

NOBLE PROTECTOR

by

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Approx. 75000 words

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### Interlude in a Night Café

A man sat at a bar, and a woman stood behind it.

“Proper’s been awful quiet lately,” said the man at the bar.

“Hm,” acknowledged the woman behind it, sure of what he had said, but not wanting to indulge the coming conversation.

The café sat hidden in a back-street of Lucier. Capital of the Caenwald Commonwealth, the city was split into two halves, an evident bisecting of the rich and the less fortunate. They were called “Proper” and “Lagoon.”

“City center,” he said. “Not much foot traffic.” The man had taken it for a question.

The woman looked at him and shrugged, her lips making a pleasant, forced smile. The woman’s name was Edelgard. She had chestnut hair to just past her ears. Her face was a unity of mousey traits, which made her all too unassuming. Freckles were dotted about her nose and cheekbones, and she had a tall, lanky form. Although she knew how she must have looked, nodding there and forcing her smile, Edelgard wasn’t totally indifferent to how she made the

man at the bar feel. She would rather have made conversation with him, and seen him leave happily, a little more intoxicated, than watch him choke on his drink. It was more than she could say for most patrons.

Still, the woman named Edelgard smiled at the man at the bar and not a moment later he looked to the bottom of his drink. Seeing this, she caught his eye, lifted the at-hand bottle and shook it in an asking manner. It was a blackberry brand, a well-praised, local spirit.

He took a moment before he made an objecting gesture. “How much?” asked the man.

“Six coppermark. Same as usual, Aisander,” she replied.

The man named Aisander mimicked her earlier nod and began pulling at the drawstring of a leather pouch. He slowly plucked out the six requested pieces and pressed them firmly onto the counter. Neat copper tower before him, Aisander slid the coins forward and stood, electing to lean against the counter.

They sat there before toppling as the woman’s nimble fingers reached to pluck them away. They toppled over, and for a moment—and another when they were added to the rest of the night’s revenue—they rang merrily. The minted metal sung a discordant tone to the non-uniform, brassy music that was playing at a low hum, as worn vinyl spun on a record player that was just as disused as the bar was.

As his forearms supported him there, the man called Aisander said, “A water, please.” Edelgard got him one. “No charge for that, is there?”

“Unfortunately not,” Edelgard retorted.

Just gripping with the aftermath of war, Lucier's soldiers were plentiful in their victorious return. It meant that business should have been booming. However, as Edelgard stood, rag slung over shoulder and copper squared away, she noticed that the room was much emptier than she expected it to be. The café was cramped, yes, but it was not full. Perhaps it was just that its walls closed in too closely.

“Water isn't like you. What's the occasion?” the woman asked.

“I need a clear mind. I can't drink *every* answer forth,” the man said.

“Tapering yourself until sobriety, then?”

“Hardly... I think I'd just like to develop a sense of pace.”

“Thinking isn't like you either. What's the matter, Ais?” Edelgard quit her worktime focus and studied the face of the man at the bar.

Aisander was dishevelled. Black curls in greasy disarray. Clothing unruly and untoward. Edelgard had some clue what he did, because he dressed better than most people in Lagoon, and he'd been in every night since the Commonwealth's victory over the Northern Allegiance. He sighed into his glass, a heavy sad taking him as he sipped from it. It wasn't the sweet tinge he wanted.

“This is why I come all the way from Proper, you know? Lucier Lagoon people don't pretend to be things they aren't. Not what's got me thinking, though.” Aisander swished the water between his teeth and swallowed, to get the sour aftertaste of the brand off his gums.

She nodded. What he had said held an amount of truth. Proper was the *city*. But for being the prominence of Lucier, it was Lagoon which was rife with nationalism and pride. When people moved to the city, they moved to Proper, but families never left Lagoon.

Edelgard asked, “So what is?”

“Hm?”

“The point,” she clarified. “The thing that’s got you thinking.”

In the seconds he spent contemplating, the woman called Edelgard looked out the window, and through the glass and the yellow light reflecting off of it, as if a lens into a separate world. It was one, really. So tonally apart and distinct. Through Lagoon, women danced with their husbands on the street, as motorcars passed by, music playing loudly through rolled-down windows.

Lanterns were lit and hung out from gables at every building, and the world was dancing jovially in their amber glow, without a second care in their minds. It was naïve, in a modest, unknowing type of way, and Edelgard thought that might not be so bad. Green glass bottles with gold foil stripped open to the nape, foam spilling over the glasses and hands of the ones pouring from them. The sky lit up as overhead aircraft left pyrotechnic displays in their wake, like a second layer of bedazzling upon an already star-dappled spring night sky.

As a couple went by the windowpane, Edelgard was brought back into the space, and the room, and how small it felt. To the bar she was behind and the glass in front of her. She smiled at her reflection.

In the light, she looked rather handsome.

“Well,” the man at the bar started, “those people out there, on the street. They’re happy. Celebrating.”

“I don’t think that’s too bad.”

“Well of course not. But people don’t do that up in Proper, not how they should. They’re having balls and dinner parties,” Aisander snickered, sipping the last of his water.

A pensive moment later, Edelgard supposed she understood what he meant. But, to play advocate, that woman behind the bar pressed, “Nothing wrong with that either.”

“Yeah, maybe not. It isn’t out-on-the-street kind of joy though. No kind of celebration I’m interested in,” he said. “Then, I’m not exactly partaking, am I?” He placed the glass back onto the paper coaster he’d made himself. “So, question is, what else is bothering me. Why aren’t I out there,” Aisander pointed toward the window, “drinking liquid gold from skinny glasses. I mean, they’ve been at it for a week.”

“Maybe you’d miss my company too much.”

“Maybe I would.”

Edelgard looked at her reflection again. It didn’t seem quite as alluring as she remembered, but she could still hear the cheers beyond it. High pitched laughter and woops, resounding for blocks.

She contemplated the man at the bar, and what he might of done. He couldn’t be an official of any kind; he didn’t seem very nationalist. Edelgard considered that, if he did come all the way from Proper, why he still lived there to begin with. And then she was wandering, and her eyes took her away from the café for a moment. She thought she may have liked to have helped

in the war. Not on the home front, maybe not even on the battlefield, but, somehow. Maybe just, to one person, do something—be something—useful.

The woman behind the bar poured a thumb of brand into a cylindrical cup. She replaced his glass with the one she'd poured.

“I didn’t—”

“I know. Consider it a gift,” Edelgard interrupted. She said so with a distance, her eyes far away. It occurred to her that maybe Aisander *was* a soldier, but that couldn’t be. He was far too melancholy and the army had just achieved conquest over the Northern Allegiance. Surely that wasn’t the case, but she asked still, “Ais?”

“Edelgard?” he mimicked.

She asked, “Did you fight in the war?”

“Do I look like I fought in the war?”

“Maybe you do.” The woman behind the bar tested the waters carefully. She wasn’t yet familiar with the man called Aisander, and she wasn’t sure how he’d take to what may be a more personal inquiry. Thus far, their conversation had been restricted to idle chit chat and drunken discussion. The most they had gleaned were names, a taste of personality, and that they led very different lives, which was ultimately for the best.

He spoke, “What if I had? Does that make me an admirable veteran? Are you to shower me in drink and praise?” He was interested now, sitting again in the fixed stool and making a miniature performance out of his question.

Edelgard grinned. Widely this time and much more earnestly. She inhaled and covered her face to conceal her beginning laughter. Not expecting it, she gasped and snorted. In turn, Aisander smiled and contained his own mirth just behind his nose.

It lasted only a moment. Soon they sighed and inhaled slowly, clearing the air and making it tense again. Edelgard, hand still covering a part of her mouth, spoke from behind it, “I’m sorry, it... it wasn’t that funny.”

Aisander answered swiftly, eyes widening just a bit, “No, no, it’s okay. It *was* meant to be a joke.”

“Good,” she exhaled relievedly, “I didn’t want to be insensitive.”

“You weren’t. You’re okay. Though awfully noble of you to care so much. Protective over my fragile, fragile mental health?” He took up the mock-grandiose disposition again and found it less to his liking. Nonetheless, he was standing again, glad to have cleared the confusion.

For a few minutes, they were content again to stand in the small night café, and have it feel cramped with just the two of them inside it. It could only sit twenty or so, but with all that glee beyond the doors, it couldn’t really be all that empty. Still, it was, but for a few moments that was alright. Aisander pressed at his gumline with his tongue before he saw Edelgard staring.

Edelgard watched for a good few seconds as she sat, poured and sipped hesitantly. Aisander watched her thoughtfully, in return, and after another good few seconds, said, “To answer you, though, yes.”



The woman behind the bar poured another drink for the man standing at it. Afterward, she pulled her stool closer to him and sat again, a bit lower than him. She wasn't partial to brands. Or wild berries of any sort. But she poured one for herself too. More than a taste this time, there was a distinct attraction to the smell of it and the way she'd had it described to her by him. A kind of sweetness that taints the tongue, makes it want more, but if too long is gone without, well, leaves an unpleasant sensation in the mouth.

"I thought so," replied Edelgard, understanding he had answered.

"Not for long, and I didn't contribute much."

"Well I'm sure that's not true."

"It is." The silence that followed was swollen and misshapen, and it left a queasy dissatisfaction at the pit of Edelgard's stomach. She sipped the brand again and coughed a bit. Aisander smiled, though halfheartedly. He parted his lips, as though to speak, but he faltered a second before doing so. The man named Aisander asked, "What about you? Other than working here. Tell me about yourself, oh noble protector."

The woman called Edelgard re-parted her hair before considering her answer very carefully. "Lagoon. My whole life—kind of. I love it here. The rest of Lucier is lovely, but this is my home, now at least."

"Any ambition beyond that?" Aisander asked.

"I'd like to maybe own a place like this of my own someday, do things my way. The owner is... fine, but he can be belligerent." Then, more seriously, "Perhaps I should have joined

the army,” she teased. “*Then*, I think I’d be out there.” She pointed and nodded to the window, and the street beyond it.

The man at the bar maintained his half-hearted smile, lowered his head, and his lips turned to a thin line. “They’re celebrating a victory that was the result of years of fighting and bloodshed.” He took to standing properly now, handling the drawstring again.

“War’s a terrible thing, yes,” said the woman behind it, “but better that we won.”

“Maybe,” the man at the bar replied.

He stood, and he slid fifteen copper coins across the counter. Set into two, uneven stacks. He righted his posture, turned, and exited into the street, glass of champagne already in his hand.

Edelgard observed as he left. Ais smiled at the face of the woman who offered him the drink, but raised his same objecting hand when she offered him to join the merriment. The man, no longer at the bar, righted his coat, sipped at the gold-colored liquid, and parted into the street, out of sight.