

— *August 1st, 1921. Chemnitz, Saxony, 12:30 P.M.* —

Frieda and Gerhard strolled the streets of Chemnitz. It was a busy, sunny, late-summer afternoon. The two had just hopped off the train all the way from the nearest train station by the encampment. Neither of them said a word throughout the whole trip. Frieda didn't feel like dignifying him with a response. Gerhard got the feeling that she didn't want to speak to him at all, so he simply kept on a stone face. The sound of kids playing, cars driving by, and the occasional train whistle filled the silence between the two of them.

"So are you going to stay silent this whole trip?" Gerhard finally spoke up, not even looking in her direction.

"Why do you suddenly care?" Frieda asked back.

"So I know whether or not starting a conversation with you is a waste of time. I can invest that time and effort into something more productive."

"You know, for someone trying to build a psychokinetic safe haven, you're one of the least welcoming people I've had the displeasure of meeting."

Gerhard stopped in his tracks. "That's fine. We don't have to be friends. I'm just making sure our settlement is led in a secure manner."

"By pulling guns on random men and asking the women to lift their skirts up 'for security'?" She ranted, putting air quotes when needed.

"That was nearly four months ago, you're still angry about that?" He cracked a smile. Frieda hated that.

"I guess the word 'humiliation' isn't in your dictionary, Herr Administrator."

Gerhard growled. "You sound like Dieter. That wife of his made him into a damn pacifist. Nobody likes being the hardass, but it's the hardass who keeps everyone safe, and nobody else wants to do it. You may not like it, but you at least have to understand."

She didn't say anything in response, only turning her head away from him.

"Fine, then. Be that way," He spat. "We came here to run errands, not to chat."

Gerhard led Frieda inside of a warehouse shop. Frieda wasn't used to big cities, considering how after she went from living in a primitive village without electricity to training in the woods for a few years. The fact that there were stores built for selling specialized products instead of just one big general store was a concept foreign to her.

Inside the warehouse were rows upon rows of shelves. All kinds of different materials, parts, and tools filled the shelves, neatly organized. The warehouse itself was dimly lit. She felt intimidated.

"Why are we here?" Frieda asked, taking a particular interest in a barrel full of wood.

"Remember those Psychokinetic carpenters we poached about two months ago? They need a few extra materials to finish building a few of the shacks."

"So why take me along?"

"Normally, I send Dieter. But he's fighting the good fight in Berlin and he took Ingrid with him, so you were the backup plan. All we need are some wood planks."

"Wood planks? I got them." She declared. She hugged a bunch of wooden planks from the barrel, but Gerhard stopped her.

"No, not those." He put the planks back into the barrel. He led her over to the counter, where a blonde man with a mustache was working.

"Hey, Emil. You got those three by fives I asked for?"

The man behind the counter nodded, before turning around and picking up a box. He placed the box onto the counter, and opened it up to reveal a set of wooden planks, stacked neatly.

“What’s the difference?” Frieda asked, deadpan.

Gerhard spoke in a low tone, so Emil couldn’t hear. “Back in the ancient era, Psychokinetics discovered that they could temper construction materials to make them stronger, more flexible, or less prone to damage. The guy here is cool, so I make sure they use materials I supply from here.”

Frieda looked down at the box of wooden planks, and tried to lift it. It was extremely heavy, so she could only get it about an inch off the table. Impressive. Gerhard took another look at the box.

“Hold it,” He suddenly raised his voice.

“Is something wrong?” Emil asked.

“The coloration’s off.” He spat.

“There was a little incident when I put the wood in the pool to temper it. The color may have gotten a bit lighter. Don't worry, it won’t affect the quality in the slightest—”

“The color is the primary indicator that this wood has been properly tempered.” Gerhard interrupted.

“It is not the *only* indicator. Trust me, I tested the wood three times this morning, I can assure you—”

Gerhard slammed the counter, making Emil jump. Frieda backed away. “Bullshit! How do I know you’re telling the truth?!” Emil stuttered.

“Does the color even matter?” Frieda exasperatedly interjected.

“Let me ask you something. When you cook a chicken, would you rather have it be overcooked or undercooked? At least if you take it burnt, you guarantee all the bacteria will be killed off. This is the same concept.”

“If you want, I’ll take them back and make sure the color is right—”

“You’ve already disappointed us. We expect the job to be done not only on time but to our standards or above—”

Frieda shoved an arm over Gerhard. She looked at Emil softly. “Take as much time as you need, Herr Emil.”

Emil clasped his hands together and nodded profusely. “Thank you. I will make you double the tempered wood to make up for the delay!”

The shop owner grasped the box and ran to the back of the store with it, in an excited, yet fearful manner. Frieda could tell by his angry eyebrows that Gerhard wanted to say something.

“Word of advice,” Frieda smugly began. “When you’re trying to get people on your side, you have to be humble and kind.”

“Like I said, it’s not that easy, Fraulein,” Gerhard sighed. “We need as many allies as we can get, but those allies also need to be competent. I can only make sure they deliver a quality product, but not what the product is. We have no idea if someone is going to sell us poisoned food, or defective materials.”

Frieda gestured to the back room. “You already have a relationship with Emil. And he just offered to compensate you with twice the amount. His heart’s in it and he’s putting in the effort.”

“Rebuilding this society requires us to stay vigilant—”

“Too vigilant to make mistakes?” Frieda interrupted. Gerhard was caught off guard by her sudden remark. “Want to know what true authority looks like? It’s not just power. It’s not just the ability to do things. Authority is the ability to give and the ability to take away. To show mercy, even if you don’t want to. Being the leader isn’t about being a tough guy and ordering people around. It’s about knowing when to be firm, when to be lenient, and how to keep people happy.”

Gerhard crossed his arms. He couldn’t believe he was letting someone young enough to be his daughter lecture him on this. He wanted to tell her that she doesn’t know anything about how the world works, but he found himself speechless.

He just looked away from her and mumbled, “I hope the extra wood doesn’t take too long.”