

# Friendship and Duty

By C.C.von Moguntia © 2015

Sir Reinhardt von Obermünde leaned lazily against the wall of the throne room in the Silver Castle. A quick glance ensured his men were holding their guard positions in the hallway and out in the gardens. Only when everything looked calm did he focus his attention back on his charge, the Princess Christiana, the king's only child and heir to the throne in front of which she was now playing.

The blonde girl had a row of play knights on horseback lined up on the steps of the dais. She also had a figurine of a queen, which she now let walk before the arrayed knights. Reinhardt noticed with satisfaction that she had a knight in the red-blue-white surcoat of the Royal Guard accompany the sovereign wherever she went.

Reinhardt smiled. If the king went the way of the grave, he would gladly serve his daughter in the same capacity as First Knight and Grand Marshal of the Armies of Pruzzina.

The princess stopped the toy queen before a knight in an ocean blue surcoat. "Duke von Rhadebucht, I had to notice with dismay that your ledgers are still not balanced. Dismount and explain yourself to your liege."

She threw her voice deeper. "My apologies, Your Majesty. I was going to fix them, honest, but the dog ate the books and we had to start all over..."

She spoke normally again. "Nonsense. That is the lamest excuse I have ever heard. Marshal? I want you to arrest the duke and throw him in the dungeon. Maybe his scribes will follow orders better than their master."

She threw her voice again, this time imitating the marshal's short, precise words. "As you command, Your Majesty."

Reinhardt shook his head with a wry smile. The princess certainly did not play like normal young girls would, but then, ordinary girls were not heir to the throne of a large kingdom.

His musings were interrupted when the front door to the castle opened noisily and the guards by the doors to the hall gathered much closer to be able to fend off whoever would demand entry. The marshal grabbed the hilt of his sword, as much out of reflex as concern for the princess's life. He rushed to the entrance and peeked through the crack of the leaned-to door. When he could not see enough of the foyer to ascertain what had happened, he turned to the princess who had stopped playing and caught up to stand stood right behind him. He knelt to be at eye-level with her. "Milady, I will have to entrust you to the care of the captain of the guard to see what the commotion was all about. Please, stay in this room and do not leave. I will be back as soon as I can."

Christiana nodded. "Do you think Papa will have to receive a guest here? I would have to clean up my knights."

Reinhardt smiled. He was as very fond of her. "I think, maybe, in case your father does need the space, you should command your army to withdraw into the basket, only for the time being, of course."

She grinned. "I will order a strategic retreat, but now you must see what is going on and if Papa needs you."

He bowed to the princess as he was kneeling. "As you command, Milady." With another smile, he stood and left through the half-open door.

Once he reached the foyer, he waved the captain to himself. "Report."

“Yes, sir. Urgent messenger from the Ostmark. The herald escorted him to the king’s chambers.”

Reinhardt flicked his glance at the door behind him. “You guard this girl with your life, am I clear?”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Good. I will be back.” He dismissed his men with a terse nod before he bounded up the large staircase and hurried to the king’s study.

“...lingering in front of the defenses. We can’t send scouts, but just from the walls, it does not look good. There are thousands, to be sure.”

Reinhardt slipped silently around the messenger and stood at his accustomed spot behind King Gerhard’s chair.

He turned to look at him. “The Ostmark, again. Sounds like they are serious this time.”

“What are your orders, Sire? Full deployment?”

The king paused for only a moment. “Yes, from what I am hearing, it is warranted. Better safe than sorry. Draw up the orders for your troops, and send the chancellor so he can do the same for the nobles.”

Reinhardt bowed to his liege. “As you command.”

Gerhard scanned the mud-splattered messenger. “Go, get some rest. You will ride out with the army. If there is more to be told, you can brief me on the way.”

“I hear and obey, Your Majesty.”

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Reinhardt entered the royal bedchamber and found King Gerhard standing while the servant tightened the strap on his battle armor.

“Reinhardt, everything ready?”

“Yes, Sire. The garrison is holding, waiting for your arrival.”

The king nodded, his gaze absent and distracted. “Good... good...”

The servant bowed and left his chambers.

When they were alone, Reinhardt asked, “What’s wrong?”

Gerhardt raised his eyes to look at him. “Now I know why the First Knight and the Grand Marshal should be two different men.”

Reinhardt creased his forehead. “Oh?”

Gerhard sighed. “I have to leave her by herself, while her protector will be with me, bashing barbarians, not here, minding his charge.”

Reinhardt smiled wryly. “As much as I would like to split myself in half, I think I should lead the army, don’t you think?”

He made a face. “I know. I wish I could... ugh...”

Reinhardt frowned. “You are not thinking of taking your daughter with you to war, are you?”

Gerhard snorted. “No, of course not. I am trying to figure out who I should leave behind to watch over her... maybe...”

He looked into his eyes. “Gerhard.”

The king met his gaze.

“She is every bit your daughter. She will be fine. If you want, I can speak to her, remind her to stay in the company of the palace guards, and--”

Gerhard shook his head. "No, no, I must talk to her."  
"Do you want me to fetch her?"  
"If you would." The king wore a tired smile.  
"I will be right back."

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Reinhardt slowed his walk so the princess could keep up with his long strides. As they climbed the foyer stairs he had to smirk at the strange pair they made.

He was tall, his polished armor well-worn, his massive broadsword handy by his side, his war-calloused hand never far from its hilt.

She was a delicate blossom half his size, her flowing, embroidered dress trailed behind her, her blonde tresses flowed like golden waves down her back with every step she took. Her graceful hands gathering the folds of her garment reminded him of the ivory carvings of a Madonna.

"Are you coming or should I go on without you?" Her captivating smile lit up her entire face.

Reinhardt sped up his steps. "I will accompany you, Milady."

"Then come." She turned to walk ahead while the servants by the door already opened to admit her.

They entered the king's chambers. When she spotted her father, she ran toward him.  
"Papa! You're riding out with the army? What border is it this time?"

Gerhardt tried to smile, but his eyes were glistening suspiciously. "Oh, Tiana, my precious, precious little girl..." He knelt with the creaking and jingling of his armor to be at eye level with her.

Princess Christiana took his face into her little hands and kissed him on the cheek. "Don't fret, Papa. I'll watch over things for you while you are gone. You go and fight the bad guys. I will help the chancellor however I can. You can rely on us."

Gerhardt's chin quivered and he embraced her tightly to hide that tears were about to spill across his face. "Tiana..." He swallowed hard to steady his voice. "Of course you will... and I think you should keep an eye on the Silver Castle as well. I am not sure if the new castellan will know what to do just yet."

She pulled herself out of his tight embrace and grinned with excitement. "Really? Oh, Papa, I will do my best to see to it everything is as you like it. I promise." She took her slim finger and wiped a tear from the side of his nose. "Don't worry about us, Papa. I won't be afraid. I am sure you and Master Reinhardt can take care of the enemies easily."

Gerhard took her face into his hands, kissed her forehead, and caressed her cheek with his thumb. "Now, to make sure I don't have to worry when I am gone, I need you to be good and never leave the sight of one of the palace guards, do you hear me? I have to know you are safe."

Christiana frowned. "Don't you need all the guards at the border? I think they will do more good bashing bad guys than standing around, watching doors."

Gerhard chuckled. "True, but I have to leave at least a few of them here to watch the place. We can't have people simply walking in, stealing our stuff."

She thought about it for a moment before she nodded. "Maybe you are right. We might need a some of them."

Reinhardt said, "Milady, please do me a favor and stay with the Captain of the Guard. It would make me worry less as well."

She made a face. "Well... all right, I guess. But don't pick that pudgy captain who watched me before. He would not let me do anything for myself."

He chuckled. "I suppose I will order Captain Bernard and his company to stay behind then."

She looked at her father. "Captain Bernhard is a good soldier, but you don't have to leave his entire company behind just for me. Two platoons are good enough, aren't they?"

Before the exasperated marshal could reply, the king said, "We will see how many we can spare at the garrison later, but now come with me. I will have to give the chancellor and the castellan instructions that you will take care of things while I am gone." He straightened and held his hand out for hers. They both left the chambers on their way to the offices of the officials of Pruzzina.

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Reinhardt glanced at Captain Bernhard to stand at ease. "Do you understand your orders?"

The captain nodded gravely. "We are to guard the castle, but most importantly, Her Royal Highness, Princess Christiana."

"You know how she can be, always good for escaping the watchful eyes of her keepers."

The captain flashed a tight smile. "Yes, sir. I remember it well enough."

Reinhardt's gaze sought his eyes. "If anything should happen to the king's precious daughter... the heir to the throne..."

Bernhard swallowed hard. "I know, sir. I would suffer the full brunt of His Majesty's wrath."

"And mine as well, if you survive the king's displeasure, that is."

Bernhard stood at attention even more stiffly. "I will vouch my life to keep her safe, sir. I swear it by the Holy Mother."

Reinhardt nodded, satisfied he would do exactly that. "Off to your post, soldier."

"As you command, sir."

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The long column of fully armed knights and soldiers rode out of the gates of Cliffhaven, following the road leading into the vast forest. King Gerhard reined in his horse and gazed back at the massive city walls.

Reinhardt held his steed by his side. "Sire?"

The king whispered, "I don't know..."

"Do you regret ordering the castellan to do as she orders?"

Gerhard chuckled at the reminder. "No, no. I am sure she will do fine."

Reinhardt looked into his eyes. "Then what?"

He shook his head and sighed. "I don't know... this feeling... that I should not... that I am leaving the most valuable treasure in all of Pruzzina barely guarded..."

The marshal's voice was soothing. "We left an entire--"

"I know that... I know... still."

Reinhardt smiled. "We should catch up with the column, Sire."

Gerhard turned to look at the passing soldiers. "Right... the duty of a king..."  
"She will be fine." Reinhardt laid a comforting hand on his bracer.  
He sighed. "Yes, I suppose, in my head, I know that."

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The king entered the command tent to the bowing of the generals. He walked to the big table in its center, covered with maps and troop markers. "How does it look?"

Reinhardt looked up at him and straightened from looking over the parchments. "Sire."  
Sensing that his friend would rather speak in private, the king glanced at the generals.

"Why don't you get some dinner?"

The soldiers bowed and excused themselves.

When only the king and the marshal were left, Gerhard groaned. "That bad, huh?"

Reinhardt snorted. "Well, it isn't good. The line broke here and here today. We were able to seal this breach, but over here..."

"How many made it into the woods?" He looked over the maps with a worried frown.

Reinhardt turned and leaned against the table, his arms crossed over his chest. "I have no idea. It was only by a stroke of luck that we saw them at all. Those sneaky bastards could have brought an entire battalion for all I know."

"Hmph."

He shrugged. "I will do my best to clean this up... if I can."

"I know you will. I am glad to have you."

Reinhardt dragged his palm across his strained forehead. "It will cost many lives, I am sure... maybe even my own."

Gerhard shook his head. "We have enough cavalry. Let them go after them."

"I think I could serve you better if I led the scouts to--"

He slapped his padded shoulder in friendship. "And who watches my back while you are gallivanting around in the woods?"

The First Knight smiled sheepishly. "I guess I am terrible at my job, aren't I?"

Instead of answering, Gerhard looked over the maps. "Well, if the knights are taking the woods, I think I should lead the infantry here and here. If we hold the river ford..."

"I will be by your side, Sire." The tone of his voice betrayed that he did not think this was the best course of action.

Gerhard's stern gaze made sure he had the marshal's full attention. "I think you should stay out of the fighting. I need you to run this."

"You are not such a bad tactician yourself, Sire."

"Quit trying to beguile me and listen. If I have learned one thing from my father it is this--don't allow your commander to get killed or the entire army is in disarray."

Reinhardt held his gaze for a long moment before he nodded to break eye contact. "I will stay out of the fray. As you command, my liege."

"Now, now. No need to be sore." Gerhard smiled. "There will be plenty of killing to go around, I am sure."

"Let us hope it is far away from you, though."

Gerhard chuckled. "At least on that, we can agree."

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Reinhardt looked over the battlefield with his forehead in deep creases. When one of the lieutenants came to report, he was short and gruff with him. After another soldier backed away quickly after having given his message, Gerhard frowned at him. "You are in a bad mood."

Reinhardt snorted. "Look at this mess!" His voice was sharp with scorn. "Three times I've sent word for Weizenfeld to tighten his lines. Instead, they get sloppier by the minute. What in the world! Ugh!"

Gerhard glanced at the soldiers and knights holding around them. "I know you want to go in there and clean it up yourself."

Reinhardt lifted his hands. "I know, I know. My place is here."

The king nodded his chin in the direction of the failing line by the river crossing. "I think on this occasion, Weizenfeld and his knights need a good talking-to, from somebody who would not cause political difficulty if... say... his fist found some of their chins...?"

The marshal turned to stare at Gerhard. When he spotted the mischievous twinkle in his eyes, he laughed aloud. "I think I can keep my fists to myself. I will be right back. Don't go charging into the fray yourself until I am, though."

Gerhard grinned. "I will hold here and watch you kick some barbarian rears. How does that sound?"

"Good enough. I'll see you later." He barked a few commands to the captains holding nearby as he swung himself into the saddle and heeled his charger toward the battlefield.

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Reinhardt parried a war ax meant for his head before he stuck his dagger into the attacker's ribs. "There, that'll show you."

"Sir, Lord von Weizenfeld is calling for a partial retreat." One of his captains barely kept his steed steady in the battle frenzy.

He felt his rage bubble up in his throat like boiling stew. "He what? Well, we'll see about that." He reined his stallion even deeper into the fighting, hacking and bashing at the enemies' heads as his horse plowed through the onslaught.

He only stopped when he had reached the baron, surrounded by several rows of his knights. "What on earth? Milord, I hope you are joking!"

Baron von Weizenfeld flashed a weary smile. "My men are tired, Marshal--"

"Your men will be dead in a minute if you keep this up."

"What do you suggest we do?"

Reinhardt barked, "Get back to the king's company. Willerich and I will take care of this."

The baron's First Knight said, "Yes, Milord. Let us take it from here. I can see you are fatigued."

The baron thought for only a moment and nodded tersely. "Fine, but don't get too many of my knights killed."

"I'll try not to, Milord." Reinhardt barely waited until he was out of earshot before he looked at Willerich. "Get your men back in it. We need to tighten this up around the shore and the village wall."

"As you command, sir." A few commands to his soldiers quickly mobilized the line once more.

This time, Reinhardt saw to it that it stayed tight.

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Reinhardt avoided the spikes of a morning star and counterattacked, his massive broadsword cutting the attacker from his steed.

The captain and his men bashed their way through the fray, mud splattered. "Sir? Sir!"

Reinhardt wheeled around to deflect a spear aimed for his ribs and followed through with his blade, blood spraying his arms and chest. "What? Can't you see I am busy at the moment?"

"I do, Sir." The soldier dodged the head of a mace and stabbed his attacker. "But I think you should attend to His Majesty."

Reinhardt became serious in an instant and his gaze sought the little hillock where the royal party had been holding before. "The king...? How is he? Where is he?" He swung at a barbarian, annoyed that he dared to interrupt his conversation.

The captain shouted over the din of clashing steel, "Not good, sir, from what I have been told. The line broke right in front of us and we were neck-deep in barbarians before we knew it."

Before he could elaborate further, Reinhardt barely suppressed a curse and barked, "Your men are with me." Without waiting for his response, Reinhardt heeled his steed through the thick of battle, straight toward his king.

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Reinhardt urged his horse to even more speed when he spotted the king sitting on the ground with his head in his hand. When he saw his physician attend him, Reinhardt gasped and did not slow until he dismounted by the hillock, his stallion not fully stopped yet. "Sire? I am so sorry...!" He ran and dropped to his knees next to him without regard for the churned mud.

Gerhardt waved his concern off. "Nothing you could have done if you'd been here, my friend." He looked up at the physician. "Are you finished?"

The healer tugged on the bandage once more. "Well enough, Sire."

The king nodded his thanks. "Why don't you see to my knights? They might have wounds much graver than mine."

"I will do so, Your Majesty." He retreated with a bow.

When he was gone, Reinhardt asked, "How deep is it?"

Gerhardt glanced at his bandaged arm. "This? Not as bad as it looks. The cut in my scalp stings worse."

He scanned his king's injuries without an attempt to keep the worry off his face.

"The bastard almost chopped my head off. I was very lucky." The king shrugged.

Reinhardt bit his lip as he averted his gaze. "I should have--"

"...been here?" Gerhard snorted. "Yeah, maybe, but you couldn't have prevented them breaking through and taking the hillock any more than the company of knights who were watching over me. I dare say you might have been even worse off than me right now."

Reinhardt could not help his sour face.

"It's over. Don't worry about it anymore." Gerhard's voice was soothing. "They're dead and we live. How did it go at the ford? I saw you were dishing it out pretty good."

"We're still holding the river, no thanks to Baron von Weizenfeld, I might add. He almost withdrew to let them all just stroll right in."

Gerhard chuckled. "I bet he regretted that."

He held up his hands with a shrug. "I was nice enough when I asked him to get off the field and leave this to real men."

"You have to work on your people skills." Gerhard elbowed him.

"I thought I was."

The king glanced at the glowering sky. "I think we should tighten it up for tonight. I want to start the morning fresh, with the lines by the river, not all the way up here."

"I'll see to it, Sire."

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The crickets' serenade blended with the soothing sound of splashing raindrops.

Reinhardt allowed the maps on the table to roll in on themselves. The command tent was quiet after the king had sent the bickering generals to their blankets for the night.

He headed for the exit when he found King Gerhard standing barely within the entry flap, his tired gaze fixed on the dark forest below. "You're up late."

The king jumped at the voice beside him. "So are you. You came up with a strategy?"

Reinhardt smiled. "Almost. I was going to sleep on it to be sure." When Gerhard did not respond, he asked softly, "You are still thinking about the raid?"

Gerhard continued to look out into the darkness. "The enemy almost made Tiana an orphan today."

"You were not that badly wounded."

He snorted. "By the grace of Almighty God alone, I assure you. Only one more inch and the barbarian would have hit my carotid artery instead of my helmet." He paused for a moment. "One more inch and I would not be having this conversation."

Reinhardt did not know how to answer him. Everybody had to deal with the brush of death in their own way.

The king pulled his silver coronet out of his surcoat and caressed its delicate leaves with his thumb. "One more inch and Tiana would have been queen of Pruzzina."

"I am sure she would have done a wonderful job. She is just like you in so many ways."

Gerhard turned to him, his eyes full of pain and regret. "Reinhardt, she is eight years old. You know as well as I do... The dukes would have outdone each other in trying to seize control. First, they would have married her off to one of their snot-nosed sons, whether she wanted to or not, and then..." His chin quivered.

Reinhardt flinched. The king was right, and the truth tore at his heart as much as if the princess was his own daughter.

Gerhard beat his fist into his palm. "I can't allow that to happen. I simply cannot."

"She is the heir to the throne. Eventually, she must wed one of their snot-nosed sons." His voice was soft.

"Not if I can help it." The king pressed the words through clenched teeth.

Reinhardt looked at him. "What are you going to do?"

Gerhard jutted his jaw out with defiance. "I'll marry a widow with a son. I'll adopt him and voila, my daughter does not have to inherit this bloomin' mess I will leave to somebody... someday."

Reinhardt gasped. "You will deny Christiana her birthright?"



A bitter laugh escaped the king's throat. "Some birthright! A council chamber full of squabbling nobles, weak borders that won't stop much of anything, neighbors on almost all sides who would sooner kill us than trade with us. And not to forget the mountains of reports and ledgers one has to wade through almost day after day." He snorted sarcastically. "Hmph! Birthright! I'd rather see her live as a commoner and marry whomever she likes than lay such a heavy yoke around her neck. I think she would thank me for it." He slowly twirled the coronet in his hands. "This thing can weigh a ton when it is on your brow, especially on days like this..."

"What if the son you'll adopt won't do any better either?"

Gerhard shrugged. "How hard is it to learn to read and reply to the Crown's correspondence? Not overly, I'd think."

"What about leadership?"

He hit the taut tent pole with his right fist. "No, I have made up my mind. Tiana..." He looked out over the forest once more. "She should not have to endure such a fate..." He gripped the crown until his knuckles turned white. "No, I'd rather marry a battle ax and suffer through a loveless marriage than put this upon her." A heavy sigh shuttered his shoulders. "I hope my darling wife, may God rest her, will understand and forgive me."

Reinhardt said, "I'm sure she sees your heart and knows you are making this sacrifice for her child."

The tears collected in Gerhard's eyes. "I loved her, you know? My wife, I mean."

"I know you did." He laid a compassionate hand on his shoulder.

The king swallowed hard. "It will be difficult for me to... marry someone else."

"Are you sure you have to? You might live a very long time. By then, your daughter is well able to--"

Gerhard turned to look at him, his forehead in a frown. "Tiana is the only thing I have left of my wife...of my entire House. I would see her rejoice in a life of happiness, not burdened down with this gigantic responsibility."

Reinhardt allowed him to grieve for some time before he said, "I think you should get some rest. Tomorrow, things will look different."

The king nodded, fatigue washing over his countenance. "You are right, of course."

To end on a more hopeful note, Reinhardt added, "Tomorrow we have to kick these bastards out of Pruzzina for good or collect their bloody corpses. Either way works for me."