

# Shackles made of gold

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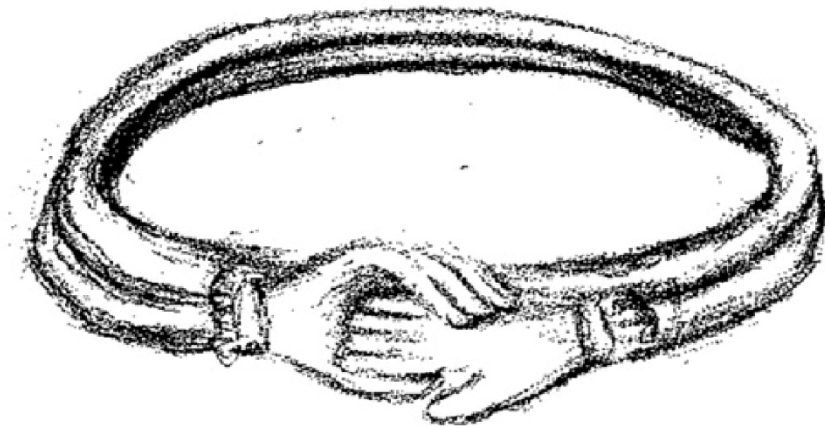
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## Shackles made of gold

She stared at the ring on her finger: two hands holding each other - actually a symbol of unity, love and trust. But for her it was just proof that she was nothing more than a commodity in her father's trading game. She would soon meet her future husband - the son of the man who would become her father's business partner through this marriage: another influential and wealthy nobleman of Stade.

This was Elisabeth von Zesterfleth's fate now. And she knew that there was nothing she could do to change it.

As her father, Albrecht von Zesterfleth, away on business as he often was, Elisabeth decided to take a walk through the town to take her mind off things.

She walked past countless traders who carried their wares on their backs like a hump and hawked them. As these traders were part of the street, just like the facades of the houses and shops, the street was given the name: Hökerstraße. For Elisabeth, the hustle and bustle of this street was part of everyday life, so she found the crowds and the shouting of the vendors very calming. Although she loved Stade, she wondered what it would be like to flee the city and her father, to give up her current life as the daughter of an influential businessman and live a modest life in the country. Suddenly, she was jolted out of her daydreams by a shout, much louder than the usual, customer-attracting shouts of the Höker. "Stop the thief!" shouted the baker. Before Elisabeth could realise what was happening, she bumped into someone. It was a young man who hurriedly from the baker. In his hand he was holding what looked like a loaf of bread rolled up in a cloth. Elisabeth looked into his light brown eyes and staggered backwards. He mumbled a curt apology in a strange accent as he hurried past Elisabeth. She stared after him as he continued to run through the crowd. "Stop him!" the baker shouted again as he dashed after him, but the thief was too fast. Soon the baker had given up running after the thief and the commotion died down again.

Elisabeth continued to stroll along the street, but she couldn't get the thief's eyes out of her head. She didn't know why, but she wanted to find out more about the stranger with the unusual accent. So, still agitated, she set off home, wondering how she was going to make it possible to see the strange young man again. She decided to return the street the very next day at the same time to look for him.

Those chestnut brown eyes. Elisabeth just couldn't get them out of her head. As a result, she made her way to Hökerstraße in the morning, the colourful autumn leaves lining the path and the cool breeze that swept through the alleyways. The smell of freshly baked bread was in the air and people were busily going their business. As she had arrived a little early to be on the safe side, she decided to go to the baker's first, where the mysterious young man had fled, to have a look around. She walked around the market for a long time, taking great care to look busy because she was beginning to feel embarrassed by her helpless search for a thief. But no matter how much she peered and eyed the baker, she couldn't spot the stranger anywhere.

After some time, she decided to return home. She was disappointed not to have found the stranger and at the same time ashamed to have given in to such childish hopes, even though she was already engaged. Nevertheless, she couldn't quite let go of the way he had pushed past her. Actually, on closer inspection, he wasn't

was a thief, as customary. Nevertheless, she toyed with the idea of returning to the market tomorrow.

Yes, why not? She could on a little shopping spree. The

Make the day easier for the maid. Yes, to do something good, to go back to Hökerstraße with a clear conscience and noble intentions. She was already looking forward to it. But to her disappointment, this little excursion was also unsuccessful. She spent almost a full week looking for the stranger, but each day left her with less hope than the last. Nevertheless, it somehow became a habit to through Hökerstrasse every day. Whilst it wasn't particularly fitting for an engaged lady like her to wander the streets of the city alone, these daily excursions did offer her some relief from the oppressive mood at home.

Even though the stranger's face was slowly blurring, she liked to escape into the hustle and bustle of the markets before her impending marriage. By now the whole household was in a state of excitement, well, at least the part of it that was still there: her father was on a business trip to Cuxhaven. All she could gather from his files in his characteristically cryptic handwriting was that there had apparently been tension among the harbour workers.

He probably just wanted to make sure that there would be no delays in the transport of his goods. Basically, however, he preferred to keep her out of his business affairs. All her knowledge of her father's business was based on worn-out papers that she occasionally stole from the lavishly filled drawers of his desk. A few days ago, she had finally been able to find out more about her fiancé. His name was

Daniel Marschalck. Her father had apparently been exchanging letters with the Marschalcks for the last few weeks and had probably been very busy a fool of the wealthy family. It didn't surprise her in the least that he wanted to marry her off as profitably as possible. After all, it was only logical that he would a generous dowry from a family of such standing.

Nevertheless, she could not deny that it hurt her to be treated like a commodity by him and that he had even withheld the name of her future husband from her. He had made no effort to inform her of his plans for the ceremony, even though they seemed to be well underway. She didn't really feel like marrying Daniel Marschalck. Sure it would be profitable, for the good of her family, yes, but also for the good of her father's business, which should be the only reason for the whole marriage. By now she had given up counting the days on which she had searched in vain for the stranger. So she strolled through the streets of Stade again, a basket of bread and apples tucked under her arm.

It slowly became difficult to the maid to let her do the shopping. She feared it might make the mean girl think she was incompetent at her job. But Elisabeth had built up a good relationship with her over the years and had managed to convince her that she actually enjoyed these little outings. She had just taken on the inconvenience of squeezing through Lämmertwiete. It was the shortest way home and the maid relied on getting her apples home in time for cooking.

She heard footsteps at the other end of the alley. She mentally scolded herself for not taking the longer route. She lowered her eyes and tried to move as close to the wall as possible without soiling the hem of her dress. However, she couldn't really the basket out of the way, so she and the man coming towards her had to push past each other rather awkwardly. She was just about to ask for forgiveness when he mumbled an apology. His accent sounded familiar. She immediately stopped and raised her eyes. Even in the half-shadow of the narrow

She recognised his face from the walls of the house as if she had never forgotten it. His eyebrows were drawn together and his dark hair cast shadows over his darker eyes. "You," Elisabeth began and felt her heart beat faster. "You're the thief! You pushed me away so indelicately a few days ago!" He pursed his lips and scrutinised her.

Elisabeth began to suspect that it was unwise to have confronted him like that. "Well, how are you going to hold that against me, Miss?" Elisabeth blushed. "Well, I suppose I could report her." She jutted out her chin.

He smiled insolently. "I don't know how much you've stolen, but your face is familiar to me now. It would be easy for me to describe you!" she continued. "So now I hear it, how would you describe me?" He replied and grinned even wider when he realised how much he was upsetting her. Fine

Lines stood out under his high cheekbones. He outraged Elisabeth. Without further ado, she decided not to put up with his manners any longer. She snorted and pressed her basket closer to her body. "You should be ashamed of yourself, you!" she exclaimed and turned on her heel. She took hasty steps away from him. A blush rose to her cheeks and she pressed her lips together. How impertinent he was! That she had thought so much about him, how embarrassing it all seemed to her now. How cheeky he was with his manner, no one had ever dared to treat her like that before. Something about the situation upset her, but she didn't dare the feeling any further. The whole way, her thoughts dwelled on the encounter with the stranger, no matter how hard she tried to distract herself. Agitated, she knocked on the wooden door of her house. "Angela!" she called after the kitchen maid. "Angela, don't you dare open the door for me!"

was an eager rustling behind the door until it finally swung open and Angela's rosy face appeared behind it. She quickly brushed her blonde curls from her soot-smeared cheeks. "Miss Elisabeth! Come in, you've arrived just in time.

I've just fired up the oven." Elisabeth pressed the basket into Angela's arms and hurried into the house "Oh Angela, I have so much to tell you!" she cried as she gathered her skirts and followed the maid into the kitchen. While Angela set about peeling and grating the apples, Elisabeth pulled up a stool and began to tell her about her encounter with the stranger. Although Angela's back was turned to her, she could barely conceal her excitement.

"Miss Elisabeth, your courage is admirable! Although it just as easily have been mistaken for stubbornness. Truly, one might think that an engaged

A lady like her doesn't get involved in such situations. A thief, heavens!" Elisabeth cleared her throat a little. "Well, it wasn't in my interest to meet this man again," she immediately bit her lip. She hadn't told Angela about her first encounter with the stranger until now. She briefly dared to hope that Angela might not have overheard, but she was a perceptive young lady. She immediately lowered the wooden spoon she was using to break some eggs for the batter. "Again? Did you know this young man before?" Elisabeth cursed herself inwardly, but now it was pointless trying to hide anything from Angela. She sighed devotedly while inwardly cursing herself for her carelessness. She briefly explained how she had bumped into the stranger at the market and that this was also the reason why she knew he was a thief. It seemed to make sense to Angela and she clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh Elisabeth!" she exclaimed in horror. "Is this why you insisted so vehemently on doing my shopping for me?" Elisabeth gasped for breath. She tried in vain to calm the maid down, but Angela was already completely lost in her thoughts

lost. "Oh Elisabeth, what you doing, dreaming after a thief while you already have a ring on your finger. Ooh Elisabeth, do you want to disgrace your father?"

"And are you going to continue preparing the meal," Elisabeth ran her hand over her mouth. Angela fell silent in surprise. Elisabeth buried her face in her hands. "Oh Angela, forgive me. I don't really know either. Can you promise not to tell me? Now I know how brazen and shameless he is! I'll have forgotten him in no time, please just keep this to yourself." Angela sighed. "Oh

Elisabeth, what you doing? I'll keep quiet, but promise me you'll keep your word and leave this man behind. And I'll do the shopping again from now on." Elisabeth nodded, ashamed, but didn't dare look Angela in the eye. "Yes, I promise Angela."

Contrary to her promise, she lay awake deep into the night, lost in her thoughts. The way he had looked at her, the way his dark eyes had lingered on her and the faint light had caught in his brown hair. The way his smug smile formed little dimples under his striking features and how she had lost herself in the sight. She didn't quite know who she was angrier at: him for being so overbearing or herself for enjoying it.

She was also beside herself the whole next morning. Angela tried as best she could to accommodate Elisabeth by not a word about last night. When she couldn't stand it any longer, Elisabeth energetically reached for a coat and set off. Brunhilde, the maid, held her back: "Miss Elisabeth, where are you going? Are you going shopping again?" Elisabeth said no, she just wanted to go for a walk and get some fresh air. As Angela was busy in the kitchen and couldn't stop her, Elisabeth hurried out of the house. She didn't really know where she wanted to go. She certainly wanted to go for a walk, but she also wanted to see him again. She wandered aimlessly through the town's less busy alleyways and side streets. The cold bit into her skin and the autumn wind blew relentlessly under her clothes. She pulled her coat tighter and buried her face in the lined collar. She didn't realise how much time had passed before she spotted him.

He was standing in the Lämmertwiete, his back against the wall. Excited, she suddenly forgot how numb her hands and face were from the cold. Suddenly she began to doubt. What was she actually going to do now that she had found him? She became unsure of herself and thought about simply turning back, but he had already noticed her. She froze as he her. "You're here again, miss." He sounded surprised. She searched for words. "I have every right to be here and my reasons for being here should be of no concern to you," she replied snootily. "And yet I think I know one of those reasons." He smiled as if he was mocking her. "You posh city girls are all the same anyway, let me guess, your favourite activity, apart from the daily gossip, is embroidery." Elisabeth snorted. "You're very presumptuous!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Well, ignoble lord," she replied, "where do you live, if I may be so bold as to ask? You don't give the impression of being from the noble class that you seem to mock so much." For a moment, she thought she could withstand his gaze. She quickly broke away from this thought and reluctantly turned her head away. "What is your

Name? It's extremely rude not to introduce yourself, you know!"

He grinned mischievously, took her hand and before she realised it, he began to run with her through the winding corridors and alleyways. Elisabeth staggered after him, perplexed, as she tried to regain her balance. After a short time, they hurried through the stone and moss-covered town gate and over a bridge that separated the town centre from the city.

farms and cow pastures. The cold autumn air burned in Elisabeth's lungs and she no longer wanted to be carried off to a strange place by a man whose name she still didn't know. It slowly dawned on her that a thief had taken her to a place she didn't know and she had no idea how to get back to the city. She heard the church bells ringing in the distance and slowly realised how her unease was growing. "What's your name?" she asked again. "Luleff Jansen," he replied curtly, "Can we go on, or doesn't the fine lady trust me?" Of course she didn't trust him! But holding that against him now would probably get her no further back towards the city. "Where are we going?" she asked instead. He didn't answer, took her hand again and walked on. By now, the town was barely recognisable.

After a few minutes, they stopped again. They were standing in front of a small wood of sorts. Luleff led them through the thicket and just a few seconds later they were standing in front of an abandoned windmill. Some parts of the roof had collapsed, one of the wings lay broken off in the grass and the walls were crumbling. Nature had apparently decided a long time ago to take back what was rightfully hers. The wood was rotten and there was no area that wasn't overgrown with greenery. Luleff suddenly called out: "Cathelijne, ik ben terug. Ik heb iemand meegenomen". Suddenly a little girl peeked out from behind a hole in the wall. "Who is that?" Elisabeth asked in astonishment, "Is that your sister?" Luleff sighed and led her into the windmill. Inside, despite the few items they seemed to have, it was quite chaotic. The walls were partially collapsed and full of cracks, straw lay in one corner under what had once been a white sheet, and they seemed to be using the millstone as a table. Luleff began in a hushed voice: "We had to flee a few weeks ago, forced to leave everything behind. All because we held on to our faith. Cathelijne and I lost our home, our family, everything that was important to us. Now we're here, safe, or what you think we are. But what do you have left when you have nothing? No food, no roof over our heads, and we live in a ruin that barely offers us any protection. It's hard to know if we've really escaped or if the real fight is just beginning."

He paused and sighed deeply. "Sometimes I wonder if it makes any difference at all. We want to try and move on to Copenhagen when we've recovered a bit." In the distance, the church bells rang out again: one, two, three, four, five times! Elisabeth froze, soon her father would arrive home and she wouldn't be there. She jumped up, babbled a brief mixture of explanation and apology, then ran back home as far as her clothes would allow. She could feel Luleff's gaze on her back and felt awful leaving him behind like this. Nevertheless, she reached her destination faster than she had expected and the relief melted into the burning in her lungs and the pain in her feet. She knocked on the door and her maid Brunhilde opened it. "Miss Elisabeth, what were you doing on the streets at such a late hour? Your father could arrive at any moment and if you hadn't been home in time, your father would most certainly have been more than upset." Elisabeth mumbled a brief apology and went into her room. She hurried to her room. Some time later, she looked out of her window, from which she had a perfect view of the tall church tower. It was already seven o'clock in the evening and she was beginning to wonder whether her father would be home today. It seemed that her stress and rushing home had been unnecessary. When he normally left for a business trip, he was always back home around five in the afternoon, which was why she was a little worried now, despite her dislike of her father.

His views, which included his daughter's love life, were rather dubious in her opinion, but if you believed him, this was the only

The chance to marry the right man. According to her father, she would only make a stupid mistake in her emotional frenzy and give herself over to some scoundrel from the alleyways. But it wasn't up to her to decide and she didn't really need to worry about it.

When her father finally came home, Angela had already served dinner. She didn't really want to greet him, but as soon as he saw her, he pulled her into a very soft embrace, thanks to his healthy corpulence. As she had no chance against her father, who was two heads taller and many times wider, she finally surrendered to his embrace, which ended in a very strange scene that was somewhat reminiscent of someone trying to hug a statue. When he had finally finished squeezing the air out of her, she to out of the immediate vicinity of his arms as quickly as possible in case he changed his mind. When they sat down, Albrecht immediately began to describe his entire journey. It went on like this for a while, with Elisabeth switching off after about two minutes, but that didn't seem to bother him. He just kept on talking so that anyone who happened to walk in might have thought he was a waterfall that had been dammed up for three years. He talked about his miserably long dealings with people, most of whom, as he emphasised several times, he couldn't stand, and how he had sold a poor fisherman a rather battered boat for such an unreasonably high sum of money that the latter had almost started to worship Albrecht in spite of it. "Anyway, when I had sold the old Angelika, I decided to relax in a nice pub first.

While I was sitting there enjoying my wine, a tall, handsome man suddenly sat down next to me and I was still thinking, well, don't I know him from somewhere? But then I took a closer look and when he greeted me, I finally realised who it was. It was Bartholt, the father of your fiancé, Elisabeth." She snapped out of her trance and listened. "And because you're getting married in a week's time, we had a lot to talk about, so..." "What?! I'm getting married in a week's time?" Elisabeth was furious and jumped up. "I haven't even met my future husband yet, and now I'm supposed to marry him in a week? And anyway, why are you choosing my husband for me?

Do you really think I can't choose a sensible gentleman anymore?" She was almost shouting now. "Young lady, that's going too far," Albrecht thundered and also stood up. But Elisabeth had already got too far into it to stop her now. "No, you alone are to blame for the fact that I have never been able to make a single decision of my own in my life, and I wouldn't even have been able to meet Luleff if I hadn't snuck out!" "Please, what did you say?" her father suddenly asked with a cold, deadly calm in his voice. A cold shiver ran down Elisabeth's spine. What had she said? She hadn't realised in her agitated state, but now she really had made a crucial mistake. "Elisabeth von Zesterfleth. What. Did. You.

Did you say that?" her father asked , with a clear emphasis in his voice.

"Nothing, I was just carried away a little by my feelings, I'm sorry, father." "No, Elisabeth.

Who were you just talking about?". Elisabeth felt hot and cold at the same time. She clasped her hands behind her back to hide her trembling, but her father had already noticed and looked at her with a penetrating gaze. She tried to avoid the stare of his eyes and therefore looked helpfully at Angela, who was standing in the doorway, attracted by the screaming, but she just shook her head imperceptibly. She had to deal with this situation on her own. Her father probably interpreted her silence as

Confirmation of his suspicions, as his face contorted into a mask of disgust. "My daughter," he then said with barely suppressed anger in his voice.

Voice, "meets up with some random strays despite her engagement and falls in love with them. Have you ever realised what that means for you? What it means for us? You're jeopardising your family's entire reputation and therefore your future, and despite knowing this, you continue to chase after him. I'm ashamed to have to call you my daughter. You have hurt me very much, Elisabeth." With the last words, he lowered his voice and slowly slumped down. Elisabeth felt helpless. She no longer knew what to do, she had never seen her father so dejected and disappointed. She felt terrible and would have liked to hug him and tell him that she would never do something so foolish again. But a small, quiet voice deep in the back of her mind kept reminding her that none of this was her fault. If her father had simply allowed her to control of her own life, it would never have come to this. Driven by this certainty, she developed a new passion. "He's not a stray." She gave her father a hostile , "And not a stray. You don't realise how hard he has it. You haven't seen how he and his sister live. And all because they cling to their faith. Why does anyone care what someone believes? Father, I love him. You can't take that away from me. Lock me up, lock me away, never let me feel the daylight on my skin again because of me. But this love, this one true Love, you can't take it away from me, whatever you do.

may do. And should I sit hundreds of miles away in the deepest dungeon and starve to death, his smile in my memory will give me warmth, his words will give me the strength to survive. Every single day, every little eternity, I will wait for him. His face shall be the last thing I see when I leave this world. His voice the last thing I hear and his touch the last thing I feel. Please father, understand me, you from whom I am descended." During the last words, she had fallen to her knees in front of him and was now looking into his face. She was startled when she realised that he was crying.

He angrily wiped away his tears and stood up. "Elisabeth, to your room. Now." She shrank back from him and slowly retreated towards the door. "And that you won't come back to me until you've got these fluffies out of your head.". Those were to be the last words she heard from him. With an empty feeling in her chest, she slowly trudged up the stairs and barely made it to her room, where she collapsed on the bed. Her tears soaked her pillow and her clothes, but she didn't care. She wanted to get away, just away from this horrible place. She gazed into nothingness while thousands of whirling thoughts almost swallowed her up. She couldn't move and drowned in her own head until, a little later, she was overcome by tiredness due to the stress and emotional chaos.

When she woke up again, it was dark and Elisabeth heard her father snoring loudly in the next room. She knew she couldn't stay any longer and put up with her father's selfish decisions.

Without further ado, she began to gather provisions and some clothes and weave a rope from sheets and cloths - goods that her father traded in, among other things. She attached it to a hook on her window. Although the rope didn't look particularly sturdy, she climbed down. In a dress, however, this was more difficult than she had expected, but she reached the ground in one piece.

As soon as her feet touched the ground, she ran towards the city gate with the cool night wind blowing in her face. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she ran towards the city gate. When she had almost reached it, however, she noticed an obstacle that she had in her hasty escape: At night, the city gate was closed and heavily guarded. She knew that the money she had with her would take a long time.



would not be enough to bribe the two guards. She hid behind the wall of a house, watched the guards and thought about how she would manage to cross the wall without being noticed. She knew the city like the back of her hand and if was a way to get round the wall, she had to know it.

It hit them like a bolt of lightning: the opportunity to get out of the city. There was a tree near the wall that should have been cut down long ago.

She crept quietly through the alleyways, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Shortly afterwards, however, she saw her salvation. In front of her, the silhouette of the young oak tree that marked her destination stood out in the faint moonlight. She looked round. There were no guards to be seen, but a group of them could appear at any time. She had to act quickly. She quickly scurried into the shadow of the wall, where she would hopefully be protected from prying eyes. Now she just had to find a way to climb the tree... There! She spotted a few branches that could easily be used as a ladder.

Unfortunately, there was a problem. Said branches were about two and a half metres above her head, which proved to be quite an obstacle. But there was nothing that could stop her now. She took a few steps back from the wall and gathered her skirts. She should probably have stolen one of her father's trousers after all. So she had no choice but to get rid of her skirts. Dressed only in an undergarment, she felt uncomfortably exposed, but she had no other choice. With a powerful throw, she sent her discarded clothes sailing over the top of the wall. She then took a running start and sprinted towards the wall. Her feet left the ground and for a brief moment she felt almost weightless, free, like a bird in the skywings spread proudly. When her foot touched the hard stone of the wall, she pushed off hard and caught the edge of a block with her fingertips. She pulled herself up with difficulty and clung to the next crack between the brickwork and the tree, from where she finally got hold of the lowest branch of her previously identified ladder. She clutched it tightly and heaved herself up, reminding herself not to look down as she didn't really have complete confidence in the branch. But it was more stable than it looked and could hold her weight so well. She reached out for the next branch, which was easier to reach. So she continued to climb branch by branch, while smaller branches kept getting caught on her clothes and hair. When she only had one more rung to go, she suddenly heard voices behind her. She looked round and saw a glimmer of light travelling along the alleyway through which she had previously crept to the wall. Now she really had to hurry. But just as she was about to swing over the top of the wall, she felt her leg being held back by something. Her heart sank to the back of her knees. She slowly turned her head, expecting to see the flashing helmet of a guard. But it was only her foot, stuck in the fork of a branch. Now she could also hear a whistling sound that was getting louder and louder, which must also be the source of the glow. It couldn't be long before whoever it was would turn the corner and see her. She pulled at her leg, but the branch fork would not give up its fight so easily. The torchbearers were bound to turn up at any moment now.

She shook and pulled further, but the wood just wouldn't let her go. Just as the tip of a shoe emerged from behind the street corner, she finally managed to free herself with a powerful tug. With a clearly audible plop, she landed on the ground on the other side of the wall. Behind the thick stones, she heard a shouted "Who's there?", but she had already picked herself up and ran as fast as her legs would carry her towards the nearby forest so as not to get caught.

to discovered by the gatekeepers. The beaten track led more or less straight ahead some time, until she came to a small stream. A small quarystone bridge spanned the stream, which she crossed with ease.

She crossed the bridge and soon left the first farms behind .

The town where she had grown up was just a small silhouette in the moonlight. Her lungs were burning and her legs were beginning to give way, but she couldn't stop now.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she ran along the increasingly undefined country lanes. She ran and ran until she could see a faint, flickering light behind some trees and bushes. She knew she was in the right place. Elisabeth fought her way through the undergrowth and saw Luleff, who must have been sitting by the fire a moment ago but had got up to find the source of the rustling, and fell into his arms. Tears streamed down her face. Luleff asked, both surprised and very confused: "W-What are you looking for here?" Elisabeth replied, sobbing: "I want to go to Copenhagen, I can't stay here any longer. In less than a week I'm supposed to marry someone I've never seen in my life, but I don't want to, I can't, I love you". She sank further into Luleff's arms and he hugged her tighter. "We have to find a way to get away from here, and as quickly as possible. Don't worry, we'll do it together." The two talked for a while longer and Luleff managed to comfort Elisabeth. She gave Luleff the warm clothes and food she had brought from home so that they wouldn't have to freeze or go hungry for the next few days. She then set off on her way home so that her father would not find out that she had ever been away. She soon reached the rope under her window again and climbed up. Once at the top, she painstakingly tried to dismantle her escape aid back into its individual parts so that the last evidence of her nocturnal excursion was destroyed. Then she went to bed as if nothing had ever happened.

For the next two days, she avoided her father during the day and spent her nights at the old mill, planning her escape from a life that was a nightmare for her.

One morning, after she had once again been busy punishing her father with her silence, Brunhilde told her that he would spend the day at the harbour and let her know that she would have time to calm down by then. When she heard the door close a little later, she breathed a sigh of relief. At last, she no longer had to feel like a stranger in her own home. She decided to pass the time by leafing through her father's documents, although she was lucky to only be able to decipher half of them thanks to her father's handwriting, something suddenly caught her eye. On the morning of her wedding day, a merchant fleet was due to leave Stade harbour and deliver several crates of cloth directly to Copenhagen. Elisabeth immediately realised that this was her chance for a better life with her Luleff and little Cathelijne.

The days passed faster and faster and it was already the day before her wedding, which she would not be attending. In the last few days, which all merged together in Elisabeth's mind, she had tried to steal as many provisions, money and other things that might be useful on her journey from her home and transport them to the old mill at night without anyone noticing. There they stuffed everything into bags to make it easier to carry. Soon they would be on their way. She would finally be free. Free from her father's games and agreements, free from people's expectations. Soon she would leave behind forever the town where she had grown up and never really left. Would she ever return? Was it really the right thing to flee? Would they even survive the escape and would they remain undetected?

The thoughts danced through her head like the leaves outside her window in the cold autumn wind. But now was no time for doubts, she knew exactly how the ship was constructed, where it was best to hide in the cargo hold and that all the preparations had been successful. So she climbed out of her room window one last time with a braided rope. This time she would not return under the cover of dawn. When she hit the ground, she released the rope from the window hook with a violent jerk and tried to make it disappear into her bag. There was no turning back now. Under cover of the shadows of the night, she crept towards the harbour. Although it was the middle of the night, she had to be careful as the city and her father had their eyes and ears everywhere. When she reached the , she immediately saw the silhouettes of Luleff and Cathelijne hiding by the goods crane. Together they walked to one of her father's ships, which was decorated with her family crest. First she walked across the

plank that led to the deck. It all so surreal, the lapping of the water beneath her feet, Luleff's breath on the back of her neck and the cawing of the crows, as if they were mocking her for this risky escape.

When everyone had arrived on deck, Elisabeth showed Luleff a hatch that led directly into the ship's cargo hold. He and Cathelijne climbed in and disappeared into the darkness shortly afterwards. Elisabeth herself decided to on board for a short while. Now she looked at her home for the very last time. The town where she had grown up, the streets and alleyways where she used to play. She could even recognise the bakery she had often spent time near over the last few weeks in the faint moonlight. Was it a mistake to leave here? No. She couldn't allow such thoughts to unsettle her now. She had already come too far for that. The cold night wind blew in her face. She was sure that she was doing the right thing and now there was only one thing that bound her to her soon-to-be former life.

She stared at the ring on her finger, glistening in the moonlight: two hands holding each other - actually a symbol of unity, love and trust. For her, it now just a symbol of the old life she was leaving behind. She took it off her finger, hesitated briefly and threw it into the harbour basin.

**End**

