Checkmate

by MycrotsUmbrella78

Summary

“In life, unlike chess, the game continues after checkmate.” -- Isaac Asimov

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A/N:  Italicized sections are flashbacks...

Of course, Maria had seen the board before, tucked away by the window, a match in progress some days and in perfect regimented position on others. She had wondered whom he played with. Herr Detweiler or one of the children? Perhaps he played by correspondence with an old naval colleague or a reclusive master? Whatever the case, the chess set was beautiful, each piece an elaborate work of art, almost too fine to touch. Not without washing your hands first.

This afternoon she had found herself with a few stolen hours of free time and had sought him out in his lair, where she was certain he had been hiding. Finding the room empty she had walked past his desk, dragging her fingertips across the edge of the wood idly before wandering over to the window to finally succumb to the temptation of touching the lovely white knight. He was heavy in her hand and the felt pad on the bottom of her piece was soft and strangely warm against her fingertips compared to the cool of the marble carving atop it.
“Do you play?”

“Oh! You startled me Captain, er, sir,” she huffed at herself, “Georg,” she said deliberately. “I just can’t seem to break the habit…,” she shook her head at herself and gave him a shrug and a smile.

He walked over to her and nodded his head toward the knight in her hands, “Well, Fraulein, do you play or not?” he teased.

“I have played a time or two,” she said, nodding. “I confess, I have admired your chess set in the past, it’s far nicer than the homemade wooden set my grandfather had. Probably less splinters too,” she laughed as she replaced the piece gently on the board.

“I heard a rumor,” he said slyly as he reached out to stroke the skin of across her collarbones,”...that Max took the children to town, something secret and likely not on my list of approved activities.”

“Mmm, I wonder what might be on your list of approved activities for you and I?” she sassed, sliding her arms over the curves of his shoulders.

“How alone are we?” he mumbled.

She gave him a rueful smile, “Not very, Sister Euphegenia is just in the other room.”

“Of course she is,” Georg rolled his eyes and un-twined her arms from around his neck, holding her hands in a chaste manner while his eyes told her just how bad of a liar his body was.

“Would you care to play? That should be on the good Sister’s list of approved activities for newly engaged couples?” He gave her a smirk as he pulled out the chair in front of her.

“Alright. Just don’t be too hard on me, I haven’t played in a long while.”

“I would never dream of it,” he quirked his lips at that. “Perhaps a wager, mmm? If I win, then you give me a kiss. And if you win then I give you a kiss.”
Maria laughed, “So win or lose, you still get the prize? Clever,” she said giving his cheek a pat as she sat down and started to stare at the board. Sometimes the simplest things reminded her that her life had changed, overnight. Sitting across for him, as an equal, soon as his wife.

“White moves first, love,” he whispered in a teasing tone as he pointed to her pieces.

“Oh, yes. Of course. I had forgotten.” She gingerly picked up the knight she had been toying with earlier and held him against her lips as she studied the board.

“Are you kissing him goodbye?”

“No,” she giggled, “Well, maybe I was. I always feel badly when I send my pieces across the board to their fate. Silly isn’t it?”

“Charming actually, as I recall you don’t love to say goodbyes.”

“True,” she murmured placing her knight back in his square carefully and instead pushed a center pawn forward two spaces. She chanced a look at Georg and knew he was thinking the same thing she was. About her non-goodbye the night of the party and the pain that separation had caused. She had fared much better with their second parting...

He had looked for her in all the usual places, but knowing Maria perhaps he should have started with someplace unusual. It was late, the children had been in bed for hours, or at least had been in their rooms. He’d heard a distinctive thud an hour or so ago from the boys hallway but no cries of pain. They were probably fine. Probably.

Private moments were rare, too rare. Oh, he had managed a few rather memorable ones since they announced their engagement, but they had taken all of his considerable skill as a tactician and were unsatisfyingly short or interrupted by copious bleeding, smashing glass and on one indelible occasion bright purple paint. A house full of charmingly needy children, and he included Max in that number, previous obligations, rescheduled appointments and mandatory appearances had made his time alone with his warm and willing fiancee scarce, and he was...grouchy.
He gave a sigh and started back down the hallway when a nearby, “For heaven sakes!” caught his attention. There was a tiny sliver of light coming from underneath a partially closed storage closet door and he was certain he had found his wayward quarry.

“Darling?,” he asked, cocking his head to the side to study her shapely rear end as she dug into a shelf near to the ground. Smiling with approval he teased, “Have you decided that this room is more to your liking?”

“Very funny. I am taking the children on an outing tomorrow, we have both been so busy with the wedding and they have been so cooped up… Well, I knew the boys had set a few of the balls and ropes in here but when I got in here they had been placed on the shelf too high...so I jumped for them and…”

“Ah, perhaps I could be of service,” reaching up with the casual ease of the tall and setting the items in the basket she had dropped in the hall.

“Thank you,” she offered, stepping in close to press a kiss on his chin.

He gathered her into the loose circle of his arms and pressed his forehead to the top of her head, breathing her in. “You have managed to remember I am leaving in the morning?” he mumbled as his lips brushed over her hair.

“Mmm, yes. Still not happy about it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, running his hands down her back and resting them scandalously at the base of her spine. “You have no idea…,” he mumbled to himself. “But I cannot postpone it any longer, and it will only be for a day or two.”

“It’s just that, well, we haven’t been-”

“Apart. Not since the night you came back. I’m rather enjoying it.”

“Me too. But,” she rallied pressing her hands against his chest and pushing at him a bit. “We will be just fine, the children and I.”
“Of course, no doubt. I’m leaving you in command!” He gave her a grin and he saluted her.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you certain? That didn’t go as you planned last time did it?”

“No. And aren’t I the lucky one?”

“Not leaving me with a list of rules this time? No marching and breathing?”

“Umm, no. Well, perhaps just one rule. The new drapes, in the music room? Don’t make clothes out of them. Order material.”

She gave him a playful swat on the arm. “For that I just might make you some play clothes as well, short pants-- to match Kurt’s.”

“I’ll wear them,” he warned with a laugh, “…on our honeymoon. We can play the Lonely Goatherd,” he waggled his eyebrows at her and her giggles turned into a laugh.

She shook her head at him, “I am not playing that with you, and I have heard you yodel, it’s terrible.”

“Oh ho, insulting me already. Better give me a kiss and to make it feel better, we naval heroes bruise very easily.” He reached out and settled his hands along her hips, pulling her in and nudging her nose with his, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth before shuffling in to cover her mouth with his and deepen the kiss. She allowed it, for a moment, and then pulled back, a playful light in her eye.

“Ah ah, Captain, wouldn’t want to be too repetitious now would we?” She felt the huff of his laugh against her hair and he reached down to tip up her chin. But still she held back.

Running a finger down his nose she gave him a stern look, “Now sir, you’ll remember that the first rule in this house is discipline,” she stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips, drawing his bottom lip between hers and giving a lingering tug. He shuddered, hands reaching out, but catching only the fabric of her dress for a moment before it slid from his grip.
“I trust when you return, you will have acquired some?” She deftly bent to slide her arm through the handle of the basket and settled it in the crook of her elbow as she walked away.

“Huh”, Georg muttered in impressed disbelief. Absently rubbing his hand over his heart, “She’s fantastic.”

Darling, I know I haven’t played in a bit but I do believe you have to move after I do.”

Georg shook his head to clear the memory of her sashaying down his hallway and grabbed a pawn, sliding him two spaces forward in his opening salvo. Maria studied his move and touched the tip of her finger to a bishop, mumbled a bit to herself and then slid one of her brave knights out in return. Georg winced a bit at her choice of move and decided that she was obviously inexperienced and, being a gentleman and not want to destroy her confidence, he decided to take it easy on her. He pushed another pawn out, just one space, and gave her an encouraging grin.

She had an adorable little crinkle between her brows as she moved a pawn out a couple of spaces in response to his move. He slid a bishop out across the board a bit and threatened her knight. She ignored the danger in favor of using her pawn to capture one of his, she gave a triumphant little squeal and snapped his pawn down beside her on the table, pleased to have taken the first piece. She raised a brow at him.

Georg shook his finger at her, “Not so hasty, my lady,” he admonished as he moved his bishop over the board to capture her knight in turn. Her face fell a bit, but she shook her head, “My brave knight...Should have seen that coming I suppose;” but the glint in her eye gave her away as she looked up at him her finger resting atop her queen, “Unless of course you should have seen me coming…,” she whispered, leaning in across the board to knock his bishop over.

Georg narrowed his eyes at her, “Wooden chess set huh? Haven’t played in a while,” he cleared his throat and put on a horrible falsetto voice, “Oh, Captain I love your chess set, I’m going to add it to my list of favorite things…,” he gave her a wink as she laughed aloud at his impression of her.

“Just what did you learn from your grandfather?” he asked as he slid a pawn over to take one of hers, but the move was the weaker compared to hers and he was beginning to sense his lovely bride to be was once again hiding a considerable talent…
Georg heard the thunder of hooves behind him and for a moment was afraid that one of the horses had gotten loose from the pasture and was running free. As he turned to glance back he saw that the horse had a rider, and an excellent one at that. He squinted a bit into the sun and wondered which of his grooms was atop one of his newest mares, but he couldn’t place the face from this far away. They cast an impressive shadow as they raced across his pasture, he could see the riders fingers dug gently into the horse's mane, their bodies moving in harmony with one another. The horse and rider glided smoothly out of his view as they appeared to slow a trot on their way back toward the barn.

Curiosity getting the better of him, he did an about face and started off on the long walk to the barn to question his grooms about the new mare and how she had done being put through the paces. He was hoping to present her to Louisa as birthday gift.

As he rounded the wide flung doors of the barn he peered inside, “Hans? Corvin?”.

But he received no answer from his absent grooms and only a few friendly whickers from the horses. He walked over to his own favorite mount, Charybdis, and gave him a gentle stroke of the nose. Charybdis shoved his nose further out, poking at the captain's pockets and hoping for a better reward than a simple pat. Georg laughed at him.

“Looking for his old man?”, he asked, opening his palm and disapplying the sugar cube like a magician. “Ah ah, no more for you,” Georg said firmly as he gave him a gentle pat and push on the nose. Charybdis gave him a look and then turned back to his hay, clearly disgusted.

The sound of an approaching horse made him turn his head into the sunlight, where he could only make out the slight figure of the horse and rider, saddleless. He leaned forward and squinted harder into the sunlight to see if it was Hans or Corvin but before the face could materialize it spoke to him.

“Captain? Are you alright?”

He knew that his mouth dropped open in shock and that he was staring as his governess slid gracefully off the back of his horse, in trousers, and with a gentle hand to her mane lead his mare toward her stall.
Grabbing a brush and towel from the shelf just outside the stall door Maria paused again and he shook his head to clear the shock and tried to cover for his obvious lapse as he shoved his hands into his pockets—mostly to keep them from reaching out to touch. He kept his eyes firmly on her golden blonde head not on her perfect backside that looked like it had been poured into those breeches and...no. No more thoughts in that direction. Reminding himself firmly that this young lady was going to be a nun, he tried to convey a casual air.

“Something you, uh, learned at the abbey?” he teased. He heard her laugh, but she didn’t answer him as she started to rub the towel along the horse’s withers.

“Good girl,” he heard her murmur, cooing to the horse as she worked, expertly and efficiently.

Suddenly she stopped, “Oh, Captain, perhaps I should apologize for riding your new mare. I, well I, didn’t think. I brought Kurt and Louisa down for their riding instruction and when Bubbles threw a shoe Hans had to call the farrier and this little girl was just anxious for a bit of exercise, so…

“So my groom just let you take her out?”

“I’ve ridden your horses before sir. All except Charybdis, he’s yours and it didn’t seem right.”

“You’ve ridden… When?”

“Mostly while the children had lessons or when I had a spare afternoon. And when I saw her,” she scratched between the mare’s ears, “I simply couldn’t resist.”

“And Hans just lets you out to ride bare breeches, uh, I mean, barebacked? No time for a saddle?”

“I can ride either way, farm girl if you’ll recall. Poor farm girl at that. I never learned with the luxury of a saddle. And she seemed so wonderfully friendly and eager. This one loves to run.”

“Does she now?”
“Mmm,” Maria said, concentrating on rubbing the horse down. Georg was beginning to think he would have to start paying her the groom’s salary along with the governess…

“Do you mind, sir? I won’t come back out if you’d prefer. I should have asked, I know I should have but I just… Well, I found at the Abbey that it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission and I would never want to jeopardize the second chance that you have given me here and—”

“Stop, please.” Having startled the horse with his command Georg held the back of his hand up a to the mare and let her sniff him a bit, “You are welcome in my stables anytime. I mean that. It would be a shame to deny a rider of your ability and my horse the chance to run as you say she likes.” Georg found himself reaching out for a riding crop that was hanging on a nearby peg, simply to give his hands something to do.

“But I can’t pretend I’m not more than a little shocked at your hidden talents,” he smiled, rubbing the back of his ear with soft leather keeper.

“Thank you, Captain. I never had horses as fine as these growing up. And I never really hid my talents, as you say. The children all know and I assume all your staff as well,” she paused to clear her throat, “I just thought someone would have told you.”

“And these,” he made a gesture with his hand toward her pants and failed to keep his eyes from giving her body another full sweep.

“Riding clothes? I made them, from an old pair of Friedreich’s,” she gave a little chuckle as the deja vu of the conversation threw her off for a moment. “They still had plenty of wear left,” she added cheekily, glad to have the upper hand in the conversation this time around.

Georg felt an answering smile tug at his cheek, “Ever the resourceful one. And so you ride with no saddle and no crop?”

“Never needed one,” She replaced the brush on the shelf and reached into her pocket for a sugar cube which the mare grabbed eagerly.

She gave the crop hanging from his hand a playful swat, “If you have to use this then how do you know you’re really in control?”

Georg cocked his head to the side and watched as she held her hand flat again, letting the mare
Georg cocked his head to the side and watched as she held her hand flat again, letting the mare grab another sugar cube from her bare palm. She tossed him a grin over her shoulder as she left and he wondered how long he simply stood there, wondering if she knew he was almost as far gone as his mare. He cleared his throat and squared his shoulders, eating out of her hand indeed, not him. Not while he had wind in his sails...

Charybdis turned and whickered in his stall, stamping his foot a bit.

“Your right old man, who am I kidding? She took the wind out of my sails weeks ago.” Georg gave him an absent pat and ventured of to find his wayward grooms and question them, relentlessly, about his governess of many talents.

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Maria pushed a bishop casually out across the board and turned to thank Frau Schmidt who had come into the room with tea tray.

“Oh my dear, I didn’t know you were in here,” she fuzzed as she noticed Maria tucked into the chair opposite the Captain. “Lucky for you I’m always trying to fatten him up, such a skinny boy, and so I brought plenty enough to share,” she clucked her tongue as she fuzzed over the tea service and poured them each a cup.

“Thank you, Frau Schmidt.”

“Oh your welcome dears.” She gave the chess board a glance, “Who's winning?”

“Oh, it's really too early to tell,” Maria explained as she watched Georg push his knight out a bit further, removing his finger from the piece slowly before committing to the move. She could see his eyes narrowing with concentration and she found it rather adorable.

“Well, good luck to you both then. Never did have much a of a head for chess myself, good day now.” She was gone in a flurry of lilac perfume and rustling leaving the two of them alone with their strategies.
Giving her tea an absent stir Maria rather boldly moved her Queen in a sweep across the board to threaten Georg’s pieces. In retaliation, he gave her a raised brow and moved his Queen out to threaten her knight. Seeing the threat Maria moved the poor knight out of the way on her next move and wondered at Georg’s strategy in not giving chase but rather moving a pawn one space forward.

“Pass the sugar please, darling,” he asked politely as Maria moved a bishop out to threaten his knight. Georg reached over to grab a chocolate biscuit before tipping a pawn a few spaces forward in another curiously mild move. She bit her lower lip in concentration as she realized that he was underestimating her, badly.

Realizing that a sacrifice would have to be made in order to move her game forward Maria pushed her brave knight out and took Georg’s pawn with a rueful smile.

“I’m sorry about this, love,” he said as he took her knight with his pawn. Maria reached out to take the fallen piece from his hand.

“My other poor brave knight, I’ve lost them both now,” she gave Georg an exaggerated pout and stuck out her lower lip as Gretl was want to do when not getting her way. “But I suppose sometimes we must lose so that we may gain in the future,” she said as she placed the knight on his side of the table with his captured comrades.

Georg watched as she gave him a smile and reached up to push her bangs out of the way, the ring he had placed on her finger glinting in the late afternoon sun. As he watched the ring on her hand he wondered if she had any idea the power her words often had on him? How her remarking on how we often must lose to gain would affect him so deeply?

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“No, thank you,” Georg drummed his fingers on his desktop, annoyed.

“Mmm, yes I’ll hold.”

“No, you said that two days ago,” Georg clenched his teeth in irritation but kept his voice low.
He didn’t want to be overheard and this house had ears everywhere. He had considered whether or not the phone cord would stretch into the little closet in his study but rejected that as ridiculous. He’d be caught immediately if he did that.

“Wilhelm, can I call you Wilhelm? Either you can get it done in the time frame I gave you, which you agreed upon, or you cannot. Really?”

“Mmm, today if possible.”

“Of course. Yes.”

Hanging up the phone he wove his fingers together and flexed them until they gave a satisfying little pop, his wedding band catching a glint of light from the window behind him. How ironic, there he was on the phone trying to make sure the engagement ring he had chosen for Maria would be delivered on time and he hadn’t thought for a minute about the fact that he would need a new ring too.

A new ring. To replace the old. The lost. He twisted the band absently round his finger, his fingertips catching in the divots and scratches. Georg never took it off. Never. When she had died this ring had been a reminder and an anchor. He couldn’t see her crooked smile or feel her eyelashes brush his cheeks, but he could feel the weight of the ring on his finger. She had been there once even if he only saw her in his dreams and woke to his blinding loss, heavy on his chest.

In the years following her death, as the grief had burned away his heart and left a cold comfort in its wake; the ring remained, even when he began going out again socially, even when he had met Elsa. It should have been a sign. A clue when he was clueless, torn as he was by the need to marry the right woman and the desperate want he felt for the wrong woman. In all his dances with Elsa, in ballrooms or in bedrooms, he had never once thought to remove his wedding band. Not even as he had proposed to her, his words sounding hollow and far away, as though he was conducting a business merger in his fancy dress the night of the party. The crumpled note that had decided his fate still clutched in his fist.

He didn’t want to think of the ring he would wear for Maria as a replacement, of her as a replacement.

He didn’t want to think of this ring he would take off for Maria as old, something to be replaced because a newer model has come along. Both women were worth more, deserved better.
Because he wasn’t going to replace this ring Agathe had pushed onto his nervous finger. She was irreplaceable, but her place in his life was mirrored to him times seven every morning in the faces of his children. He could hear her in Kurt’s easy laughter, see it in that narrow eyed look Liesl was starting to give him, and in a hundred other ways. She had never truly left, would never leave.

He gave the band a tug and it caught in his first knuckle, broken more than once in his youth, and then finally it slipped free. It felt warm on his open palm and he closed his fist over it, whether he was protecting it or hiding it he didn’t know. There was a pale strip of skin where the ring had been, his summer tan making it more obvious than it would have been in winter, fitting he supposed. His engagement to Maria hadn’t made it as obvious to him as this little piece of skin, worn almost shiny smooth under the chafe of the metal, it threw his choices into sharp relief.

But he felt peace as he crossed the room and pulled back the seascape on the wall by its gilded frame and began to spin the dial of the safe. Placing the ring inside for safekeeping and closing the door on his past.

A few hours later Franz tapped lightly on the door and gave a polite throat clearing before announcing that the Captain had received the long awaited delivery from town. He placed the box on the Captain’s desk without ceremony and left the room, no doubt to inform the rest of the staff of the contents of the box and to enjoy beating Frau Schmidt to the good gossip first.

Georg ripped the plain brown paper and string off the outside to reveal the elaborate box underneath, stamped with the crest of the finest jeweler Salzburg had to offer. Nestled inside was the ring he had been waiting for, simple and elegant, rather like his lady. A single diamond with two emeralds, one on each side, the deep green of the hills she so loved. He tucked it into his pocket, going over the rather elaborate plan he had concocted to give it to her, by candle light in the gazebo where he had first proposed. He was rather proud of himself for thinking of that idea actually.

Glancing over at the clock on the wall he realized the children would be taking tea soon and thought he might join them. He had been cooped up in his office long enough today. Halfway down the hall he heard the thunder of footsteps as his children rushed up to meet him.

“Slow down before someone gets trampled Kurt,” he admonished even as he reached out to ruffle the boy’s hair.

“Yes, sorry Father. It’s just that we have to wash before tea,” he held up his hands to show them cover with paint spatters.
“We were painting a new backdrop for the puppet show in the ballroom,” Marta added shyly.

“And we have to wash and not touch anything until we are squeaky clean!”, piped Gretl.

“And then we can eat...I’m starving...” Kurt mumbled as they took off at what could at best be called a fast walk towards their bathrooms.

The Captain smiled to himself as he made his way down the stairs and over to the doors of his ballroom, flung wide open and echoing with the sound of laughter from within. Stopping at the door to take in the scene of his bride to be clutching her stomach with laughter and his oldest daughter beside her wiping her eyes from whatever had them laughing so merrily.

“It seems I am missing the joke,” he announced.

“Not a joke Father, just that we sent the children up to wash and realized that the two of us have more paint on us then they did. It just caught us as rather funny,” Liesl gave a giggle as she wiped at a blue smudge on her dress.

Georg reached out and brushed his finger down the yellow streak of paint on Maria’s nose, “Yes, I can see that the painting was a success...” He had meant only to be playful but his hands had a mind of their own and his thumb wandered over her cheek and his palm cupped her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his.

Liesl, whose sharp blue eyes missed nothing as they darted between her father and her former governess, gave a little cough, which caught no one's attention.

“I think I’ll just go and see what the children are up too, maybe have a bit of a wash myself,” she gave the two of them a smile and left the ballroom, shutting the doors quietly behind her.

“One again I find you in in my ballroom, without permission I might add, and using it for a purpose for which it was not intended.”

“In a few weeks you’re planning to vow that all your worldly goods are mine, I thought that included the ballroom?”
“So it does. And I must say that everytime I meet you here your dresses improve considerably.”

“Are you saying that you didn’t find me ravishing the moment you saw me in your ballroom the day we met?”

“You already know the answer to that,” he countered, taking her hand in his and pressing a kiss to the base of her thumb. “But I do have one regret from that day, knowing what I know now of course.”

“Is it the whistle?”

“No,” he snorted. “I rather regret not offering to dance with you, seeing as how your other partner was rather, uh, invisible. I’m assured that I am passable at the waltz.”

“Passable? Well, I can’t offer you any assurances on that note, sir, seeing as how we have never waltzed.”

He gave her a little crooked smile, gave her a little bow, and held out his hand, “May I have this dance, Fraulein?”

“What? Georg, don’t be silly! I am covered in paint and I--”

“Look perfect. Please,” he said extending his hand to palm her waist and pull her forward a step. “Dance with me. Right here, in this ballroom. Give me a good memory to replace the others.” She took the last step closer and placed her hand in his, giving him a little grin as he started them slowly around the room; swirling them faster and gaining confidence in the wake of her warm smile.

“You are indeed passable at the waltz, Captain.”

“My thanks,” he smirked a little as he pulled her much closer than he would have if the dance floor had been filled. “You, on the other hand, dance beautifully, the night of the party you--”

“Forgot the end of the dance, your fault…”
“My fault?” he said with a raised brow, slowing them down to a lazy sway.

“It was a game at first, wasn’t it?,” she asked, stopping mid step to curl a hand around the back of his neck. “Showing Kurt how it was done, but then, well, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to lean in just a bit and--”

“Kiss you,” they both whispered to the other, lips brushing before they both succumbed to a smile.

“I was… Rather I had it all planned out, with candles, but I… I can’t imagine a better place than right here. Right where we met. You changed my entire life in one moment.” He stopped and fished around in his trouser pocket.

He held his hand out, palm up, the ring catching the light from the windows and casting sparkles, “Marry me?”. 

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“What?”

Maria was resting her chin on her hand and was slow to respond, “Hmm, oh nothing.”

“Why do you keep staring at me?”

“Well, it's just that you're rather adorable when you concentrate, you get this little crinkle…”

“Grown men are not adorable. I will accept *devastatingly handsome* or some other name in that vein. And not cute either.”
“No, your only cute when you notice I haven’t finished all my desert and you give me those puppy dog eyes so I’ll slide my plate your way.”

“Mmm, it’s your move.”

“I already moved, my bishop took your pawn, just there, see?” she pointed to the board and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh,” Georg gave the board a glance and reached out to grab a pawn, but clearly changed his mind and instead advanced a knight his customary three spaces. Maria countered with a sweep of her a rook to the far right of the board. Georg gave her a curious look and swept one of his rooks the same direction, placing her rook in immediate danger.

Maria briefly placed her finger on the rook in danger but then raised her brow, and instead used the opposite rook to take one his knights.

“Why do I feel as though I am one step behind you, my darling?” he teased.

“Why do you feel you are only one step behind, Handsome?”

Georg have her a frown. “Why did you not move the rook in immediate danger?,” he murmured, more to himself than to her as he swept his own rook across the board to capture hers.

“Maybe I needed a distraction?” she offered.

“You hardly need to plan a distraction,” he laughed, leaning back in his chair and cradling his hands behind his head. “Every time you lean across the board I can almost see right down that dress. Been moving the board my way a little at a time the entire game just to get you to lean a bit closer…”

“Georg!”
He gave her a wink as she slid her remaining rook back to safety on the other side of the board, without leaning in. He gave an exaggerated sigh and moved his Queen a single space forward.

Seemingly excited at the prospect of taking out another of his pieces Maria, and perhaps to make him pay a bit for the board moving scheme, she hastily pushed her bishop out to take his exposed rook.

“Ha!”

“That was a good move,” he offered, “But this one is better,” he said, giving her recently triumphant bishop a bit of a shove with his knight, enough to send him clattering to the edge of the table.

“Your right! I was too hasty that time around.”

“I have been known to surprise you a time or too.”

“Just like that ring toss with the bottles at the fair. Do you remember?”

“Yes, you and Kurt spent all your money and his trying to win, what was it he wanted?”

“The bird whistle, guaranteed to charm the birds down from the trees…”

“Oh yes. And win it you did!”

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“You should have heard the laughter Max, when I told Sophia that I was going to attend a street festival. That will keep them laughing for weeks I suppose.”

“Undoubtedly darling,” Max agreed, “But think of the all the delicious food that you can get only at a street fair such as this. And you know, a few of those singing groups and acting troops
haven’t been half bad… I may take myself round again and pay closer attention.”

“Really Max, you’re enjoying this, this spectacle of local peasants?”

“I admit I am. Come one, go and have some fun with it. Insist that Georg prove his manhood and win you a prize at one the game stalls, hmm?”

Elsa gave a derisive snort, “I should think not. It probably has fleas… Besides, Georg knows better than to think I could be bought with something so tawdry and cheap.”

“Well, I tried,” and Max gave her a tip of his hat and took off to the pretzel stand for his third round.

Elsa caught up with a distracted looking Georg and threaded her arm into his. “Good heavens, it is dreadfully hot out here. Wouldn’t you agree Georg?”

“Georg?”

“What, yes, well it’s Salzburg, in the summer. It does tend to get rather warm.”

“Yes, well, some of us are not, fond, of perspiration. Its detestable. I feel as though I am positively wilting,” she fanned herself rapidly and turned to see what was keeping Georg’s attention from her overheating crisis. She followed his distracted gaze over to a ring toss stand where that little governess and some of the children were playing a game, and losing if the sounds they were making where any indication.

“Honestly Georg, I think we have been here--”

“Why don’t we go over and see if we can help the children win whatever prize they are wanting from that stand, mmm? It might be fun? You could have a turn as well, you might be wonderful at a ring toss.”

“Fun? No thank you. Why don’t you just pay the man for the whatever trinket it is they want and be done with it. Then we can all go home...”
“You can go if you like Elsa, Franz would be happy to take you. But I promised the children and I have had enough of breaking promises to them to last a lifetime. A few games at a fair is the least I can do.”

“Well, if you're sure they wouldn't mind I’ll just go on back to the villa and take a long cool bath,” she walked her fingers up his arm and gave his earlobe a tug, “Sure you don’t want to join me,” she purred.

He gave her a forced smile and peck on the cheek, “It’s tempting darling, but a promise is a promise.”

As he took off in the direction of the stand he knew he was going to have to face the fact that he was considering marriage to a woman that had just offered him a place in her bath, and he wasn’t tempted in the slightest. Giving his head a shake he approached his children, and Fraulein Maria, just as they let out a triumphant cheer.

“Success finally?”

“Yes, look Father! It’s a bird whistle!”

“Fraulein Maria spent all her money to help Kurt win it.”

“I think she would rather have had the teddy bear but she gave her prize to Kurt to choose. Now all of us have won a little something from the fair.”

“Spent all your money have you?” He made a show of digging in his pockets for change and came up with a handful. “Alright, it’s the last of it, go and have fun, but stay on the street and stay together!”

“I’m so glad you came along today, Captain,” Maria announced as she watched the children chase one another to the next game. “It has meant the world to them to have you here. Thank you, I understand this was not the Baroness’s first choice of venue today…”

“She isn’t really the fair type, no. But what’s this I hear about you giving up a teddy bear for Kurt?”
“Oh, that was nonsense. Besides, you have to get all three rings on the bottles to win the bear and we were lucky to manage the one!”

“Perhaps you just needed an expert in the field of ring tossing?”

“Expert are you? How does one acquire such a skill?”

“Hours and hours at sea with not much to do. Watch and learn Fraulein.”

“There must be a trick to it and no one has managed all three today. Oh, sir, you needn’t bother,” she flushed a little with embarrassment at the prospect of her handsome employer playing the role of a beau winning a prize. “Certainly not for me…”

“Certainly for you. I insist. Besides, a gentleman never backs down from a challenge.” He shucked his light summer coat off and handed it to her, she avoided the temptation of rubbing her cheek against it, and instead concentrated on watching him meticulously roll up his shirtsleeves and push them up to his elbows.

Georg handed the man in the stall his money and received the three rings in return.

“All three to win a bear then?” he asked the barker.

“All three, sir. And you’d be the first today to do it,” he gave Georg a wink and leaned in to speak were Maria couldn’t hear, “Trying to impress your fancy lady, sir?”

“Something like that,” Georg offered, glancing back a Maria who gave him a smile and wished him good luck though she clearly doubted his ability.

He stepped up to the wooden stand and tested the weight of the first ring in his hand giving the rows of bottles a survey as well. As he let the first ring go Maria felt the breath that she had been holding push out in a rush as the ring dropped neatly over the top of a bottle. She gave a little clap that brought a smile to his face before he turned back to concentrate on the next target. Once again the ring fell gently on the bottle and he turned back to grin at an astonished Maria and an increasingly shocked looking barker. Georg picked up the last of the rings and felt a little stir of
nerves, was it possibly that he was truly trying to impress his governess?

He let the ring fly, but his aim was off and it bounced away from his original target and he watched in horror as it looked as though it would veer too far to the left and miss the last bottle on the row. But luck was on his side that day as the ring caught the lip of the bottle and swirled its way down with a resounding clank!

“The lady wins the bear!” yelled the barker, handing his prize over the edge of the stall to Georg. “Nice work there, sir.”

“Here you are, one bear as promised.”

“Oh thank you Captain! I always wanted one as a little girl and we never had money for such things. They are so soft...” she trailed off, biting her lip at having revealed so much all at once. Georg knew he was staring but he couldn’t help himself. Her face... He didn’t think he had taken such joy from something so simple since he was a boy, possibly he had never known joy such as this.

“You’re most welcome.”

As she cuddled the bear and thanked the man running the stand, whom she was no doubt charming into telling her his life story, his mind took him back to a week ago. The last time he had given a gift to a woman. He had given Elsa a pair of diamond earrings he had bought on a whim in Vienna and had accepted her cool and elegant thanks for them, the dry bloodless kiss on the cheek. But there had been no joy, no thrill in the giving of them for him or the receiving of them for her. Such things were simply done amongst the circles they ran in. It was expected.

Watching her proudly show the bear off to the children as they walked home, telling them all the little details of his victory, he wondered if Elsa had even worn the earrings he had given her. Would he have noticed if she had?

He swung his coat over his shoulder and gave his governess a little tilt of his head as she looked back to make sure he was still following. Not for the first time looking at her with new eyes, she was a continued surprise.
“You know, I noticed the other day that the bear has a rather prominent place in your room, right on your nightstand. Planning to bring him on the honeymoon?”

“He is a treasure, but no. I suppose I shall have no need of him once I can take the real thing to bed with me,” she gave him a saucy little wink and slid her queen alongside his king, “Check.”

“Mmm, check? I’m sorry my mind went off someplace *undressed*, uh rather, unimportant,” he sputtered, quickly moving his remaining knight over to take her queen. “Thought to distract me from that trap with talk of the honeymoon, eh? It almost worked my coy little Fraulein.”

“Almost?” she wondered aloud, slowly sliding her remaining rook to knock his king off the board.

“Checkmate.”

_The End_

**Quick historical sidebar because I like to give credit where it is due...and because I am a major nerd... The game Maria and Georg play is based on a real chess game that took place in Paris in 1858 between Paul Morphey and Duke Karl. Morphey, who played white like Maria, beat Karl in just seventeen moves.**

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