

Loyal to Myself

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It was a wonderful summer day. The blue sky was sparkling as the orange and yellow sunshine sifted through the picturesque clouds. A horse rider was seen crossing the meadow; her long and shining brown hair just flew after her. The woman was laughing loudly as the soft wind kissed her rose-cheeked face. She enjoyed being outside, riding her horse. She simply enjoyed the freedom that was given to her. Freedom was one of the two things she always knew she had to own to live a happy life. The other thing was love. That undefinable, strange, but still kind feeling. Love.

She felt that she is lucky to have these two important things in her life. Without these she would be lost and couldn't find the role God planned her to take on. Her life could have gone in different directions, but she was happy to find her own way, the way that made everything perfect. As a child she thought a lot about what would happen with her as a grown woman, and she believed she had hoped for something like that. She didn't need money, hundreds of servants or the most expensive dresses. Just freedom and to be loved.

As she was leaving the meadow she could see her home. Yes, her home. She realised that she cannot imagine her life somewhere else than in this little, but beautiful castle. It was something that a princess may not accept, but she, as a countess, found it to be perfect.

As she reached the hammered gate she saw the postman waiting for her.

"Good afternoon, countess! I brought you a letter - it is from Vienna."

"Thank you, Bezzelt! Today is your daughter's birthday, isn't it? I send her our best wishes," the countess replied.

"Thank you, ma'am! I am sure she will be the happiest to hear this. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye! Have a nice day," the lady said as the postman was leaving.

She then realised what's in her hands - a letter from her sister.

"What are you reading?" She heard a familiar voice.

"A letter from Nené, it arrived just a minute ago," the lady replied with a smile on her face while turning to the man to whom the familiar voice belonged.

"When will you travel to her?" The man took a step closer and crossed his arm around the lady.

"The day after tomorrow," she said.

"So my Elisabeth, my dearest Sisi will leave me very soon," the man pretended to cry, but a warm smile sat on his face.

"Don't play, Friedrich! You already knew that I would visit my sister. She needs me in this difficult moment. And don't forget: I need you at the court ball. I take your presence into account."

"Should I really go? You know how much I suffer from being at the imperial court."

"Just as much as I. But my sister asked me to attend. She doesn't know whether she can take part or not, it depends on the time of the birth," Sisi replied.

"Well, then I believe I have no other option but to follow you to Vienna. I hoped I could stay at home with Hera," Friedrich said.

“No, my lord, Hera is coming with me. I have organised everything. While my sister needs me at the court I will stay at Schönbrunn, and your mother will look after Hera at her own palace. When you arrive in the city and I can leave Schönbrunn then all three of us will stay at your mother’s until we can return home,” the lady explained. She saw the pain on her husband’s face, but sadly couldn’t do anything about it. If her sister needs her, then she doesn’t have any other choices but helping and supporting her.

“Come, we should visit Hera,” Friedrich said and he went towards the castle together with his wife. When they reached the first floor they turned right and went through the not so long corridor until their daughter’s bedroom, which was located close to their own one. Sisi opened the door carefully and smiled at her daughter. Helene Victoria was sleeping peacefully. Memories went across Sisi’s head. It was not a long time after her and Friedrich’s first wedding anniversary when she gave birth to her first child around a year ago. Her mother-in-law really wished to welcome a new son and heir, but deep inside Sisi knew that her baby is a girl. They couldn’t decide about her name. Elisabeth wanted to name the baby after her sister, Helene, but Friedrich stuck to the name Victoria. It was possible to give both of the names to their daughter, but they cannot always call her by two names! Sisi’s younger brother, Carl Theodor, or as the family called him, Gackl solved the problem.

“I believe you should give her a nickname,” Sophie, Sisi’s youngest sister, said when all seven of Elisabeth’s siblings gathered together to see the baby for the first time last year.

“Call her Nené,” Maximilian, the youngest brother replied.

“You can’t call her Nené too,” the then seventeen-year-old Marie called out.

“What about a nickname that mixes both of the names? For example Heria? No, that doesn’t sound good. It should be rather Hera,” Gackl said, and everyone was satisfied with that name, especially the young parents.

*“The young spring returns again,
And trims the trees with new green,
And teaches every bird a new song,
And makes the flowers bloom more beautifully.*

*But what is springtime bliss to me
Between the walls of my family’s home?
We walk hand in hand along
Isar as the sun kisses us too.*

*My lips whisper for the darkness of trees,
As I want you to be with me,
To tell me your evening wishes
When we return to sleep.”*

Sisi smiled as she read her own poem. She wrote it only a few weeks after her wedding to Friedrich on a sunny summer day in 1857. She was full of love, hope and couldn’t imagine

to be happier.

“My Lady, we should leave within an hour, is everything ready?” Valerie, Elisabeth’s lady’s maid asked.

“Yes, everything is done. I just forgot to pack my diary - I should put it in my handbag. Thank you, Valerie,” Sisi replied.

Valerie bowed as she left the room. Sisi looked back to check if she packed everything - she didn’t want to leave anything important at home. After she looked through her bedroom - which she shared with Friedrich - and her dressing room as well she took a deep breath, closed all the doors and stepped to the corridor. As she went in front of her daughter’s room she saw that it’s empty - Hera’s packages were already downstairs. She also heard her daughter’s voice. With a smile on her face she went down. As Hera glimpsed her mother she reached towards Elisabeth and started laughing when her mother crossed her between her arms. Everyone could see how much they love each other. Their relationship was not like any other noble mother and daughter’s, Elisabeth wished to be close to her child and didn’t want to raise her strictly - she rather followed her parents’ example.

“These two days passed very fast, you’re already leaving me,” Friedrich said, but with a smile on his face. He always wanted to cause Sisi a sense of guilt when she travelled without him, even though this didn’t happen frequently and he knew that his wife will return to him, whatever happens.

“We haven’t even left, but I cannot wait to see you again at the court. Look after my dogs, please,” Sisi said while her husband blinked. That made her laugh. “Goodbye, darling,” she stepped closer to him. Friedrich kissed his daughter’s face, then asked the nanny to take Hera outside. He stayed together with Sisi only. Friedrich stepped even closer, crossed his arms around Sisi’s waist, and passionately kissed her.

“Goodbye, my dearest,” he whispered to Sisi’s ears when they separated from each other. A huge smile appeared on Elisabeth’s rose-cheeked face which made her even more beautiful.

Friedrich escorted her to the carriage and helped her sit in.

“Seeing you in a fortnight’s time in Vienna,” he said while waving to his departing family.

“In Vienna,” Sisi replied while waving as well, then she sat back to her place and closed her eyes. “In Vienna...”

Elisabeth was exhausted as her carriage went through the beautiful gates of Schönbrunn Palace the following day. The long journey through Austria made her tired. She felt herself alone. Her daughter was together with Sisi’s mother-in-law inside the city, her husband was far away from her. “At least I will see Nené very soon.” That was the only thought that brought her joy. Elisabeth didn’t enjoy being present at the Viennese imperial court. The palaces were beautiful, the food was very delicious, but she couldn’t accept the rules. The rules of the Viennese nobles. Sisi thought that they form a group and allow just a few new members. And she was right. Nené was accepted. But Nené was different from her sister; she was the calm lady who always thought before taking any actions. Sisi preferred to live to the moment. They were so different, but that made them complement each other.

Sisi was escorted to her beautifully decorated room not so far from the empress's apartment. Even though her only wish was to fall into the huge bed and sleep long hours she knew she had to change her clothes and welcome the Emperor and Empress of Austria.

"Valerie, this is beautiful! A wonder! How could you do this?" Elisabeth was amazed when her lady's maid finished her hairdo. The long hair breadths were braided and put around Sisi's head. A beautiful silver barrette was stuck in the braid - it was a present from Friedrich to his wife for their first wedding anniversary. A bracelet, a ring and a pearl necklace belonged to it, Sisi was wearing all of them. The last part of this old, but mesmerizing collection was a pair of earrings. Elisabeth usually didn't wear earrings, so she left the beautiful pieces inside the box.

"It is easy to make something beautiful to be even more beautiful. I am sure you will be the prettiest guest at tonight's dinner," Valerie smiled back.

"Be careful with statements like this, Valerie, because nobody is allowed to overshadow the empress," Sisi tried to be strict, but rather just laughed as she looked at the frightened face of Valerie. When the maid saw that there won't be any consequences she joined laughing. Valerie knew that her lady had a great heart and would never punish her for a simple statement, which happened to be a compliment originally.

Thirty minutes later Elisabeth stood in front of a big mirror. She checked her hair and gown, then took a deep breath and turned around.

"Am I looking properly?" She asked.

"Ma'am, you are as beautiful as always. You cannot look more properly," Valerie replied with a huge smile on her face. The countess looked like a fairy stepping out of a book in her very light blue dress - it was almost white, but when light sparkled it everyone could see its beautiful blue colour. Her hair and shining brown eyes gave her a majestic look. Valerie was sure that every man would pay attention to Elisabeth. She believed that she served the most beautiful woman on Earth. Wherever Elisabeth was present everyone was looking at her. The countess herself couldn't always enjoy this attention, but sometimes seeing that people are amazed by her beauty made her happy.

"I have no idea when I will be back - as soon as possible. Have a good time until that," Elisabeth said and then opened the door. A doorman was waiting for her outside. She was escorted to the empress's drawing room.

"Your Majesties, may I present to you Her Excellency Elisabeth Amalie Eugenie, Countess von Beckheim," a secretary said to the emperor and empress in the drawing room, then left the room and closed the door.

"Your Majesties," Elisabeth curtsied in front of the imperial couple.

"Please, Cousin Elisabeth, stand up. Welcome to Schönbrunn," Emperor Franz Joseph said and kissed the hand of his cousin.

"Thank you, Cousin Franz," Sisi replied.

"Finally you are here" - Empress Helene stepped next to her younger sister and hugged her. - "I missed you so much, Sisi."

"I missed you too, Nené" - Elisabeth held her sister as close to herself as Helene's big belly allowed to do so. - "And how is the next archduke or archduchess?"

“Yesterday was truly terrible, but I am much better today, I hope the baby is fine as well,” Nené put her hand on her belly and sat down.

“My dear, we should join the others, if you are feeling well,” Franz Joseph said.

“Oh, of course, we should go,” Helene stood up and hooked on her husband.

“Can I ask who will sit next to me?” Elisabeth looked at her sister as they walked through the corridors until the middle sized dining room.

“Aunt Sophie,” Helene replied. She saw how Sisi’s face turned white.

“May I sit somewhere...,” Sisi said, but didn’t finish her sentence.

“Nené is just joking. According to the original plan your seat was next to Mama’s, but Helene changed it, your neighbours will be my brother, Max and Count Grünne,” the emperor explained.

“Thank you so much,” Sisi whispered gratefully.

All three of them stopped in front of the dining room’s door. Elisabeth took a deep breath again. She was not ready to have dinner together with members of the court.

“Sisi,” Franz Joseph turned in her direction, and looked at his arm. Sisi understood what her cousin wanted and hooked on him. She believed that this action went against the strict etiquette the Viennese court followed, but couldn’t care about this. She needed support, and it came from somewhere she did not expect.

“You don’t have to worry. Everything will be fine. You look beautiful - both of you do,” the emperor spoke first to Sisi, then to both of the ladies.

“I will never be able to step in front of these people without a cramp in my stomach,” Sisi said while closing her eyes.

“One can never be totally able to step in front of them,” Helene replied.

“Even if he was born as one of them,” Franz Joseph said.

The next day Elisabeth watched the paintings on the walls as she went through the corridors of Schönbrunn Palace. She was almost alone - only her daughter was with her. Sisi held her baby girl in her arms and looked at her with a smile. Empress Helene wished to see her niece, but because of her state she couldn’t leave the palace. So, it was Hera’s turn to visit Aunt Nené.

“Sisi!” Helene said when her sister opened the door of her drawing room. “Nobody presented you.”

“You said it’s not a problem,” Elisabeth answered.

“Yes, it is not, but someone might see you,” the empress said.

“Oh, don’t worry, I am not afraid of some old noble ladies,” Sisi smiled with calmness on her face.

“You will never change,” Nené shook her head while laughing. “But I will not tell you what you should do. Rather give me Hera,” she stretched her hand towards her niece. “Hello, darling, how are you? Do you remember your godmother and Aunt Nené? We haven’t seen each other for a while.”

At this moment the door opened again, and a little girl came in. Her nanny stayed in the corridor.

“Aunt Sisi! Are you really here?” The girl asked loudly.

“Indeed, Ella, I am here, indeed,” Elisabeth replied. Ella ran towards her and hugged her.

“I am so happy to see you.”

“I believe I bought something to Your Imperial Highness,” Sisi went to the comfortable red sofa and picked up the present. “Here you are.”

“What is this, Aunt Sisi?” Ella looked up to Elisabeth with questioning eyes.

“It is a doll dressed in Bavarian national costume. I found it in Munich, and when I saw it for the first time I immediately thought of you.”

“It is really beautiful. Thank you so much. What is her name?” Ella asked a question again.

“She does not have a name, you can find out how you will call her,” Elisabeth replied.

“She should be Mimi. Can I play with Mimi, Mama?” Ella turned to her mother.

“I believe we should go outside. The weather is beautiful, and I organised a little picnic in the garden,” Helene said.

Ella didn’t need any other instructions, she walked towards the door, but stopped there and waited for the adults respectfully.

“I will bring her,” Sisi said to her sister and took over her daughter. Helene stood up from the sofa and picked her daughters hand.

The garden was full of hundreds of beautiful flowers. Empress Helene has two tables set up not so far from the Neptune Fountain - one for themselves and another for the children’s nannies. She sat there with one of her ladies-in-waiting while Sisi and Ella decided to visit the Gloriette. When the two of them reached the top of the hill Sisi looked around. The view was amazing.

“Archduchess Elisabeth, please, don’t sit there. Your Imperial Highness may roll down the hill!” Ella’s nanny was scared as her eyes followed the young archduchess.

“Please, don’t worry, I will take care of her,” Sisi said with a smile to the lady. She sat down next to her niece. “Do you come here often?” She asked.

“No, unfortunately not,” Ella shook her head sadly. “Even though I like to play here neither Mama or Papa have the time to escort me, and the nanny always thinks that this is the most dangerous place in the world. She allowed me to come here only because you are here too.”

“They want you to be safe. When you will be older I am sure you will be allowed to come here more often,” Sisi said.

“I don’t like these rules,” Ella stated strictly.

“Then I am your man. Rules are important, but they can be very irritating,” Elisabeth moaned.

“The food is here! Aunt Sisi, we should go down to eat!” Ella jumped up and started running down the hill. Elisabeth was happy to see her niece forget her sorrowful thoughts. She didn’t spend everyday with her but still knew Ella really well. Sisi remembered when Ella was born three years ago. She was in Vienna at that time as well. Helene’s first pregnancy ended with a miscarriage and she was afraid of giving birth, so she asked Archduchess Sophie to invite her mother and sister to the court. For the first time Sophie didn’t want to grant the request, but when Helene’s condition began to deteriorate she wrote a letter to her sister. Duchess Ludovika and the then Duchess Elisabeth arrived in Vienna to support Helene. The empress was deeply sad when she delivered a daughter, but

Elisabeth told her that at least the daughter will be hers. Sisi was asked to be the newborn archduchess's godmother. Elisabeth remembered that the baby got such a long name, she didn't understand why. However, she happily accepted to serve as Archduchess Elisabeth Sophie Helene Marie Eugenie Charlotte of Austria's godmother. Sisi decided that she will be a supporting aunt and godmother, and she served well in her role.

Archduchess Elisabeth's birth brought another important person to Elisabeth's life: her husband. Emperor Franz Joseph held a ball in honour of his first child's birth and obviously Sisi was invited. She even danced with the emperor. Even though Elisabeth wouldn't say that she and her cousin became best friends - they had very different personalities - she had a good relationship with Franz Joseph. After dancing with him and being in the centre of attention (that was terrible for her) Elisabeth wanted to leave the ball room as soon as possible. She didn't look up so she couldn't see that there was someone at the door. She ran into him and nearly fell - fortunately the man caught her.

"Are you alright, miss?" He asked.

"Yes, thank you so much," Sisi replied. She looked up and was amazed by the man's beautiful blue eyes. He looked very handsome with his blondish brown hair.

"Can I ask your name?" The man said.

"I am Elisabeth. Duchess Elisabeth in Bavaria. But my family and friends call me just Sisi." She didn't know why she added the last sentence.

"Excuse me, Your Royal Highness, if I knew who you are..." the man bowed when he realised that he was talking to the sister of the Empress of Austria.

"No, please, this is not necessary. Can I rather ask your name?"

"I am Count Friedrich von Beckheim. It is a pleasure to meet Your Royal Highness."

"It is a pleasure of mine as well," Sisi smiled. "Oh, this is one of my favourite songs!" She said when she heard the string-quartet.

"Would Your Royal Highness do me the honour of dancing with me?" The count asked shyly.

"Happily," Elisabeth answered and let the count escort her among the dancers.

After a few seconds everyone present realised that the empress's beautiful sister - who was known for not liking to be in the centre of attention - was dancing with a man who was not familiar for everyone. All of the guests watched them, but Elisabeth didn't realise this. She was lost in Friedrich's sparkling eyes.

The sisters, Duchess Ludovika and Archduchess Sophie were not happy to see this romance, since they matched Elisabeth with the emperor's brother, Archduke Karl Ludwig. The count's mother, the Dowager Countess Marie Victoria was not sure whether Sisi is the perfect wife for her eldest son or not, but she had nothing against her family - Elisabeth was the cousin of both the King of Bavaria and the Emperor of Austria. She, as an Austrian born countess and as a widow of a Bavarian count, couldn't wish for anything better. Count Friedrich's ancestry was proper, so neither the Emperor or Empress of Austria had a problem with him, even though they could imagine a royal prince next to Sisi. But, in the end, love won and the happy couple got married in 1857.

Sisi bounced back from her thoughts when she finished her way down the hill. She saw that the emperor and Archduchess Sophie joined the empress. Franz Joseph was holding Hera in his arms, even though just for half a minute.

“Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness,” Sisi curtsied as she stopped next to the table.

“Cousin Elisabeth, it’s good to see you. Unfortunately now I must return to work, we are having problems in Italy which must be solved. Your daughter is perfectly adorable,” Franz Joseph said.

“Thank you, Cousin,” Elisabeth replied.

“My ladies, please, excuse me,” the emperor bowed his head towards the ladies and returned to the palace.

As her father left, Ella sat down next to her mother. She took a cookie from a maid.

“*Köszönöm szépen,*” she smiled at the maid.

“What did you say?” Archduchess Sophie turned towards her granddaughter.

“It was in Hungarian, wasn’t it? You said ‘thank you’, didn’t you?” Sisi asked her niece.

“Yes, Aunt Sisi, you are right! She is a Hungarian maid. Her name is Mari. When I was ill a few weeks ago she brought me tea and nearly poured it. She said something in Hungarian, which I didn’t understand, and I asked her what she said. You know, Aunt Sisi, Papa told me that I should learn Hungarian later, as it’s one of the empire’s languages, and I thought I would use the few words I know when I speak with Mari,” Ella explained.

“You blow me tight! I am sure Mari enjoys using her mother language, especially when she talks to you. Imagine, my husband and I will travel to Hungary next month,” Elisabeth replied.

“Really? I thought you were going to visit France,” Helene said.

“Yes, we will go to Paris as well, but Friedrich has a cousin in Hungary and he invited us. We will meet him in Buda. I look forward to this journey so much! I heard that the Hungarians are rebellious, just like me. I am sure we will get along very well,” Elisabeth twinkled with a waggish smile.

“Stop!” Archduchess Sophie shouted (obviously just as far as the etiquette allowed her to do so). “I don’t want to hear anything about these people.”

“Mama, have you ever been in Hungary?” Ella asked while she totally ignored what her grandmother said.

“Yes, I have, a year before you were born. It is a beautiful place,” Helene replied.

“And why are they rebellious?” Ella turned to Sisi.

“They are not rebellious, but rebellious,” Sisi said, but she couldn’t finish her sentence.

“I said stop it!” Archduchess Sophie was really angry.

“I will tell you more about this later, when the archduchess is not around us,” Elisabeth whispered to her niece’s ear.

Two days later the sun was beautifully shining. Elisabeth got up early in the morning. After she dressed up she decided to have breakfast in her room because she had a painful headache. She was writing letters to her mother and husband around 9 o’clock when someone opened the door quickly.

“Your Excellency,” Valerie stopped as she got in the room. “It has started.”

Sisi didn’t need any other words to know what happened. Her headache disappeared within a minute. She picked up the bottom of her simple, but elegant dress - she knew in the morning that she should wear rather comfortable clothes that day - and started running. She didn’t care about the etiquette and that a lady should not run, especially if she is going

through the imperial palace's corridors, but that was something she happily put aside at this moment.

"Nené... Khm, Helene," she said when she arrived at the empress's bedroom.

"Sisi!" Helene, who always followed the rulers, seemingly couldn't care about the fact that she should not call her sister by her nickname in front of the maids.

"I am here with you. Don't be afraid. I know that it is not easy, but try to be calm," Sisi knew that it's impossible for her sister to be calm at this moment. She stepped closer, sat down on a chair next to the bed and took Helene's hand.

When the door opened again the emperor and Archduchess Sophie came in. Sisi jumped up and curtsied.

"This is not necessary now, Elisabeth," Franz Joseph said and stepped next to his wife. "How are you, Helene?"

"It aches..." the empress couldn't say anything more. The emperor looked up to Sisi. She turned to him with a warm smile, she hoped she could calm at least him down.

"Thank you..." Franz Joseph whispered to her cousin without any voice leaving his mouth. But Elisabeth still understood him. She then took a deep breath as she knew that the following hours will be challenging. She had a feeling that the baby would be a boy. "Please, God, give us a healthy son," she thought.

"I knew that you will give birth to a boy," Elisabeth smiled as she held her newborn nephew in her arms. She was alone together with her sister and the baby. "How will you call him?"

"Stephan Franz Joseph Karl Maximilian Rudolf," the empress answered.

"Six names again? Why?" Sisi didn't understand why a child should have *six* names.

"He should have a proper name as he will be the next Emperor of Austria."

Elisabeth stopped for a moment. She knew, obviously she knew deep inside that this boy, this archduke, this crown prince hopefully will be the next monarch of the Habsburg Empire, but couldn't think of that at the moment.

"He is beautiful. Congratulations, dear Nené," she said while she was still a little bit shocked.

"I thank God for giving me, Franz and the whole empire a son," Helene whispered.

"It will not be easy to raise him up," Sisi looked at her sister as she sat down next to her.

"Oh, Sisi, you know very well that Aunt Sophie and a group of educators will raise him. I will try to be a supporting mother, but that is all I can do," Helene said with sadness in her voice.

"You cannot let Sophie take him away too! You should fight, Nené. You are the empress of this country, not she," Elisabeth stood up and restlessly walked up and down.

"I cannot fight, Elisabeth. I am tired," Helene answered.

"Yes, you are. You just delivered a son. I think I should leave you soon," Elisabeth said.

"That would be good, I am really tired, I am sorry."

"No, Nené. I mean I should leave the court soon," Sisi turned her head down.

"Please, stay! I need you!" Fear appeared in Helene's eyes.

"I promised you to stay in Vienna for the next two weeks, but I shall leave Schönbrunn and return to my daughter," Elisabeth said.

"You said you can visit her three times a day," Helene answered.

“Yes, I could, but I have been doing this for four days now and I got tired as well. You know, I am not feeling good in this environment.”

“Can’t you stay just a few more days?” The empress asked. “I’m feeling alone...”

Sisi closed her eyes and moaned. “But you have a lot of people around you. The ladies-in-waiting, Aunt Sophie, your husband... Doesn't he care about you?”

“He does,” Helene answered quietly. “But...”

“What, Nené? What’s wrong? I thought you love each other and you are happy together. You never complained,” Sisi said.

“Oh, Sisi, an empress cannot complain. You have an idea about happy marriages in your head. But it is not always like that. Your relationship with your husband is exceptional... one in a million. Not everyone is given this kind of happiness. I do love Franz, but this is not that easy...” Helene wiped away a tear.

“Nené, I am so sorry! Why did you not talk about this before?” Elisabeth’s eyes were full of pain.

“Sisi, can you stay?” Helene got emotional, sad tears sparkled in her eyes.

“Yes, I obviously can,” she said.

“Thank you so much, dear Sisi. I am very grateful to you for supporting me, even in these difficult hours,” Helene looked down to her son who was sleeping in her arms. “You are one of the kindest souls I have ever met. You always lend a helping hand for those who have a problem. And even though I have many ladies surrounding me you are my most loyal friend and sister. You have always been loyal to your family and friends,” Helene looked up to Sisi with tears in her eyes.

“And to myself,” Elisabeth whispered.

“Hm?” Helene turned to her. “What did you say? I couldn’t understand it.”

“I said that I have always been loyal to myself, too.”

Sisi was tired when she left the sleeping Helene, but couldn’t rest. She needed to leave the palace, she needed to take a deep breath and she needed to go, just to go. Even though she wore her most comfortable riding clothes she felt that she cannot breathe, and in addition to this, she felt pain in her stomach. Her sister never told her how unhappy she was. She always wrote just the good things. “Sisi, an empress cannot complain,” Helene’s words filled her mind. “Nené must be a perfect empress,” she thought. “And I am the worst, not the most loyal sister.”

“Elisabeth!” Sisi got frightened by hearing her name. She looked around. She didn’t realise that she was going in front of the palace.

“Aunt Sophie,” she whispered as she turned around. “Your Imperial Highness,” she curtsied.

“Elisabeth, what are you doing here with the horse? You should go in another way,” Archduchess Sophie said. “But if we see each other... May I talk to you?”

“Sure,” Sisi answered.

“I would like to kindly ask you to avoid talking about unnecessary things to Archduchess Elisabeth.”

“What unnecessary things you mean, aunt?” Sisi asked back, even though she knew what Sophie was talking about.

“I know you know it. The Hungarians.” The archduchess’s voice sounded strict and unfriendly.

“I actually find it pretty important for an archduchess to know her empire’s subjects,” Sisi answered.

“She will learn what she has to know. But we do not talk about this topic in the court. Did you understand?”

“*Who* forbids it?” Sisi shook her head.

“Me.” Sophie replied. “But do not answer my question with a question, please. Did you understand?”

“I did.” Elisabeth nodded. “What is this?” She asked when she heard some loud voices.

“These are the cannons announcing the birth of the heir to the throne,” Sophie answered. “I should go to the empress now.”

“Nené is sleeping, please, do not disturb her,” Sisi said.

“My son must be with her already. I am sure she is awake,” the archduchess explained.

“I would not think so,” Sisi made a resisting face.

“Do not give me an answer like that. And do not call the empress by her nickname in public,” Sophie replied.

Sisi started to hit the ceiling, her anger just grew and grew. “It is just the two of us here now.”

Archduchess Sophie looked round, and when she realised her niece was right she raised her eyebrows.

“Another thing, Elisabeth,” Sophie turned back to Sisi. “I heard you were nearly running inside the palace and sent away a maid saying you can do something alone as well. Please, avoid this kind of behavior at the court. It is not proper,” the archduchess commanded.

“Then what is proper?” Sisi asked back.

“For example, this is not. Avoid your emotions. Hah, you are literally like your father,” Sophie replied. Sisi knew that either she goes away at that very minute or she will lose her temper.

“Aunt Sophie, I must go...” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Do not forget, Elisabeth. We have the same goal. To serve the emperor and the empress in the best way, with the help of God,” Sophie said slowly and she drew across her eyes. “Now I must go. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Sisi whispered. She sat up on her horse’s back (which belonged to Helene, but Sisi was allowed to ride her) and left the garden within a minute.

“Run, Diamond, *run!*” She said to the horse when they reached the forest. Sisi thought if she doesn’t feel the wind kissing her face she will break down. Her sadness because of Helene and anger because of Sophie filled her mind. She never got along well with her aunt, but the archduchess never told her off that badly. She used to give Sisi instructions but they never had such an argument. Elisabeth felt that she cannot spend another minute within the palace’s walls. But she knew she had to stay. To support Helene.

“What’s happening here?” Sisi stopped at a bridge and got off the horse’s back. She wished to go through it, but a carriage was standing there, and it seemed that it would not disappear.

“The wheel broke out about ten minutes ago,” a lady answered.

“Is it not possible to go through?” Elisabeth asked.

“I don’t know, you should ask them.”

“Thank you,” Sisi bowed her face. The lady replied with a smile.

“Excuse me, is it not possible to go through the bridge?” Sisi asked as she stepped closer to the carriage.

“If the lady has enough space to pass by..”

“Alright, I will try, thank you!” Sisi tried to find a way where she could go when someone touched her arm.

“Sisi?”

Sisi turned around. A huge smile appeared on her face.

“Friedrich!” She said loudly and hugged her husband. “What are you doing here? I thought you would come only next week.”

“The dispenser thought I should have a few more days off. He said he will handle everything and sent me away. If I hadn’t known him for ages I may have been angry,” Friedrich laughed.

“I am so happy to see you,” a few tears appeared in Sisi’s eyes. “I had a really difficult day.”

“We should go home then,” he said. Elisabeth just nodded her face.

“So you helped Nené to deliver the new heir to the Habsburg Empire, then talked with her, and her sadness made you sad as well. You now think that you are a bad sister, but I disagree. Later on you decided to go horse riding, even though you were tired. You met your aunt and quarreled with her. Then you found me and my damaged carriage. Um, well, I thought I had a more difficult day because I had been travelling to Vienna all night and day, and my carriage’s wheel broke out, but you won, darling,” Friedrich said when they arrived at his mother’s palace inside the city.

“And I should go back to Schönbrunn. No, do not look at me like this, I promised Nené I will stay with her there,” Sisi replied.

“Friedrich, I did not expect you!” Countess Marie Victoria was shocked to see her son. She thought he would arrive only the next week. “But I am happy to see you.” Friedrich stepped closer and kissed his mother on her cheeks.

“Nice to see you, Mama,” he said.

“Where is your carriage, Friedrich?” His mother asked.

“I will explain it later,” he just dabbed.

“Sisi, darling, you look tired! Come in, and tell me everything!” Marie Victoria allowed Sisi to step inside and lead the couple to her drawing room.

“So, tell me everything!” The dowager countess sat down on her favourite sofa.

“About what?” Sisi asked, she nearly fell asleep. She refused to take from the cookies which were served, even though it was one of her favourites. She felt that she cannot eat anything at that very moment.

“About the birth! Did you forget? Today the Empress of Austria gave birth to a son. And you were present, so?”

“Hera!” Friedrich jumped up as he saw his daughter. “Hello, my dear, how are you? Did

you miss Papa?" He asked the baby as he took her over from the nanny. Sisi smiled as she saw them together.

"So," Sisi turned back to Marie Victoria. "The crown prince's name is Stephan... Stephan Franz Joseph Karl Maximilian Rudolf. The birth took long hours, but there were no particular difficulties," Sisi stopped for a short minute because she realised that she had a headache. She closed her eyes for a moment, then turned back to her mother-in-law, and continued telling the details that she knew Marie Victoria would find interesting. But she did not tell her the most inner information. "Maybe that would be the loyalty Nené talked about?"

A court ball is always phenomenal for those who attend. The sparkling chandelier, the shining jewellery, and the colourful, but still elegant dresses all made the event memorable. Those who were invited felt really proud. They could attend the ball held by the Emperor of Austria in honour of the birth of his first son a week ago. That was said to be the event of the year.

After visiting her hister the second time on that day Elisabeth joined the guests in Schönbrunn Palace's most beautiful ballroom. The room was lit with hundreds of candles which gave an amazing look of the place full of big windows and mirrors.

Elisabeth was one of the most beautiful women at the ball. She wore the same jewellery as on her first night in Vienna, but this time she added a fabulous tiara. She received it as a wedding gift from her sister and brother-in-law.

Her big, dark bourdon dress - that fitted on her waist perfectly - limited her movements. She hoped she would not have to dance a lot. Obviously she joined her husband for a waltzer at the beginning, she actually enjoyed that. However, she did not plan to dance with anyone other than Friedrich. But she couldn't reject a special offer.

"What are you thinking about, Elisabeth?" Her partner asked as they were gliding through the ballroom for the rhythm of the music. This partner happened to be the Emperor of Austria himself.

"I am just looking at the fresco, it is very detailed, such a great painting," Sisi answered. She turned her head around and saw that every eye was on them. She didn't feel comfortable.

"Yes, it is," the emperor nodded.

"Am I right if I think you did not ask me to dance with you to talk about the fresco?" Elisabeth looked up to Franz Joseph.

"Yes, you are right. I wanted to thank you for the support you gave to my wife. Even though I would like to spend more time with her I cannot leave my duty behind myself. This was a difficult time for Nené, and you were here to help her. I am very grateful to you."

"Nené is my sister. I would stand next to her whether she is the Empress of Austria or just a simple wife," Sisi replied.

"I know that very well. She must be happy to have a sister like you," the emperor said.

"Hm, sometimes, when I don't cause any problems, she may be," Elisabeth smiled. The emperor, who was able to conceal his feelings, this time couldn't do anything but laughing.

"Cousin Sisi, you will never change," Franz Joseph smiled at her.

"Is it a problem?" Sisi asked with a smile too.

“It is not, indeed,” the emperor answered. At that moment the music ended, Franz Joseph let Sisi’s hand off. “Thank you for the dance,” he bowed his face.

“It was my pleasure, Your Majesty,” Sisi curtsied. “Even though I don’t like to have everyone’s eye on me, I enjoyed it, Cousin Franz,” she said as Franz Joseph escorted her out from the dance floor. The emperor didn’t answer, just kissed Sisi’s hand.

Elisabeth soon found herself in her mother-in-law and another lady’s company.

“What was it like to dance with the emperor?” The lady asked.

“It is always an honour,” Sisi answered with a smile.

“You meet him often, don’t you? What is it like to know him closely?” The lady asked again.

“Well, I have known him since my childhood. You know, he is not just my brother-in-law, but also my cousin. But I do not see him that often,” Sisi replied.

“It still must be amazing to be that close to your emperor.”

“*Am I that close to him?*” Sisi asked this question herself, but did not say it loudly. She looked at the lady. “I am Bavarian, he is actually not my emperor.”

“He is,” Marie Victoria said. “Obviously he is.”

“What are the ladies talking about?” Friedrich asked as he arrived to the little group. “Sisi, you are pale, are you all right? Shall we go outside?”

“Yes, please,” Elisabeth answered.

“Friedrich, did you dance with Elisabeth?” His mother asked.

“They did, at the beginning of the ball, I saw them. They made a beautiful couple,” the other lady said.

“Excuse me, but now we have to leave you. Come, Sisi,” Friedrich held his arm and Sisi hooked on him. As they stepped out to the balcony Sisi felt better.

“The sky is beautiful,” Elisabeth said as she looked up to the stars. “Why don’t we walk a little in the garden?” she asked. Her husband did not answer, just followed her down the stairs. Sisi didn’t stop until they reached the Neptune Fountain. She looked at the water surrounding the fountain and saw their reflection. The reflection of a young, happy couple full of life.

“Friedrich,” she turned to him. “I would like to tell you something,” Sisi took a deep breath.

“I am listening,” he answered.

“So... I am expecting a child.” She finally blew out the air.

Friedrich seemed to be shocked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am,” Sisi smiled.

“Sisi, you cannot believe how happy I am!” Friedrich picked up his wife and turned around while holding her in his arms.

“Please, put me down, we should be careful,” Sisi said, but she couldn’t be angry while seeing his joy.

“Of course,” he answered. “Who knows about it?”

“Only Valerie and you. I will tell Nené while we are in Vienna and tomorrow I am going to write the news to Mama.”

“So it is our secret,” he said.

“Just for a few hours,” she laughed.

“And how do you feel? Will the baby be a ...” Friedrich didn’t finish the sentence.

“I have the feeling that this time we will welcome a little count,” Sisi answered. She couldn’t hide her big smile.

“A boy?” he asked carefully. Sisi just nodded her face. “Thank you, dearest, for this amazing news. But do you hear this?” Friedrich asked out of the blue.

“What? Wait, I hear it. It is our song!” Sisi shouted out.

“Our song? That sounds funny,” Friedrich replied.

“How would you call the song that we danced for the first time, that was played at our wedding reception and at our daughter’s christening if not our song?” Elisabeth asked with questioning eyes.

“You are right, it will be played at this baby’s christening too” Friedrich twinkled. “Then would the countess do me the honour of dancing with me for our song?”

“Happily,” Sisi answered just like she did when they danced together for the first time nearly four years ago. “Do you remember that we met when the emperor held a ball in honour of his first child’s birth?” She asked.

“And now you told me that we are going to have a second baby at the ball held by the emperor in honour of his second child’s birth,” Friedrich replied.

“So you remember,” Sisi smiled.

“I remember everything that happened with us together. How would I forget the moment when I met the love of my life?” He asked as if he was indignant but he clearly wasn’t. “Seriously, Sisi, you and our growing family are the best things that happened to me. I thank God everyday for my luck.”

“I believe nobody could bear my rebellious, horse-riding and freedom loving and poem writing personality than you,” Sisi laughed.

“Oh, Sisi, don’t act as if you were a bad person. You have mistakes, so do I, nobody can be perfect,” Friedrich said.

“You are absolutely right,” she replied.

“And whatever life throws in front of us, you know I will always stand by you. Even if we have terrible arguments just like last month. Even if time will get the better of you...”

“Friedrich!” Sisi shouted out.

“Alright, I am sorry, it was just a joke. You are the most beautiful woman who I met in my life,” Friedrich said.

“Sounds much better,” Elisabeth smiled proudly. “And who knows, maybe time will get the better of *you*...”

“Sisi, if you don’t see I try to be romantic once in my life, don’t get a word in!” This time Friedrich shouted out and stepped on Sisi’s feet. She nearly forgot that they were still dancing.

“Excuse me, please, continue,” Sisi tried to conceal her naughty smile but she actually failed.

“So, I wanted to say that whatever happens I will love you until death takes us apart.” He finally could finish his confession.

“Dear Friedrich,” Sisi’s smile disappeared, seriousness sparkled in her eyes. She couldn’t imagine a moment when she can be happier than now. “I love you too. I will always love

you.”

Elisabeth closed her eyes as Friedrich stepped closer. She felt that she is the luckiest woman on Earth. Friedrich crossed his arms around her waist and kissed her in a way that only a loving husband can kiss.

The End