau had borne a dozen children. The very thought of all those pregnancies was repellent, so I was easily distracted from my curiosity.

The bell tolling the hour interrupted my thoughts. The sisters would now be off to their duties—"obediences" as they are called in the convent—providing me with the opportunity to use the fine Bechstein I had given them. They tell me that my voice can be heard throughout the convent, so

I reserve my vocal practice for times when it will not disturb the nuns. I was not long into my practice when out of the corner of my eye, I saw the mistress of the choir bearing down.

“And what do you think you are doing?” Sister Elfriede asked, patting my head as if I were still a child. “Can you be learning *Winterreise!*”

“You know how I relish a challenge.”

“A challenge, yes, but *Winterreise* is the Mount Everest of *Lieder!* And it’s scored for a baritone.”

“It can be transposed. Lotte Lehmann sang it.”

“Yes, Lehmann. She tries everything, not always with success,” she said with a frown. “But if anyone can do it, you can!” She sighed. “A pity you can never have a career. It would have been spectacular!”

“You ought to talk! You gave up a successful career. Surely a greater pity.” She had been a diva of the opera. When she abruptly entered the convent, she left her admirers baffled and distraught. Some say it was a soured romance. Others, a lost pregnancy. I have yet to pry the real story out of her.

“You little heathen! How can you possibly understand?” She tapped me on the shoulder. “Get up. Let me play while you sing. So much easier to mind the singing when an accompanist plays.”

On returning to my quarters, I found a leather folder on my cot.

Finally. *The dossier.*

A quick scan revealed that the crisp papers had all been newly typed—copies rather than official documents. I found a summary of reports from convent superiors, a professional history, and a brief biography. The latter revealed that Sister Augustine had been born in the summer of 1901. She was raised in the city of Galway, where she attended local schools. So far, all seemed quite ordinary apart from the curious fact that an Irish woman was living in a German convent. I turned the page only to be stunned by what I read next. In addition to a university education, Sister Augustine held not only a medical degree from Heidelberg but also a doctorate.

Now the causal web began to reveal itself. Studying medicine at Heidelberg was likely the reason Sister Augustine had learned German. It also explained how she became acquainted with the nuns. The order operated a nearby hospital, which was affiliated with the university, and it was there that Sister Augustine had done her medical school clerkship.

Given her medical education, her training as a nurse was much abbreviated. Immediately afterward, she was made head nurse in one of the order's hospitals. She held progressively responsible posts until early 1930, when an otherwise distinguished nursing career was interrupted. For many months, she held no post at all until being assigned to the infirmary.

As I began to piece together the timeline, I also noticed that the date of her final vows was absent. A quick calculation told me that her final profession was more than a year overdue. Whatever had gone wrong, it had compromised her religious career as well.

Without pausing to change out of my walking attire, I went in search of Sister Augustine. Her little office was barely a closet off the dispensary. She was there, busily writing in a great ledger, no doubt entering the usual bits of information a nurse is required to keep—medication given here, water there, as well as a detailed record of the bodily functions of the patients under her care. Evidently, she had not heard me approach, so I took the opportunity to admire her unobserved. Eventually, she became aware of my presence and looked up. Again, she gave my trousers a look of disdain but then she smiled, which made her all the more attractive. I put aside my weakness for her beauty and assumed an appropriately stern expression. She instantly discerned what had brought me. "You've seen my file."

"Yes...*Frau Doktor*." Now it was my turn to give the title undue emphasis.

"Come in." She gestured to the straight-backed chair beside her desk, and I took a seat. She rose and closed the door. "You must keep this to yourself. No one in the community knows. Only Reverend Mother and the sister who keeps our records."

"Why is it such a secret?"

“It would singularize me among my sisters. The nursing sisters, especially, might be uncomfortable with the idea that I was once a physician.”

I allowed a long pause to elapse. To her credit, Sister Augustine endured my silent scrutiny far longer than most. Ordinarily, people feel compelled to fill the silence with chatter. “What else have you hidden from me, Sister?”

“Nothing material.”

I gave her a skeptical look.

“I assure you, *Frau Doktor*. Nothing that would affect my performance as your head nurse.”

“Indeed? How can I trust you when you’ve kept such an important fact from me?”

She raised her chin and replied, “It was not kept from you in particular and never would have been revealed except for Reverend Mother’s insistence. She thought you’d be angry if you discovered the facts later.”

In fact, I would have been furious, and that would have been the end of Sister Augustine’s tenure as my head nurse. But what was curious was my grandaunt’s conspiring to hide such a thing. She was a great champion of education for women. She always encouraged her nuns to achieve their fullest potential. “Was giving up medicine a condition of entering the convent?”

“No.”

“Then why would your superior squander such a resource?”

“Reverend Mother has never discouraged me from returning to medicine. Quite the contrary.”

“Then what prevents you?”

Sister Augustine lowered her gaze and shook her head. “I cannot say.”

I was rapidly losing patience. “Sister, if you do not tell me at once, I must find another head nurse.”

Despite my threatening words and tone of voice, she only shook her head and still refused to look at me. Exasperated, I left without even bidding her good day.



Throughout the afternoon, the burden of my decision pressed on my mind like a thorn. Clearly, I would never find Sister Augustine's equal in the order. Apart from her frustrating lack of candor, there was no objective reason to reject her.

During the evening meal, I felt my grandaunt's pale eyes scrutinizing me. No doubt, she knew an internal debate raged within me but said nothing.

By the time I finally came to her, the Great Silence had already begun. She often occupied her evenings with writing letters. As the leader of more than a thousand women, she was kept busy with correspondence. She was much sought after by the laity for spiritual advice and was as faithful as night and day. Without fail, she wrote to me weekly.

"*Tante*, I must speak with you," I said, standing in her doorway.

"Margarethe, you are breaking the Silence," she said with an admonishing look.

"Yes, but it is necessary conversation, I assure you."

Carefully, my grandaunt capped her pen and set it down. She gestured to a chair. "I was expecting you, my dear. I am only surprised that it has taken you so long." She put her hands in her sleeves and waited for me to open the conversation.

"Your Sister Augustine is surprisingly well educated," I finally said.

She gazed at me calmly. "So she is."

"She ought to be practicing medicine. Why not encourage her?"

"I have encouraged her."

"Evidently, your advice went unheeded."

"So, it has."

There seemed no alternative to asking my question bluntly. "Can you tell me why she quit medicine?"

"That is confidential. If Sister Augustine wishes you to know, she must tell you herself."

"But you can understand why I am uncomfortable employing her?"

"Actually not. She is not obligated to tell you every aspect of her history."

You must agree she is unquestionably qualified. What more can you ask?”

“Assurance that she is psychologically sound.”

My grandaunt’s eyes narrowed. “Is that what you fear? A psychological defect?”

“You abruptly removed her from a very responsible post. You brought her here to the mother house, no doubt for close supervision. She had no assignment for months. What should I think?”

She stared at me. Finally, she said, “Margarethe, this is none of your concern, but easily explained. The discipline of the mother house often benefits a nun struggling with her vocation.”

“Who had doubts about her vocation? You or she?”

“They were mutual.”

“But now you will allow her to leave the mother house. Has something changed?”

My grandaunt sighed. “Margarethe, you have no right to personal information about Sister Augustine, but she deserves the benefit of the doubt. She requested this appointment because she is finding life here, especially after such worldly responsibility, extremely difficult. For obvious reasons, she is an excellent infirmarian, and we shall miss her. But working in the world again may better enable her to decide about her vows.”

I nodded, seeing the wisdom of the plan. “If her choice is to be valid, it must be her own.”

“Which is precisely why you must promise not to interfere.”

“I would never...”

“Oh, really? You forget how well I know you. Now, swear to me, Margarethe von Stahle. Swear to me *on your honor* that you will not interfere.”

It was profoundly insulting to be asked to swear an oath, but I gave no sign of my indignation other than to raise a brow. “On my honor,” I repeated.

“Good. Now, we must end this conversation,” said my grandaunt, picking up her pen. “We have violated the Silence long enough.”