

Fallen Angelica

When Justice fails, Vengeance is all that remains



A Novella by Gilbert G. Beeraj

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Prologue

From the Journal of Peter Hummel

November 17th 1792

For hours I had been alone in my father's office waiting for him to recover from whatever illness he had contracted. I tried to keep myself occupied by perusing the various books that he had left on his desk, novels and magazines that had yet to be catalogued.

The light coming from my candle created shadows on the walls and ceilings. The tranquillity and motionless surroundings had me fearing spectres. I kept looking over my shoulder hoping that a ghost would not appear.

At fifteen, I had thought myself cured of such childish phobias. However, soon the silence was broken, and my fears seemed justified. I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer toward my location. They were the tapping of shoes and a cane. I quickly regained my composure, as I understood that those unfamiliar sounds belonged to Dr. Josef Yenko, the village physician. He was a proud man, a careful individual. Despite the use of a cane, he was very meticulous in concealing his age. He always wore a hat to cover his grey hair. He never wore his glasses outside of work. But most important, he made tremendous efforts to stand up erect, keeping in his gut and holding his chest firmly. This made it impossible for him to speak at great length, but he was seldom called upon to do so.

For this reason, when I saw the doctor walking slowly and carrying with him the markings of the elderly man that he was, I knew then that he had news for me, news that was too significant for him to be worried about his image.

I braced myself and thought of how I would react to the news; but I could not bear hearing the words, so I said them instead. "He is dead, isn't he?"

Dr. Yenko saw my sadness, but he could not respond to it. He simply rested his head on his double chin and gave me a small nod.

"How did he die?" I asked expecting an answer.

The doctor looked at me then looked at the ceiling, the paint of which was peeling. “Your father loved this place.”

He was evading the question, so I asked him more precisely. “Dr. Yenko, of what did Papa die?”

He finally sat down, realising that he could keep the answer to himself no longer. “There are many things about the human body that we do not know, young Peter. Five days ago, I would have said that your father had nothing serious. I bled him as much as I could. After the treatment, he seemed to be getting better. However, his death indicates otherwise. Indeed, the human body is very fragile. Anton could have died of several things.”

I stood up and approached him until my eyes hovered over his. “Are you telling me, sir, that you do not know?”

“Yes... no... I mean that a doctor is not all knowing. Whatever killed him is unknown to medical science.”

“A refined way to say that you are incompetent!”

The doctor became angry. “I forgive your impudence in light of Anton’s sudden death. However, you should not speak to your elders in such a tone!”

“And you should not be practising medicine at your age! Sudden death indeed, you had four days to diagnose Papa; and on the fifth, you pronounced him cured! Perhaps, had you been wearing your glasses at the time, you would have been able to perform your duties!”

“I did all that I could, Peter!” he protested.

“I know,” I replied with sarcasm. “It is a frightening and sad thought.” I paused to regain my senses. “Why did he have to die?”

“God has his reasons Peter. Who are we to question Him?”

Dr. Yenko never said another word—I did not give him the chance. I let him know that we had nothing more to speak of. As far as I knew, my father was dead and, though it may not have been his fault, the good doctor could not do enough to prevent it. So, the old physician left me as I was before he arrived... in solitude.

I kept hearing Yenko's answer over and over in my head, God has His reasons...who are we to question Him? How ironic, I thought, that a man of science would find 'God's will' to be a satisfactory cause of death. As for me, a young man about to enter the priesthood, I found that conclusion to be most unacceptable. I was uncomfortable with the unfairness of the whole situation.

Days after my father's funeral, I left Vatra Dornei bound for a monastery well hidden in the heart of the lushest forest of Romania. I said goodbye to no one, except for one person, a friend—my only true friend. I wrote a letter revealing my plans.

I was angry and unfocused, ignorant of the challenges that lay ahead, unprepared for the test that was to come.

Chapter 1

December 20th 1807

As the train finally penetrated the forbidding Carpathian Valley, I felt the warm fluid of nostalgia coursing through my veins like lava. I found myself in reminiscence, remembering the pleasant times that were or might have been. However, I also felt the icy hands of fear and abhorrence reaching for me as I recalled the pain that Vatra Dornei had brought me. I had left this place because of it, so why did I come back?

I returned to Vatra Dornei—having completed my training and visited Bucharest—feeling no better than I did when I last saw this place. I had consulted the best medical minds in the country, expecting to be enlightened, reassured that my father had died of some incurable disease. What I found instead infuriated me as I felt that Fate had mocked me!

I prayed for my soul to be at peace. However, because my heart was so dark with the pangs of rage, I feared that my plight would go unheard. In fact, the more I prayed the more quizzical I grew. A great strain was put on my Faith to the point where my belief in the Lord became uncertain. It was a disturbing realisation, one that would plague me for the days to come.

No sooner had the locomotive made a full halt that the ticket-master hastily escorted me to the nearest exit. I remember the pale look on his face, as well as the frightened glare in his eyes. I did not understand what could have made him feel that way, but I was not given time to find out. With courtesy though agitation, I was given my bags and told to disembark quickly. As instantly as it had stopped, the train started its engines and headed away from Vatra Dornei. And there I was standing amidst a sad memory.

The once golden fields were now bronzed. The ponds, which had been transparent green in the summer, were now solid topaz. Moreover, the majestic Carpathian Mountains, that overshadowed the whole valley, were of a formidable jet-black colour with only the white snow-caps soaring towards the heavens to give any indication of their height.

I would have lost consciousness from this awesome scene had not a breeze suddenly blown and replenished my lungs with its refreshing air. Indeed, how I have missed this region—how anxious I was to be close to it again.

After witnessing that breath-taking tableau, I turned my attention towards the village. In contrast, Vatra Dornei was a most tragic sight. Death hung over it like a rain cloud, and the putrid aroma of decay had touched every inch of the village. What happened here; how could such devastation have taken hold of my birthplace?

With much sadness, I made my way towards the station clerk's office in search of answers. Inside the booth, I saw an elderly man giving me a most uninviting gawk. I could read in his eyes that I was not welcomed here.

The old clerk greeted me with a methodical tone. His demeanour was everything but courteous and impromptu. "Good evening sir," he said. "The train schedule is on the bulletin board."

"I'm not interested in the train schedule sir," I replied. "I need a place to stay for the night. Do you know of any?"

Suddenly, the clerk smiled sarcastically. "The gentleman cannot read perhaps?" He pointed to a shrivelled piece of paper on the bulletin board. "This is an ordinance. It says that every inn, every auberge must close its doors at five o'clock. It is a quarter past that hour now. So, I think that you had better move on."

I found this ordinance fascinating. "Pray, on whose authority must these establishments do this?"

"Our parish priest, Father Krueger."

Upon hearing that name, I could not be otherwise than moved. The sound of it was like music to my melancholic ears. Yes, I knew this cleric, and knew him well. Not only was he Vatra Dornei's priest for a little over thirty years, but he was also the one who baptised me. I had to confirm my suspicions. "No, Father Nicoles Krueger, is he still here?"

"You know the clergyman?"

"I used to know him, as I used to know this town," I replied with a snicker.

As I had suspected, my answer peaked the clerk's curiosity. "Did you really?"

“Yes, I lived here—fifteen years ago.”

The man looked at me with a doubtful sneer. “You say that you lived here?” he asked me with arrogance, “Strange that I don’t remember you. What is your name?”

“My name is Hummel, Father Peter Hummel.” So as not to cause any antagonism, I added, “I wouldn’t blame you for not remembering me. How could you, for I was but a boy then; but perhaps you knew my father, Anton Hummel?”

The name struck a chord in the old man. I expected as much, since my father was a well-respected man in this community, beloved by all. Promptly the clerk’s cold disposition became friendlier. In a more apologetic voice, he told me that Father Krueger’s rule was indisputable. He suggested that I take the next train to Transylvania, and return the next day before five. He even gave me a ticket at no cost.

I thanked the clerk; I was about to leave when I decided to ask him more about this ordinance. “Tell me, why must the inns close at five?”

“Father Hummel, you have been away a long time.” His manner of speech became eerie, “Much has happened during your absence. A great fear has taken hold of Vatra Dornei. Every day, after the stroke of five, the sun sets and the creature awakes.”

“The creature?” I asked.

“A creature,” he repeated, “of great strength.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. “What sort of beast is this? How do you know it exists, has anyone seen it?”

The clerk felt the scepticism in my voice, and that vexed him. “No one has seen the fiend. However, Father Krueger tells us that it is real, and the word of a fellow Vatraian is good enough for us. And so it ought to be for you; that is if you really are one of us?”

“Perhaps the good Father was mistaken,” I remarked with a slight chuckle. “Did this monster kill anyone?”

“I do not expect an outsider to believe us.”

“I did not mean to offend you or the village. I apologise, but I find this so incredible.”

He gave me a wry smile and replied, “Hmm... Father Hummel, I do not care what you believe; but you would be wise sir to take my advice and go to Transylvania. As for me, I must now go home. Goodbye.”

The clerk left in haste. I did not know what to make of his story, but I could tell that he was genuinely afraid of something. I wondered, ‘was an animal really terrorising the village?’ The people around here were Catholic by baptism, but whether they practised the Faith was another matter. Perhaps the good father created this great fear to increase the volume of his flock; this was not impossible. The Nicolei Krueger that I remembered was somewhat of an opportunist, perfectly capable of masterminding such a scheme.

I thought that my theory was sound; but then the smell of rotting carcasses, which was ever so present in the air, poignantly made me consider that perhaps the clerk’s story did have credence. The odour seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. Moreover, as I looked at my surroundings, I observed that the populace of cattle and rodents that usually roamed the land were nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 2

I sat on the bench waiting for the train bound for Transylvania, attempting to piece together the puzzle that lay before me. Once more lost in my thoughts, it did not occur to me that someone was approaching. Indeed, without so much as a warning, I was startled by the tapping sound of footsteps. A chill ran up my spine as the echoing sound of shoes hitting the station's wooden floor drew near.

Suddenly, I heard a sweet utterance. "Could I interest you in a rose, sir?"

The sound took me by surprised. Yet, I was not afraid. The sound of it was melodic and soothing to my ears. I quickly looked to see to whom the voice belonged; and there stood a girl carrying a flower basket. If her voice did not stun me, her features certainly did for they were frightfully familiar. This flower girl bore an uncanny resemblance to an old friend of mine, a young lady of royal blood whom I used to know. However, her youth confirmed to me that she could not be my friend; just the same, the similarities were astonishing; the same dark hair, the same hazel eyes. Looking at her was like gazing at a painting of her.

I could not say whether or not she was destitute; however the dark beige dress that she wore suggested that she had not had an easy childhood. The elaborate stitching and lace revealed that the dress had once been a gown—and a very expensive one at that—of the sort that covered a woman's body from neck to ankle. However, now it was nothing more than a worn piece of cloth stained with clotted blood and dirt. For a fine piece of clothing such as this to be rendered to such poor a condition, it would have had to be the child's only garment.

"Eh... Excuse me?" I replied. "What did you say?"

"A rose," she repeated. "Could I persuade you to buy one?"

"Isn't it a little late in the year for roses?"

She looked at me without saying a word. It was as though she was reading my thoughts. She was not who I thought she was, but it occurred to me that she might be a relation. As she was about to leave, I quickly asked her age and name.

She placed her basket, which I noticed was empty, on the ground and sat near me. “My name is Elizabeth sir, and I am fourteen.”

“Elizabeth who?” I asked with hesitation. “Who are your parents?”

“Just Elizabeth sir.” She then looked at me with a saddened face. “I never knew my father; he abandoned me before I was even born. And my mother...my mother is dead.”

“But surely someone cares for you,” I contended.

“Yes,” she admitted. “After my mother’s passing, I was placed under the care of Pauline.”

Pauline, she told me, was once a housekeeper under the employment of her grandparents, very influential and wealthy people. However, when Pauline was relieved of her position by the elderly couple, she offered her services to their daughter, Elizabeth’s mother.

I was surprised at the child’s seemingly candid disposition. She was sharing her life with me with unusual openness. She was very trusting; it was as though she knew me, or of me, all her life.

After recounting her story, Elizabeth’s face became blank; how melancholic and troubled she became. I could tell that she had seen much violence in her youth. I feared that I was the cause of her sadness, having inadvertently reopened some emotional wounds with my inquiry.

“Father, you are a priest?” she asked as though it were of great importance. Then she gently stroke her neck adding, “But you are not wearing a...”

“Yes, it is for personal reasons,” I answered with uneasiness. “Nevertheless, I am a priest.”

“I saw you reading Father Krueger’s ordinance,” she said. “Am I to understand that you are without shelter?”

“That is true. I am waiting the next train to Transylvania, where I would find room and board—or so the clerk tells me.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes, you would,” she answered, “but why go all the way to Transylvania, when you would find better here?”

I was surprised. How could I find shelter here, when no inn would open its door to me?

“Please, let me take you into my home,” she said. “To get there would take a journey through the fields and into the Carpathian Mountain Range; but it is nearby.”

Having gained my trust and friendship, I saw no reason to decline Elizabeth’s invitation. Besides, on such a murky and cold evening as this one promised to be, I must admit that her generous offer seemed most appealing.

Chapter 3

Her home, as Elizabeth explained, was an ancient stronghold, the construction of which dated back to the days of the Ottoman Empire. She was rather cryptic about the building's history and even more enigmatic when I asked her about her ancestors. Obviously, she did not wish me to learn more about her than what she had told me; her forthright demeanour had limits. What was she hiding? Did her opulent clan abandon her—is that why she was reduced to selling roses on street corners—or was she lying? My curiosity, I confess, was intolerable; however, I did not attempt to pry in the young lady's affairs.

We boarded a royal coach, which had been parked in the shadows for some time. With a yell from the driver and with the snap of his whip, I felt the sudden tug of horses pulling the carriage. Thus, Elizabeth and I were underway towards the mysterious abode of which she spoke.

Mine was not the most pleasant of journeys. The lumpy frozen dirt of the deadened wheat field caused the cabin to quake. The coachman's assurance that the nauseating effect would not endure was but a cruel reminder that the ride had lasted this long. A half-hour later we finally reached the foot of the Carpathians. Hence, the mighty steeds began their ascent of the majestic mountains. I remember thinking how unusually smooth the trip had become. I had expected it to be worse—rockier—but that was not the case.

Elizabeth noticed the inquisitive frown on my brow. "Is something the matter Reverend?"

"The ride," I replied, "I expected it to be far more disagreeable; yet I feel no vibration aside from the cabin's usual rocking motion. Why is that?"

She laughed and said, "Surely, a man as learned as yourself knows that the snow is thickest at this elevation."

Finally, two hours later I assumed, the vehicle reached its destination: the castle. It was a formidable structure indeed. The bricks were scarcely distinguishable for time had fused them with one another; this made the building look as though it had been carved from a single block of stone. The moss and vines, which crawled their way up the sides, gave texture to the structure, as well as a frightful aspect. However, I was more frightened by the gargoyles that stood at each

angle of the building. These fantastic monsters of rock, guardians against evil, were of such horrid appearance.

The coach stopped at the main entrance. The cabin door opened and Elizabeth looked at me—as though we were not to meet again for quite a while.

“Well,” said my travelling companion, “our journey has ended.” I was told to disembark and to enter the residence.

“Are you not coming with me?” I asked her.

“I need to see Pauline,” she answered. “She must be informed of my return and of your arrival.”

“But I am a stranger here...”

She interrupted me, “Nonsense, you are our guest. Please, enter and make yourself at home. I shall join you presently.”

On those words, with nothing but my overcoat in hand (as my suitcases were taken to my room), I stood at the entrance. I was about to reach for the handle when a massive door opened before me. Its slow motion and squeaking resonance were enough to send chills down my spine. I did not know what to do; should I go inside? I looked behind me for a sign that everything was as it should be, but none was given. The coachman coaxing his horses to move startled me. The carriage seemed to be fleeing from me. I was now left by myself, alone amongst the ghosts and goblins of the area. Indeed, a feeling of uneasiness took hold of me at once—I felt unsafe. The emotion was so intense that I was obliged to consider that security and peace of mind were to be found nowhere but within the walls of this retreat.

A few steps past the threshold into the main hall of the lavish abode, and my body was filled with a sense of comfort. I quickly forgot the demons that dwelled in the surrounding woods. Although I was convinced that Elizabeth’s invitation was unplanned, the fortress’ welcoming atmosphere gave me the impression that I (or perhaps someone else) was expected. The rhythmic sound of a nearby clock soothed my agitated spirit and the crackling fire in the foyer thawed my frozen heart. This home embraced me as no other home ever did; I was enchanted, bewitched.

Chapter 4

I sat in a nearby chair in order to catch my breath whilst contemplating the beautiful architecture that lay before me. Although my early intuition assured me that all was right in this place, every fibre in my being suddenly told me otherwise. I could not help but be upset by something. I began to feel that I was being watched. I lent a closer and more attentive ear to the encompassing area. Soon enough, the comforting noises of the clock and the fireplace were muffled by the single echo of something panting. It was like nothing that I ever heard before. It certainly was not human; this frightening resonance belonged to some sort of animal. Judging by the loudness, I concluded that it was of considerable size and that it was coming towards me.

Eventually I was able to visualise the animal for I saw its shadow projecting on a wall. It was a quadruped with lengthy extremities; the torso was lean. In fact, the beast's entire silhouette, projected as it was on the stone wall, reminded me of an Egyptian hieroglyph. In a pounce, the animal stepped out of the darkness. It was a wolf, one of unusual breed. Except for some specks of black here and there, the canine's fur was snow white. Its eyes were the most peculiar features—they were almost human. Although I was in fright, I could appreciate the wolf's grace. As it came towards me, I became tenser; yet, I was not frightened. It was as though I knew that this animal posed no threat to me.

Eventually, the wolf had reached the middle of a burgundy Persian rug, where it chose to stay. For a long period, the canine simply panted and kept staring at me with its piercing blue eyes. What a hypnotic gaze it was—I could not turn away from it. It was sensual... loving even. I came to learn more about the wolf as a trusting relationship established itself between us very quickly. Soon, I was able to detect a glare of sadness, as though someone had done her great harm.

“What happened to you?” I rhetorically asked. “Where did you come from?” I began petting her, working my way down her neck, when I heard a tinkling sound. I slowly reached into the animal's fur and felt a type of necklace. I found a golden pendant hanging from it on which there was writing: ANGELICA. “Angelica?” I repeated to myself.

I was at once startled by a voice, “Angelica.”

I turned around and saw Elizabeth standing in a doorway with a plate of food. “Oh Elizabeth, you startled me.”

“Forgive me. I see you two have met.”

“Yes, she’s a lovely creature,” I replied. “It is good to know that the animal life around here is not as dead as I thought it to be,” I added, as a joke.

Elizabeth looked at me bewildered; still she gave me a forced laugh. “Eh... Yes, it is good to know.”

I stood up and walked towards my hostess, “Tell me, where did she come from?”

“She was here before I was born,” she responded.

“Was she indeed?” I asked.

Elizabeth explained that Angelica was part of a pack of wolves that were driven from these parts by hunters. Being merely a cub, as well as of a sickly constitution, her family was forced to leave her behind. In time, she came here and has lived here ever since. “...When my mother bought the property, she decided to keep her. She healed her and named her in honour of Angelica Von Klausenberg.”

“Ah yes, the Baroness!” I uttered as some careless lover professing his affections.

Elizabeth looked at me with inquisitive eyes. “To most, but to you she was more I suspect?”

“A ghost from my childhood. I haven’t seen her for fifteen years,” I answered. “She and I were from two different worlds, but we spoke the same language.”

“You loved her,” said Elizabeth teasingly.

“Yes, though I would never tell her so,” I admitted timidly. “Anyway, I don’t know whether she is alive or dead.”

Elizabeth smiled, “So, where was I? Ah yes!” She went with her story, “Mother was very fond of her. I do believe that she and the Baroness had a lot in common.”

Elizabeth took my hand and led me to the dining room where a sumptuous meal awaited me. There was a plate of carved sirloin beef at the table's centre. It was decorated with steamed vegetables and coated with gravy. At the closest end of the table I could smell the vapours coming from a bowl of mashed potatoes; while at the other end I could see a medium size chocolate cake covered with orange flavoured icing.

I was well fed that evening; however, apart from the resident wolf's company, I found myself eating alone and in silence. Elizabeth did not join me. Only after supper did my strange hostess appear again. This time, she showed me to my sleeping chamber. Her absence at supper concerned me greatly. I could understand that she was not able to accompany me inside the castle, but one does not leave a guest to sup alone for any reason. In addition, she spoke of the housekeeper named Pauline; I had yet to meet her.

"You're wondering about Pauline, about why you haven't met her?" Elizabeth knew what I was thinking.

"How did..." I was unsettled by her perspicacity.

"It's written all over your face sir," she replied with an offended tone. "You think that she does not exist, perhaps? Well, let me assure you Reverend, she does. In fact, Pauline was upstairs preparing your room, while you were eating the fine supper that we had prepared for you. After she did so, as she was fatigued, I dismissed her. So you will forgive me if I did not introduce her to you."

Needless to say, I felt ashamed. A kind girl, who knew nothing about me, welcomed me into her home—a château no less—and I had the impertinence to criticize her character and question her generosity.

As we reached my room, Elizabeth took my hand and said, "Please, do not worry so. I forgive you."

Again, she was able to see what I was feeling. From then on, I concluded that attempting to hide my emotions from her would be futile. On that final thought, I thus entered my sleeping quarters with the intent of retiring for the night.

My bedroom was of small dimensions, an oblong residence made entirely of brick and stone. To my left, a finely crafted dresser stood; and to my right, a single-bed had been properly made. It was exactly the variety of quarters to which I grew accustomed during my stay at the monastery. There was nothing striking about the room, it was as ordinary as any Romanian bedchamber. Although, I did observe the unusual red tint embedded within the crevasses of the stone floor.

Chapter 5

Three hours had passed since I last saw Elizabeth. I remember being quite tired then and confident that my slumber would be a deep one. However, I found myself very much awake and restless. Soon enough, it was midnight. What was I to do now? Should I exit my quarters and venture out into the strange narrow corridors of this mysterious dwelling; or should I remain here, and hope that sleep would soon take hold of me? I chose to walk the halls instead of remaining cloistered... alone with my imagination.

My decision was certainly a wise one, or so it seemed at the time. Since I was wide-awake, I took the time to delight my vision with the paintings that were put on display in the lengthy passageway. The tableaux were indeed exquisite. I noticed that most of the pictures were portraits, all of which pertained to the von Klausenberg Dynasty. The fondness, that Elizabeth told me her mother held for this clan, was not exaggerated. Her degree of adoration bordered on fanaticism; she perhaps saw herself as one of the von Klausenberg family.

The soft purple glow of the winter moon glimmered through windows, which were facing the framed depictions. The lunar luminescence added an awesome realism to the regal canvases. My imagination had more cause for excitement here than in my bedchamber. I began regretting leaving the warm security that it furnished.

I was about to make my way back to my quarters when I heard it: the sound of someone, or something, calling me and laughing. I followed the echo and traced it to the main hall, the very room where I had met the wolf. I looked down from the second floor and noticed a fire burning in the inglenook.

Unable to resist the curiosity, I slowly descended the stone staircase and walked towards the hall; and that is when I saw her. She was a vision of loveliness, as young and as beautiful as when I last set eyes on her. Her eyes were an odd translucent grey; she had hair as dark as night; and in contrast, her skin captured the paleness of the untouched snow; as well her lips were blood red. I was speechless.

Despite some changes in her appearance, her complexion did not seem to have been weathered by time at all. I knew who she was for my heart told me so. She was my Angelica. I merely stood there, in the hallway, staring at her. I knew that her body was bare, yet I could not turn away. I was mesmerized—frozen by a mysterious force of attraction.

At first, she did not say a word. She simply looked at me with her warm eyes and smiled. Then she took a crimson robe and concealed herself in it. “Reunited after fifteen years Peter, and you have nothing to say?” Her voice echoed through the halls.

I finally took hold of my senses and greeted her appropriately. “Angelica? For years I have thought you dead. Now I see you, and you are as I remembered. You’ve barely aged!”

She smiled. “So now I live. Come, and highlight your kind words with a warm embrace.”

I went to her and kissed her hand, as any subject of the baronial court would. She felt a shiver as I drew closer to her—it was as though I had frightened her—but it quickly went away.

She smiled as though to say that there was no need for so much formality. “We have much to talk about you and me.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“But not now. Soon the sun will rise...I must leave you then.”

“So early?” I protested. “Please, won’t you stay with me a while longer? Long enough, at least, to tell me what happened to you all these years.”

She looked at me, thinking of an answer. Then she replied with a smile, “I never could say no to you. Very well, I shall relate my story to you over a cup of tea and in a more private setting.”

She brought me to her study. The room was very sombre. The only light sources were the moon’s beaming glow and the burning fireplace. Angelica had not lost her flare for the dramatic. This stage did indeed provide the adequate atmosphere for what was to be a tale of the darkest miseries. Angelica took out a journal, and began reading from it as a mother would from a child’s book.

Chapter 6

From the Journal of Angelica von Klausenberg

December 19th 1792

It has been a month since my friend left for Bucharest. Although he was not dead, I had been mourning Peter Hummel's departure. For weeks, I had been confining myself to my room, attending only supper and church. My family was concerned but for different reasons.

On the one hand, my father was worried because he knew how I felt. He understood that, though Peter and I were merely friends, I loved him as dearly as any woman could love a man. Papa frequently came to my bedchamber with bouquets, which had remained from his various banquets, accompanied by notes reassuring me that he, my Peter, would return and that I would soon see him again.

Papa and I were very close. Of all my family members, he was the one whom I loved best. I admired the way he approached his people. His mannerisms and speech were filled with so much love and respect. From him, I learned what it truly meant to be a leader.

"You know daughter, Peter is not gone forever," he would often say to me.

"But I never answered his last letter, I never said goodbye, Papa," I would reply.

"Why should you? You shall see him again."

On the other hand, my mother was not really concerned about me but about her image. She was the Great Sylvia Von Klausenberg, and a certified tyrant. Her thirst for power was insatiable. I despised her keenly, and my sentiment was more than justified. She had, on countless occasions, overridden my father's rulings with diabolical orders of her own. Many innocent people died by her hands, and in Papa's name. However, I had another reason to hate her. Since the day I was born, Sylvia paid little attention to me. She wished to have nothing to do with me, as I interfered with her baronial duties (which mostly involved a heavy amount of drinking and entertaining). I was therefore entrusted into the care of a gentle young woman named Pauline. Her instructions were to distract me and to keep me from getting in the Baroness's way unless summoned.

That afternoon, on the eve of a visit from the Baron of Bukovina and his family, that most rare of situations occurred: I was called to Sylvia's bedchamber. She had a scornful look on her face. She analysed me for a while. Then she beckoned me to come closer. "Do you know who I am, child?"

I did not dare smile. "Yes," I answered, "you are Sylvia Von Klausenberg, my mother."

I could see that she was displeased with my answer. "More importantly, I am the Baroness of this land. I am leader of my people!"

I had had the same conversation with her before, and it angered me that she saw herself as the supreme ruler of Vatra Dornei. I could tolerate it no longer. "You are my father's wife!" I finally exclaimed. "You are nothing without him!"

"And you are nothing without me!" replied the Baroness in shock. She regained her composure. "This is not the way that I wanted us to behave."

"Then why did you summon me here?" I asked.

"I wished to talk to you," she answered. "Gustav... Your father tells me that you are still pining over your friend's departure. Don't you think that this childish behaviour has gone on long enough?"

I was angry. 'Childish'? She had the audacity to trivialise my emotions. I wanted to respond—I had to respond. "Of course, I wouldn't expect you to comprehend the depth of feeling that I am experiencing. You have loved nothing else in your life but fortune and fame! Only Papa understands."

She stayed silent for a while, and then spoke. "I tried to be diplomatic, appealing to you in a civilised manner, speaking to you as a woman. However, now I see that you cannot be dealt with on a mature ground! So take heed little girl. Tomorrow is an important day for me. We are having a reception for Lord Rheingold and his family. I will not have a spoiled lovesick child saddening the party. Do you understand?"

I was aghast. She did not care about me at all. I kept my composure and answered. "Yes, may I go?"

She took her time in answering, and she enjoyed it. “Yes.” Then the worst came, “One other thing Angelica. It should bring us great pleasure if you were especially agreeable towards the Baron’s son. You know how much he enjoys your company.”

I could see through her euphemism. For her, being agreeable meant something more—much more. It had been a wish of hers that I would someday marry young Lukas Rheingold and rule over Bukovina as well as Vatra Dornei. Sylvia thought that if I offered myself to Lukas, he would respond with a marriage proposal. However, the thought that Gustav von Klausenberg V’s daughter would resort to prostituting herself to win a husband repulsed me. I would not do it for any man, and certainly not for one as horrid as Lukas Rheingold.

Thinking of Lukas made me long for Peter more. As with no other than with my friend had I held deeper conversations, or spent kinder moments. However, now those days were gone, and I found myself alone, dreary, and haunted by nightmares of things yet to come.

Chapter 7

December 20th 1792

The much-dreaded night of the baronial ball finally arrived. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself or herself... everyone except me that is. As only he could, Papa mingled with his guests and saw to their amusement. As for my mother, she spent much of her time with Father Krueger. In fact, I recall she being very friendly with the priest, more so than with the other guests. However, aside from contemplating how the good reverend must have loathed her company, I thought nothing of it. Sylvia had often said that ensuring strong ties with the Church was as crucial as establishing alliances with any country.

The festivity was filled with laughter and merriment; still the guests of honour had not arrived. The suspense was devastating. I kept having evil thoughts—praying that something had happened to the Rheingold party. ‘Perhaps’, I thought, ‘the Baron was called on urgent business elsewhere.’ However, alas, I was blessed with no such fortune. Indeed, no sooner had I erased the vision from my mind’s canvas, that the thunderous resonance of horses pulling a carriage was heard. The sound was a very common one around these parts, thus usually of no consequence. However that evening, it bore special meaning. It was a herald.

The music suddenly stopped, as well as the buzzing conversations. Everyone froze and had his and her eyes fixed towards the main entrance. A heavy silence hung over the hall. Footsteps could be heard approaching from a distance. Then the door opened revealing a stiff-looking little man wearing a beige wig and a most uncomfortable uniform. He was our manservant, assigned to lead and admit the guests as each of them arrived.

“Lord Leopold Rheingold III of Bukovina, Lady Fiona Rheingold, and their son Lukas Rheingold!”

Following the introduction, a tall man wearing a dark blue cape stepped into the hall. His wife stood beside him and their son was behind.

My mother was the first to greet them. “Lord Rheingold, I bid you welcome to Vatra Dornei, as well as to our ancestral palace.”

The great Sylvia was a notorious braggart. The building, in which the party was held, was not a palace at all. It was in fact an old museum that my father, because of his fondness for antiques, decided to renovate and donate to his people. Once restored, Papa decorated the halls with sculptures and paintings depicting the von Klausenberg heritage and the Vatraian lifestyle.

Although I was somewhat ashamed of my mother's flaunting, I did nothing. I knew that the Rheingolds did not place much value on what Sylvia said, at least not Lady Rheingold; for who else would know Sylvia best if not her own sister.

Lord Rheingold gallantly bowed. "My family and I are touched by your greeting, Milady."

As though to break the tension, Papa went close to them in a less formal manner. "Come now Leopold, are you planning on standing near the door for the rest of the evening?" He offered his arm to Aunt Fiona and led her to the centre of the floor. "Let us have music, let us dance!" he commanded.

Without delay, the musicians began playing and the guest resumed their activities. I recall the chamber orchestra playing Mozart, Three German Dances—my favourite.

I stood near the window, enjoying the winter landscape. I could see the Village Square from where I was seating. It was so beautiful, decorated as it was with Christmas ornaments and flickering streetlights. I was lost in contemplation. I imagined that the lights reflecting on the window glass were fairies waltzing to the orchestra's selections. I was content. Soon however, my world was shattered as I saw a dark spectre walking up behind me. I did not dare turn around to face him, but I could not go away either.

"You do not dance, Lady?" said the voice.

That voice, that squealing voice, I knew it as well as I knew its owner. He was a tall skinny-looking man. He had curly brown hair, the length of which stopped at the neck. His face was long and with high cheekbones. With his nose unusually elongated and his eyes close together, it was often said that he looked like an eagle. How unfortunate however, that this gentleman did not have the bird's majesty and poise as well.

"Good evening Lukas," I replied. "No, I have no want for dancing tonight."

"Perhaps I could persuade you otherwise?"

“Do not waste your time with me sir. I’m sure there are women in this very room more willing than I to dance with.”

“Willing yes,” he boasted, “but none as beautiful.”

His feeble attempt at flattery affected me not; but I resolved to stay polite. “Nevertheless cousin, if it is good company that you seek, you will find none here.”

“I do not seek any sort of company cousin. I instead come to offer mine.”

I was astonished. What ever could he mean by that? I asked him to repeat himself, and urged him to be clear.

He told me that he had just come from a brief conversation with my mother. She apparently took it upon herself to divulge information relating to the state of my constitution during the past weeks. Undoubtedly, she shared her opinions about Peter (which, I must note, were everything but favourable) with him.

“... And so,” added Lukas, “I have come to you in hopes of giving you a little diversion and making you forget whatever, or whoever, is preoccupying you.”

“You are kind cousin,” I responded with light sarcasm, “but dancing will bring no improvement to my state; and I do not wish to forget my friend.”

“Then, let us at least take a walk. I should very much enjoy hearing about this Peter. You must love him dearly?”

I detected a tone of jealousy in his voice. For a brief moment, the reason eluded me. Lukas had never expressed amorous feelings towards me. Yes, he often said that he found me desirable, but there was no love in his advances. Then it struck me. My cousin was a very arrogant and insecure individual. Even though he did not love me, he never thought that I would reject him. He probably blamed Peter for this affront.

By being so unresponsive, I had chiselled away at some of Lukas’ ego. Therefore, since I saw no harm in it, I decided to give him some joy by accepting his invitation. We discretely stepped out and began our tour of the Village Square. However, I could not escape Sylvia’s scrutinizing eyes. I do believe that she was watching me throughout the duration of my conversation. She must

have thought that I had conceded to offering myself to my cousin, because for the first time in fifteen years she smiled.

Lukas tried to begin some small talk. “So, it is a very beautiful evening.”

“Yes, a very exquisite evening,” I responded, without so much as a glare in his direction. Then, I added, “One that is best appreciated in silence.”

“So,” he began again, “this is the Village Square?”

It was an odd remark. “Come now Lukas,” I answered, “you know very well that it is. We’ve been here many a time when we were younger.”

“We have, haven’t we?”

We stopped near a frozen well and sat on a stone bench covered with snow. It had become very quiet all of a sudden. Only the soft whistling of the wind, coming from the mountains, could be heard.

Lukas probed the square like a raptor. “There are many dark corners in this area, are there not?” he mumbled.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked him, even though I heard very well what he said.

“Nothing.” He quickly changed the subject; “Do you remember where we used to play hide-and-seek?”

“Hide-and-seek? Yes, I remember. Why do you ask?”

He leaped to his feet and took my arm. “Let’s go there now!”

That evening, I held myself accountable for what happened next. Not knowing the devious scheme that was harbouring in my cousin’s mind, I accompanied him to an old abandoned stable—the place where we used to play. I walked in first.

“Here it is!” I remarked drawing a heavy sigh. I looked behind me and saw nothing. Lukas was gone. “Lukas? Lukas, where are you?” I must confess that I was afraid. What was I to do? The safest alternative would have been to go back to the party; but I did not.

The barn had not been utilised in years. Smelling of dankness and infested with rats, I was anxious to find my cousin and leave this sombre place. However, Lukas was obviously hiding and I was forced to seek him out.

I searched for him for hours it seemed. “Come out Lukas! I’m in no mood for games!”

I had reached the far end of the building, where some dry hay was stockpiled. As I rummaged through the mass, I felt someone standing behind me, breathing heavily. It was Lukas. I was pushed into the stack as he kneeled next to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Silence! You are a wilful girl!” he uttered in anger.

I was struck with confusion. ‘What was ailing him?’ I wondered. “Lukas, what is it?”

“I said Quiet!” he shouted.

He began putting his arm around my waist. I tried pushing him away, but my efforts were without success. “Stop it!” I cried, “Why are you doing this?”

“How dare you!” he continued. “How dare you refuse me!”

“Refuse... refuse you?” I found it hard to speak as I felt rats nibbling at me.

“No woman has ever rejected Lukas Rheingold! Why should you be any different?” He was interrogative and filled with rage.

“I simply do not love you!”

“You love that Peter fellow, is that who you love?” he exclaimed.

“Yes. He is a kind young man,” I replied.

“He is a commoner, a peasant, a mere librarian’s son!”

“I am sorry that my love for him wounds you so, cousin.” I tried to calm him down.

“Sorry?” he repeated. “Indeed you shall be sorry!”

Without a further word, I saw his arm curling in front of my face. In a split second, I knew what was to follow. His hand suddenly became an instrument of torture for he used it to mark several scars across my cheeks.

I cried out in pain. "I shall tell everyone what you did!"

He then exploded with a devilish laugh. "I invite you to do so. Who will believe the word of such a spoiled and disrespectful wench like you?"

Lukas had me trapped with the truth of his assertions. Who would indeed believe me? My word was weightless against his. Over the years, I had built quite a reputation. I was unrefined, proud and too confident for my own good. My sour relationship with my mother was the topic of choice after each Sunday Mass. Had my strong will and opinionated disposition rendered me incredulous? I never regretted having such a character; but I never imagined that it would someday betray me.

Finally, I was too weak to speak another word or make any movement. Lukas had succeeded in incapacitating me. What he did next was reprehensible and repugnant! The act was so horrid that I vowed to someday make him pay for it... with his life.

During his salacious crime, I had lost consciousness. When I woke up, I found myself alone amongst the rodents. My clothes were torn and my body was marked with bruises. Standing up was both painful and difficult; but walking was even more strenuous.

I stepped outside and fell to the ground so that I could clean myself in the snow. I dared not go back among the guests, certainly not in my present condition. I therefore went to my room, taking care not to be seen, and retired for the night.

I was soon in my room. Helpless, alone, and with no one to turn to, I was enduring the agony. I had fallen from Grace.

From the Journal of Peter Hummel

December 21st 1807

Angelica closed her journal and looked at me with cold eyes. I had always remembered her as a pillar of strength, not easily given to divulging her emotions. Although this time, I expected her to show some kind of feeling. For indeed only the dead could be immune to the effects of such a sad story.

I was perplexed by her final entry. What did she mean by ‘I had fallen from Grace’? However, little did I realise that my question would soon be answered.

“Why did Lukas do it?” I asked her.

She answered me, never looking in my direction. “Why do any of them do it?” She stared deeply at the fire and said, “I notice that you do not have a crucifix around your neck; you used to be God’s most valiant advocate. Tell me Peter, have you stopped believing?”

It was a fair but haunting question, one that had plagued me ever since I lost my parents. “I used to be confident in my belief that He existed, for no other reason than because my parents told me so,” I replied. “Then, I chose not to believe because He took them away from me. Now however, I am in between. Sometimes I wake up reassessing my religious convictions. I find myself blaming Him more often than I wish to.”

I realised then that all of my choices in life were based on the single truth that I no longer found comfort in my faith’s arms. It was as though I was acting on some personal vendetta against the Christian deity.

“He is a pitiful God—He is in great need.” Angelica stated with a heavy contempt.

“In great need of what?” I uttered.

She looked at a painting hanging above the fireplace. It depicted the defeat of an army against the Turkish Muslims. Wilhelm Von Klausenberg, an ancestor, led the soldiers.¹

1 Wilhelm von Klausenberg was assassinated in his sleep. The killers were soldiers from his army. It was later found that these supposed “Christian” infantrymen were in fact loyal to the Muslim leaders of the Ottoman Empire.

“God needs to be worshipped,” she replied. “So much so that He can no longer separate the honourable believers from the disloyal followers. To Him, they are one and the same... as long as they all attend church.”

She held her journal in a tight grip. I sensed frustration and tension in her voice. “God hungers for admirers! What does it matter if a man is guilty of defamation, as long as he goes to church and begs forgiveness? What does it matter if a mother abandons her child, as long as she goes to church and begs forgiveness? Nothing matters!”

“Angelica,” I said, “what are you trying to say?”

She replied, “I am like you, I suppose. I too believe that God exists, but I do not believe in him. How can I follow a God who pardons the guilty and condemns the innocent? ”

“I do not understand.”

She took her journal and sifted through its pages. She stopped halfway and prepared to read again. I suspected then that the earlier account of suffering was but a prologue. The worst was yet to come.

It was difficult for her to read aloud what was written on the page. She kept going over the paragraphs, as though she had been asked to learn it by rote; soon however, with a cough to clear her throat. She regained her composure and began.

“February 17th, the following year...”

Chapter 8

From the Journal of Angelica Von Klausenberg

February 17th 1793

Almost two months had passed since my ordeal, and still I was unable to speak about it to anyone—not even to my father. However, the time came that morning when I was obliged to reveal the particulars of that horrid evening. It was the only way that I could explain why I suddenly found myself bearing a child. It started with a simple but antagonizing question, asked by Sylvia. Who is the father? I recall thinking how ironic it was that her favourite nephew should be the guilty party behind this most unlawful deed.

I found it difficult to answer in front of strangers. I was being subjected to an inquisition! That woman was determined to humiliate me. As soon as she knew that I was pregnant, she immediately called Father Krueger and two of his altar boys. My father was the last to know. Papa insisted that the matter should be discussed in private. However, Sylvia was decided.

“Nonsense!” her voice echoed in the hall. “Angelica’s error is a stain on this barony. This is therefore a public matter.”

Then, for the first time, I saw Papa angry. “This is first and foremost a family matter Sylvia!”

She looked at him with menacing eyes and said, “No one is obligating you to be here Gustav. If you rather discuss this in private with your daughter, you may leave and do so... after Father Krueger and I have finished with her.”

“No, I shall remain here by my beloved daughter’s side.” He sat next to me and smiled.

“Touching,” replied Sylvia. Then, she stood up and glared at me. “So young lady, the Reverend and I are waiting. Who is the father of this child?”

I then summarised the gruesome history of how Lukas of Bukovina abused and deflowered me. I found it difficult to relive the damnable experience, but I was motivated by my need to see Justice prevail.

Papa was the first to react. He took my hand and said, “My dear, this is a most serious allegation. Is it true?”

“Every word of it is true sir,” I answered in tears.

Sylvia’s retort was a sharp contrast. “This is an outrage! Lying will do you little good Angelica! And accusing your dear cousin, who has showed nothing but kindness towards you, will only make matters worse!”

“Sylvia please!” rebutted Papa, “We don’t know whether she is lying. I for one believe her.”

“That doesn’t amaze me.” She was proud of her answer.

Being hurt by his wife’s words, Papa turned to the priest thinking to find comfort in his sage advice. “What say you Father Krueger?”

The clergyman walked near me. “Let us examine the facts, Baron,” he began. “Here we have an unrefined ill-mannered young girl charging her cousin, a respected and noble Baron’s son, with molestation. That is a serious crime indeed, one that is not easily proven.”

“So, what are you saying?” Papa asked him to be clear.

“Milord,” continued Father Krueger, “it is no secret that Angelica dislikes Lukas. Who is to say that she would not lie to incriminate him? Therefore, it is my opinion that the truth does not reside in her but in Lukas. If you want to resolve this mystery, ask Lukas Rheingold.”

“WHAT?” I shouted, “You can’t ask Lukas. He will most certainly refute my story.”

Papa was discouraged. “The father is right Angel, I must write to Lukas and get his version of the story... at least allow him to defend himself.”

“But he’ll lie Papa!”

Sylvia walked towards the exit. “I’ve heard enough! Come Reverend, we have other matters to discuss.”

Papa kissed me and left the room. “I have a letter to write. I’m sorry Angelica.”

February 24th 1793

Two weeks later, Papa stormed into my room carrying a letter. He did not seem happy. By the

look on his face, I knew the content of the letter. It was a reply from Lukas.

“Here,” he handed me the piece of paper, “read this.”

Our dear Uncle,

My family and I join you as you grieve over your sudden defamation. Indeed our dear cousin’s pregnancy is shameful and thus must not go unpunished.

It is my understanding that Angelica has attempted to implicate me in this most scandalous affair by claiming that I have taken her against her will. The reason for this mendacious testimony is obvious: she sought to lessen the magnitude of her crime in order to save her clan’s reputation. However, I cannot allow this scheme to succeed, not at my expense and certainly not when I hold the answer to the question that must be plaguing you as well as Aunt Sylvia.

If you wish to know the identity of the baby’s father, look no in the direction of Bukovina but in that of Bucharest. There you will find Peter Hummel.

You have my sympathy,

Lukas Rheingold of Bukovina

I was overtaken by rage. “How dare he! How dare he accuse Peter for his sin.”

“Angelica, I showed the letter to your mother,” admitted Papa.

“And what did she say?” I hated to ask him, but I had to.

“She believes Lukas. In consequence, I am to take you to the village’s limit, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains...” He explained that mother has arranged to have me excommunicated, but there was more. “You will also be exiled to the abandoned ruins of Klausenberg Castle. There you will spend the remainder of your natural life. You are to have no contact with the outside. It is her way of being lenient.”

“And you, you agree with her sentence Papa?”

“It could be worse dear, considering the alternative.” He revealed to me that Sylvia wanted nothing less than to have me put to death; however, Father Krueger dissuaded her from that idea.

“She is a fiendish woman!” I finally exclaimed, “Why do you put up with her, why did you even marry her?”

He stood up and tied his cape. Then he said, "One good thing did come from that union, sweetheart. Get dressed. I'll be waiting for you downstairs in the carriage."

"Death or solitary confinement for eternity, what's the difference?" I mumbled rhetorically. I never expected my father to hear but he did.

He laughed dryly. "Don't be so dramatic, daughter. Who said anything about solitary confinement? Pauline will be with you."

"Pauline?" I repeated.

"Yes, she volunteered," he informed me. "Besides, you'll need somebody to deliver my grandchild." He kissed my forehead and ordered two servants to come in. "Pack Miss Angelica's travelling bags and take them to the carriage."

They curtsied and acknowledged him. "Yes Milord."

Papa looked at me again. "Very well, don't be long my dear." On those sorrow-filled words, he left me with the two attending girls.

I did not waste time in dressing myself. I put on an informal dress over which I robed a lengthy crimson cape. I then covered my face with the matching hood. My disguise was complete. I was now dressed like an ordinary maid. I was still the same person, but I was no longer marred with the stain of the aristocracy that I despised so much.

As I went down the stairs, I began fancying the idea of exile. What I once considered a misfortune resulting from a slanderous situation, I now saw as a blessing. I envisioned myself as a creature too wild to be domesticated; now I was being released back to where I belonged.

This predicament, more than any, proved to me that I was a true Von Klausenberg; for indeed, my ancestors did not live in mansions and did not spend their time entertaining. No, theirs were modest residences and their main occupation was surviving. However, despite my sudden change of heart, the truth of Lukas' injustice remained. I was being severely punished for something I did not do.

I finally reached outside. Ironically, on this the saddest day of my life, the sun was blazing in all its glory. I would have thought that at least the heavens would share my dismay by providing

grey clouds, but the only raindrops were to be found in my eyes.

I stood in the mansion entrance in an emotional shock. My father had to come towards me and guide me in the carriage. “Come now dear,” he said gently, “where is that von Klausenberg fortitude for which you are so famous?”

I looked at him trying to show appreciation for what he was doing, but I could not. “Please Papa. I have no fortitude left! Do you expect me to be blasé by all that is happening to me? No sir, I weep, and I shall continue weeping—for my unborn child and myself—since no one else will.”

I was so entangled in my emotions, I did not realise that the carriage was moving and that I was in it. The vehicle steadily rode through the village within a corridor of people. I could see, from the corner of my eye, that they were ashamed. They all gave me a disapproving stare; as well, the most common among them shouted obscenities at me. Although a window shielded me, I could hear them clearly. “Look at Angelica the harlot!” they would scream.

My father saw that I was tormented. “Driver,” he said, “this road is distressing my daughter. Surely there is another route towards the city limits?”

The driver was a rough looking individual. Sylvia would not have a baronial coachman drive us, she therefore paid an ordinary driver to do so. He spoke with a commoner’s accent and an insincere tone. “Well Milord, there might be...there might be indeed.”

“Then, please take that other road,” Papa ordered, “Take us away from this rioting crowd.”

“Oh well you see, I can’t do that Milord.”

My father was not accustomed to having his commands refused. “And why not?”

“You see, it’s your good wife, Lady Von Klausenberg. She paid me to drive you to the city limits,” replied the driver. “She also told me to take the main road—this road.”

“She did, did she?” Papa asked rhetorically. “Well, I’ll pay you twice than what she paid you if you change route.”

“I’m sorry Milord, but I have a contract with your wife.”

“Then, at least go faster.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot. I shouldn’t put stress on the horses.” There was an evident tint of sadistic pleasure in the man’s voice. Plainly, he was enjoying the torment that he was causing my father and me. He was disgraceful, a shameful representative of the Vatraian masses. Yet, I found myself pitying him rather than hating. For he was guilty of no act save that of reflecting my people’s misguided sentiment towards me; and that is no cause for persecution.

My father was angry. He turned to me and told me to be strong. “This ride will be over soon.”

Finally, the coach stopped at the village’s border, where civilisation as I knew it ended. Beyond that point, the untamed wilderness of the Carpathian woods lay. I saw the priest and Sylvia staring at me as I walked towards them with Papa at my side. I could tell that they both felt the same way; however they manifested their thought in different manners. Whereas the priest displayed signs of regret that one of his lambs was lost, Sylvia showed disgust over the idea of my very existence.

My bags were transferred from the regal coach to a meagre-looking carriage pulled by a single steed. Pauline was already seated. She paid no attention to the activities that were taking place behind her, although it was difficult not to hear Sylvia’s preachy bellowing.

“For having tinted your family with the blood of disgrace,” she began, “I banish you, Angelica Von Klausenberg! Let your name no longer be spoken from our lips. Let your portrait be removed from the von Klausenberg Hall of Ancestors. May you be stripped of all wealth and possessions baring the von Klausenberg emblem, except for Klausenberg Castle, this carriage and what you carry with you. From now on, I have no daughter and you have no mother. All will deny knowing you or having once known you!”

After her speech, it was the clergyman’s turn to speak. Ironically, he read from the Book of Habakkuk: First Complaint of the Prophet—Lawlessness Prevails:

How long, Yahweh, am I to cry for help while you will not listen; to cry ‘Oppression!’ in your ear and you will not save? Why do you set injustice before me, why do you look on where there is tyranny? Outrage and violence, this is all I see, all is contention, and discord flourishes. And so the law loses its hold, and justice never shows itself. Yes, the wicked man gets the better of the upright, and so justice is seen to be distorted.

He closed his Bible and looked me in the eyes. “You have gotten the better of your family, my dear. Although its reputation may be salvaged, it will forever be split in two because of your sin. Do have anything to say before you go?”

“You’re wrong Father,” I replied. “It was not I who got the better of you. It was Lukas Rheingold, and one day he will pay for his crime against me, my family and my home!”

“May God have mercy on your soul, child,” concluded the priest.

I embarked in the carriage and journeyed towards the abandoned ruins of Klausenberg Castle accompanied by Pauline. I never said goodbye for, as they exiled me from my community, I exiled them from my heart.

Chapter 9

From the Journal of Peter Hummel

December 21st 1807

There were many troubling revelations in her story, not the least of which was the sudden discovery that she loved me. I could not help wondering whether she felt the same way now, fifteen years later. I knew that I did, but I could not allow myself to express it, in view of our situations. Overlooking that she is blue-blooded and I the son of a commoner, my obligations towards the Church further prevented me from having such thoughts.

“Ah! You are awake Reverend?” I suddenly heard. I lifted my head and saw Elizabeth with a silver tray in her hands. I was perturbed by her presence. How long had she been standing there? Did she know what I was thinking?

“Elizabeth? Good morning,” I greeted her.

She placed the tray at the foot of the bed, walked towards the rear window and opened it, so that the sunlight could better illuminate the room. She smiled and replied, “Good afternoon.”

She stunned me with her answer. I quickly stepped on the cold stone floor and reached for my watch. “Afternoon, did you say?” I exclaimed groggily. My Lord, she was correct. The watch clearly indicated that I had slept throughout the morning. It was now a quarter past twelve.

I was admittedly quite ashamed of myself. Attempting to plan my day, what was left of it, I gently stroke the lower part of my face, thus realising that I had yet to shave. Everything I needed for my toilette had been carefully laid out on the dressing table at the other end of the room; however, something was missing.

Elizabeth noticed my perplexed disposition. “Is something wrong Father Hummel?”

“No mirror,” I responded, “there is no mirror in this room. In fact, I don’t recall ever seeing a looking-glass in this entire place.”

“The old ruins within these mountains,” she answered, “sometimes lack the creature comforts to which city-dwellers are used.” She then emptied the silver tray of its contents and gave it to me. “Here, you may use this to groom yourself.”

I thanked her as I slowly stroke my razor blade up and down the leather strap. It was difficult to hold the razor steady with one hand while gripping a silver plate with the other, but I soon adjusted myself to the awkwardness.

Through the tray’s reflection, I could see Elizabeth making the bed. It was evident to me then that she was Angelica’s daughter; the resemblance was too uncanny. The child’s hair, her skin, even her mannerisms reminded me of hers. How was it then, that Elizabeth maintained that her mother was dead? “Elizabeth, where is your mother?” I probably should not have asked her.

She did not look at me. She kept making the bed. “Don’t you remember,” she replied, “my mother is dead.”

“Surely, Angelica is your mother.”

She then gave me an aggressive stare. “My mother is dead, sir!”

As part of me tried to understand Elizabeth’s adversity towards any mention of her mother, the other part wondered about her father. Indeed, believing that Angelica was her mother, I suspected that Elizabeth’s abandoning father was in fact the present Baron of Bukovina, Lukas Rheingold.

Elizabeth saw that her tone might have bothered (no, agitated) me. “I apologise for my lack of tact Father. It was uncalled for.”

I accepted her repentance. However, I sensed that it was not so much an apology as it was a warning, a caveat not to make the same mistake twice by enquiring about her father.

I took her advice and quickly changed the subject. "I say, you never told me that this place was Klausenberg Castle; or that Angelica still lived here."

"I deceived you, I apologise," responded Elizabeth. "I had no choice sir. I was under instructions to bring you to the castle, while never revealing that she was living here."

"I see, it couldn't have been helped," I replied forgivingly. "Tell me, where is she now?"

"She had urgent business outside Vatra Dornei, in Bukovina," she informed me, "and she won't be back until nightfall."

I received her response, unsatisfying as it was, with an understanding that I should not pry too deeply into matters that did not concern me. I ate my breakfast, which had gotten cold by then, and finished dressing. With Angelica gone, I quickly made other plans. If I was not to reminisce with my friend, perhaps I could do so by visiting my old town. As though she had expected me to journey into the valley, Elizabeth informed me that a stallion was waiting for me in the stable.

"Actually," I said, "I was hoping that the driver would take me there." However, I soon realised that he was with Angelica. I therefore had little choice but to ride the stallion.

It took the horse a bit over two hours to arrive at Vatra Dornei's borders. I was astonished that we, the horse and I, did not get lost. Indeed, I was not familiar with the Carpathian terrain and I had not expected my mount to be so intelligent. From my present location I could see the Village Square and hear the entire buzzing and mumbling coming from it.

How beautiful it looked from afar; but of course I would say that, I was looking at it with yesterday's eyes. I rode slowly through the corridor of people walking to and fro the various markets. They looked at me with questions on their faces. Who was I? Why was I here? Finally, I reached the destination that I secretly was longing to find: the cemetery.

Having dismounted my horse, I made the short hike towards my parents' gravesites. Each tombstone was fashioned out of a slab of limestone, and each had a single cherub sitting on its summit. They were humble looking headstones, not very expensive, but my parents led a very modest lifestyle.

I began speaking to them, or so I believed. “Hello Mama, hello Papa, I came back. I am sorry that I did not come here earlier. I had intended on visiting you yesterday, after I had settled in. However, no publican would welcome me in his inn, it seems that Father Krueger has imposed a curfew on this whole town... something having to do with a beast terrorising the Carpathian Valley.

“I would have been obliged to journey all the way to Transylvania for shelter. Fortunately, a sweet girl named Elizabeth admitted me into her home. It was a rough journey to Klausenberg Castle, but it was worth the effort; once there, I...”

Chapter 10

My stream of thought was suddenly severed by the sound of someone's careful approach. I turned to see who it was and recognised the grizzled likeness of Father Nicolei Krueger. Time had aged him severely for he appeared to be older than he should be. There was a period when he would walk like a pillar of strength bringing God's message to every man, woman and child. Now however, he was a bitter looking hunchback. Corruption and revenge, as I was soon to learn, had twisted his faith. The dark cape that he was wearing gave him the allure of a beggar. Still, he preserved his statesman's charms and storyteller's skills.

"Peter Hummel!" he exclaimed. "So it is true. Igor was right."

"What's true? Who is Igor?" I asked.

"The station clerk," he answered. "He told me that you tried to find shelter here last night."

"Yes, but I arrived too late. He told me about your ordinance."

I could see that he was genuinely sorry for my situation. "You must think me cruel?"

I looked at him not knowing what to say. Yes, I thought him cruel for having given the order. "I suppose you had your reasons Father," I finally responded.

"I did my son, I did."

A brief silence hung between us. Neither of us knew what to say. Then a question came to me.

"How... how is Dr. Yenko?"

"Josef died two years after you left," revealed the Father. "The Lord took him while he was sleeping. The cause of death was undetermined"

I could not help but smile at the irony. I hoped that Father Krueger did not see me. Or at the very least, if he had noticed my smirk, I wanted him to understand that I meant no disrespect. Dr. Yenko had suffered the same fate as my father, dying of an unknown illness. I wonder if he had been administered the famous bloodletting too, as he had my father? Did he seem to be getting stronger too?

I look out beyond the cemetery and saw the Village Square. How desolate it was. Although it did

retain its quiet beauty, it seemed bereft of life. It used to be so vibrant, resonating with laughter and cheer. Now however, there was nothing but dead silence. This bright sunny Saturday had more the semblance of a murky rainy Monday.

“This is not the Vatra Dornei of my youth,” I told Krueger. “How did it come to be like this?”

The priest looked at me, then towards the village. “Did you expect life here to stop and await your return?”

“No, of course not! But Father, look at your parishioners, they are swimming in misery.” I turned my back on the pitiful sight and returned to the gravesite.

“A lot has changed in fifteen years,” he remarked. “This city is under siege.”

“Let me guess,” I said sarcastically, “the Great Fear?”

“I sense some doubt in your tone Peter? You must believe me.”

“Please Father, you may have succeeded in installing fright in your parishioners, but not in me.” I protested. “Forgive my insolence. However, how could I call myself a rational man if I believed in such figments? It would take more than a child’s ghost story to convince me. I need facts.”

I had provoked the old cleric. “Figments, a child’s ghost story!” he exclaimed tapping his wooden cane on the earth. “You need facts, Faith is no longer enough for you? Well, I have your fact right here!” With a hard unfolding of his cape, Father Krueger revealed to me his arm. It dangled freely from his shoulder, greyed and rotted by time.

“My God Father!” I said with some disgust. “How did you come to be without an arm?”

“I lost it whilst wrestling with the Great Fear more than a decade ago,” he told me.

The horror of seeing Father Krueger’s infected wound predisposed me to give an attentive ear to what he had to say. “I must know sir, what exactly is the Great Fear?”

“It is Death personified, Peter. It is a creature whose only purpose is to avenge she who has brought pain to us all, Angelica Von Klausenberg!”

The infectious nature of his dismembered limb had weakened Krueger's constitution considerably. The sickness that had reached him was of such a serious state that he could not stand up for long periods. We sat on a nearby bench.

"To understand the Great Fear," he continued, "you need to know about Angelica, about what happened to her a month after you left."

I instantly knew to what Father Krueger was alluding. I therefore braced myself as he related to me the other side to a story that I had, unbeknownst to him, already heard.

Chapter 11

From the Journal of Father Nicolei Krueger December 13th 1792

The scandal took place on the unusually quiet evening of December 20th. Being in a valley and so near a mountain range, one would have expected the wintry month to be much colder. Yet no blizzard drew near and no icy wind was felt; in fact, it was as though time had suddenly stood still.

A week before though, Lady von Klausenberg and I went to Bukovina to speak to her sister Fiona Rheingold; the subject was Angelica. It was the baroness's design to wed her daughter to Fiona's son Lukas.

"You can't be serious sister?" asked Lady Rheingold.

"Indeed I am," her ladyship answered.

Lady Fiona looked at me with a grin of disbelief. "Father?"

"I'm afraid that she is very serious Milady."

Her ladyship of Vatra Dornei took a sip of tea and gracefully wiped the droplets on her lower lip. "I know that the prospect of having Angelica as a daughter-in-law is not enticing Fiona, but imagining being her mother," she admitted while laughing. "Angelica needs to be bridled! She is too wild for her own good. Perhaps a union with your son will be a positive influence on her. Because who is too deny that Lukas is of good character and breeding?"

Lady Rheingold seemed tired. She sighed and spoke, "It isn't that Sylvia. Angelica is a sweet girl; I wish you would see that. It's only that arranged weddings are things of the past. A young girl is perfectly capable of choosing whom she marries. Today she espouses for love and happiness, not fortune and fame."

"Love and happiness, they are hollow pursuits," responded Sylvia snorting. "You ought to know that."

"Are you still jealous that Leopold chose to marry me instead of you?"

Sylvia put down her cup of tea. “I am the eldest. I should have been the one. He was a man of vast accomplishments; I loved him for it. Besides, the family rules were on my side, but Father decided otherwise. Why? What did you have that I did not? If anything, you were not very lady-like at the table and at social events. You were a disgrace to your heritage. Angelica reminds me of you sometimes.”

“I suppose Leopold was attracted to me once, but I doubt that he ever loved me,” admitted Lady Rheingold. “Do not think that I was the luckiest one in our family, Sylvia. Have you taken a look at your own husband recently? I remember a time when he worshipped the ground you walked on; and I believe he still would, if you allowed him. The romantic clichés of our Literature were written to describe men like your Gustav. I must admit that I envy you sometimes; you married a good and loving man. You would know that if you were not so blinded by his wealth.”

“My Gustav is an idiot, a court’s jester in a king’s garment. I will not discuss this with you any further! Just tell me, do you refuse?”

“I have to,” retorted Lady Rheingold. “I would feel quite chagrined if Angelica were to be conjoined with my son by force.”

“So unless Angelica falls in love with Lukas,” asked Sylvia, “you will not agree with the marriage?”

“Exactly. If such a union is to be, I want my niece to say so.”

The conversation ended there. On our way back to Vatra Dornei, Lady von Klausenberg confided in me that she would speak to her daughter and convince her to offer herself to Lukas.

December 20th 1792

The night of the party arrived. Lady von Klausenberg was particularly beautiful. She wore a ravishing violet gown, the length of which allowed it to sway gently in the winds of her movements, and an elegant silver necklace ornamented with sapphires. She was the model baroness. Unlike her weakling husband Lord Gustav Von Klausenberg, she was not familiar with her guests. No, Sylvia... I mean, her ladyship approached them with dignity, never letting them forget who she was and where they were. She was conscious of her role as a states-woman, and she appreciated her good fortune of being married into royalty (even though it was a wedding of convenience).

As for Angelica, in her dark beige gown, she was typically quiet—never mixing with the crowd. She liked being left alone. But that night, she was particularly melancholic as she was pining over the lost of her friend. Her mother feared that her daughter’s mournful demeanour would ruin the festivities, however it was not so. Angelica’s sadness was buried deep inside her; and when it did surface, it did nothing to hide the girl’s radiant beauty.

When Lord Leopold Rheingold and his family arrived, Lady von Klausenberg made certain that Lukas and Angelica mingled. She quickly prepared the grounds by briefing the young man on her daughter’s pitiful situation.

“Let me tell you young Lukas,” she said, “that your cousin is in a sorrowful state this evening.”

“Indeed Aunt, I have noticed that as I came in,” admitted Lukas. “Pray, what is the cause of her misery?”

“She grieves over the lost of her love.”

For a while, Lukas remained silent. He had heard that Angelica had confined herself to her room ever since November last. However, he never knew why... until now. “Her love, did you say? And is he a nobleman of high society?”

Sylvia laughed. “A nobleman of high society! My dear nephew, he is the son of Anton Hummel.”

Lukas was understandably outraged. “Anton Hummel!” he exclaimed, “Is he not the village librarian? Why, he is a low-class citizen, a commoner no more!”

“Yes, but then again Angelica is a common girl, a common girl in a lady’s shell.”

Lukas remarked that Angelica should no better. She should, like her mother, be more regal. “Without any disrespect to you Aunt, I would venture to say that my dear cousin should know her place in society and take it.”

Sylvia was pleased with what she heard. “Indeed nephew, she should. Even the peasants know this. They are not at all content with having their future baroness prying into their lives. It makes their meagre existence seem that much more piteous.”

Their attention was then turned to me. “What say you to this Father?” asked Lukas.

I was a representative of God on Earth, and that did not allow me to discriminate between the prized sheep in my flock and the others. As they were all equal in the Lord's eye, so they should have been in mine. However, I must confess that I was in complete agreement with my hostess and her nephew. I was in turmoil. How does a priest acknowledge the truth about the disparity that exists between groups of humans, and appear to be fair toward those who are less fortunate?

I took my time to weigh my response well, and then I spoke. "Indeed Lukas, the class distinction that exists between royalty and peasantry dissolves in God's eye; for He is merely concerned with the purity of spirit. It is an earthly fact however that both groups cannot intermingle. The reason for this is that the Lord gave the bucolic folk sufficient intellect to tend to the fields and want of nothing else, while those of royal blood have been blessed with the wisdom to rule over them..."

"...Which defends my earlier point," interrupted Sylvia. "The peasants do not wish to see us among them because we remind them that they are inferior."

"And where do you fit in this impossible relationship Father Krueger?" asked Lukas amusingly.

"My son, I make this impossible relationship possible. By not belonging to either group, I am able to make an impartial judgement on how a land baron should rule his people and on how they should serve him."

Lukas looked at Angelica, who was gently swaying to the sounds of Mozart. "But this librarian's son, how is he so different as to cause Angelica to oppose her own family?"

"I tell you Lukas," Sylvia became angry, "I don't know what Angelica sees in him. Peter Hummel is literate—his education is unparalleled by his fellow commoners'—but that doesn't negate the truth about him. He still remains a peasant. And I refuse to have my daughter socialising with a peasant."

"I shall go to her Aunt," said Lukas, "I shall go to her and make her forget this Peter Hummel."

"Yes!" Sylvia exclaimed. "Go to her."

Upon those words, Lukas Rheingold put on a charming air and walked gracefully towards Angelica. Sylvia was pleased with the scene as she thought that Lukas would make of Angelica a proper lady. We could not hear anything, but we saw that the two young people were quickly immersed in conversation. This was a good sign. It perhaps meant that Angelica did not find Lu-

was so repulsive after all. Could he make her forget Peter Hummel? We hoped so.

In a short time, Sylvia had lost sight of Angelica and Lukas. Like a falcon searching its prey, she scanned the room determined to find them. Then, a sigh of relief and pleasure came to her as she found the two children strolling slowly to the door.

Chapter 12

An hour had passed as I was sitting near a huge window that gave a beautiful prospect towards the Village Square. I was lost in the wintry scenery before me, unprepared for what I was about to witness. Startled by the wolf-like sound coming from beyond the courtyard, my eyes were suddenly peered towards an unlit alley that drew a path towards the old abandoned stable. Out from the darkness and into the light, I saw Lukas running towards the old museum, towards us. He looked uncomfortable and agitated. Something had happened. He entered the dance hall and quickly summoned his family. I could overhear what was being said.

“Papa, Mama, we must leave now,” he categorically said.

His mother looked at him worryingly. “Lukas, your clothes...what happened to you?”

“Now is not the time to discuss this. Let’s go back to Bukovina!” Lukas exclaimed. “Please, I’ll tell you everything once there,” he added.

Lord Rheingold made his apologies to the von Klausenberg clan, and left in haste. He seemed confused, not knowing what had just unfolded before him. Yet, he trusted his son; if Lukas said it was important, then it was important. However, Fiona Rheingold was less alarmed, it was as though she suspected something. However, if she knew something she made certain not to divulge it.

Meanwhile, I was still perched at my window. It was there that I saw Angelica limping towards von Klausenberg Manor, which lay perpendicular on the left to the museum. She seemed hysterical but not harmed. As she reached the house’s steps, I saw bruises on her face and I noticed that her clothes were torn. It was then that I realised what had happened. Obviously, Angelica lured Lukas in the barn where she seduced him. They both gave in to their lustful passions, thinking that they were safe. Still, matters became violent. She was wounded and he panicked.

The only person who seemed to be oblivious to the happenings around her was Sylvia. She was too busy entertaining. It was probably for the best that she was not made aware of it, for should she have gotten hold of that knowledge she would have certainly fainted.

Chapter 13

February 17th 1793

I tried to conceal the secret for as long as I could, however I was not able to shield the baroness's ears from the various rumours echoing throughout the village. For weeks, I had to comfort her by denying that her daughter had engaged in any sort of immoral activity. Yet, I was powerless when Sylvia saw—through her own eyes—that her worst fears were confirmed. Angelica came down one morning with a bulging belly, indicating that she was with child. When asked how she came to be pregnant, she claimed that Lukas Rheingold had forced himself upon her.

The two-hour long interview uncovered nothing. It was then suggested that a letter be sent to Bukovina requesting that Lukas give his account of the situation. Weeks later we received a response from Lukas himself; it was very noble of him. He refuted having acted any less than in a gentlemanly manner towards his cousin. Even though I knew different, that he did indeed know her in a sinful way, I overlooked his claim for the culpability clearly fell on the seducer not the seduced.

It was clear to me that Satan had possessed Angelica, and that she should be punished severely. The usual reprimand was excommunication, but for her it was not enough. A crime had been committed, not just against God but against that on which Vatra Dornei stands, House of Von Klausenberg. Therefore it was decided, after lengthy discussion, that in addition to being damned Angelica would be exiled from her home.

At first Sylvia disagreed. Her image had been torn and she wanted revenge. “That child has cost me too much! I want her to pay for what she has done to me... with her life!”

I tried to calm her nerves. I took her into my arms and spoke to her gently. “You must not give in to hate. If you execute your daughter, she will be seen as a martyr. Already her shame is being met with sympathy among your people. They are saying, ‘the Von Klausenbergs are human after all, they are not so superior.’ They enjoy seeing one who is so close to the Lord fall to their level. No, we must send a message to the peasants. They have to know that Angelica is an aberration. She does not exemplify the typical royal. We must turn her human error into the embarrassment

that it is.”

“So what have you decided?”

“I will reject her from my church, you will disinherit her from your clan, and we will expel her from our village. All of this will be done in a quiet and private ceremony at Vatra Dornei’s Carpathian border. She will be forgotten.”

August 19th 1793

We had exiled Angelica (accompanied by her former nanny, Pauline) to the abandoned ruins of Klausenberg Castle, in the heart of the Carpathians. It was not until seven months later that we heard of her again. Gustav von Klausenberg made it a point to go and visit his daughter, despite his wife’s objections. He returned with news that Angelica had given birth to a beautiful baby girl whom she named Elizabeth.

“Oh Sylvia, you should see her,” he said, “she is beautiful, very much like her mother.”

With spite Sylvia said, “She might just grow up to be as much the witch as your daughter is.”

“I hope so,” he answered back.

After that event, there was no mention of Angelica. We tried to put her behind us and return to our daily lives. We thought that we were final rid of Satan and his concubine... but we were wrong.

Chapter 14

December 21st 1794

A little more than two years after the sordid event, during the Winter Solstice, when evenings came earlier, Lady von Klausenberg and I felt the devil's rage upon us once more. Lord Gustav and we were on route to Bukovina, in response to a letter from Lady Rheingold telling us that her husband had taken ill and was since nearing death. I was often engaged in conversation with Sylvia, but Lord von Klausenberg was not as talkative—except when the carriage passed the route that led to Castle Klausenberg. He made it a point to mention Angelica's name and to speak about her; for he knew that it would provoke his wife's anger.

“Remember how beautiful our daughter Angelica was Sylvia?” he would ask. “Remember how pitch black her hair was, and how her skin was as soft as the Orient silk? She looked much like you my dear. She was as feisty as well, full of life.”

Sylvia did not speak. She simply kept staring at him with murderous eyes. Milord knew that his little game of aggravation was working. Indeed the baroness's blood was boiling. If she had not exploded already, she would soon.

Meanwhile, the baron continued. “Remember what you said when you first held her in your arms. ‘She looks like an angel,’ you said, ‘let us name her Angelica.’ You were so proud, not arrogant proud, loving proud. You were...”

I quickly interrupted as I suddenly heard a strange noise coming from the surrounding woods. “Quiet, there is an animal nearby!”

“It's probably a wolf Father,” answered the baron.

“No wolf makes that sort of noise Milord.” Indeed this creature made a high-pitch growling sound.

The growling ceased quite abruptly, but we soon heard the loud sound of leaves shrivelling all around us. It became evident that it was steadily approaching. This creature, whatever it was, seemed to be purposed on killing. I thanked the Lord that it was not after us. I naturally assumed that it was hunting the smaller beasts of the wild. For no animal has ever preyed on Man in these

forests.

That is when my reassurance was shattered. We heard the growling resonance again; except this time, it was louder and accompanied by a strange howling which seemed to muffle the laugh of a little girl. Furthermore, we realised that it had managed to jump on the hull of the carriage as a thump was heard. Finally, our fears were confirmed when we heard the driver scream in agony. His death was not a quick one.

The carriage was since riding out of control. It was just our good fortune that the four steeds pulling the vehicle were able to avoid the precipices. It was rocking crazily left to right when one of the wheels caught a stone in its path. Our cabin lifted off the road, the impact of which knocked the baron unconscious and broke the link with the horses. Finally our cabin toppled over.

As everything lay tranquil, I thought that our little adventure had ended; but it was far from over. I found myself lying upside-down with a dislocated shoulder. I slowly and painfully crawled near Sylvia, who was traumatised, more than injured. Lord Gustav was not as fortunate. By the looks of him, I gathered that the compartment's rolling motion had propelled him midway outside. His head had evidently hit the road several times before he finally returned inside. In short, the baron lay before me dead.

“The creature is gone,” I said to myself.

I was then startled by the beastly deep voice of something standing over Sylvia. It was not talking to me. “Good, you’re not dead yet. I will make you pay for what you’ve done!”

I turned around and saw the most horrible sight. This four-legged animal, a wolf-like creature of twice the size, was gnawing at Sylvia’s chest. It was slowly and sadistically killing her.

I cried out and begged it to stop. It looked at me with analytical eyes, and then smiled. Suddenly its canine appearance faded, and a more horrid apparition took its place. This was no animal; for none of God’s creature was capable of such a skill. This fiend was one of Satan’s conceptions.

In my studies to become a cleric, I had often heard stories of a sort of monster that roamed the countryside and villages during the nocturnal hours. It would hunt humans in search of sustenance; and there was only one thing that could ensure its survival: blood. Rumours of its powers

were seldom accurate, but they were treated as truth nonetheless. I was told that the monster could change its appearance at will. It could also hypnotise its prey, as well as be endowed with great strength.

This creature of the night was, as I quickly learned, once human. In life, it was a lost soul who had rejected the church and was swayed by the charismatic Beelzebub. Hence in death—as it was neither buried on hallowed ground nor given absolution—it rose again and took its place as one of Satan’s newest addition to his army of darkness. Everyone throughout the land knew this creature by name: Vampire.

I had never seen one until now. There stood before me the demonic grotesque against which I was trained to battle. It had all the appearance of a vampire: the pointed canine fangs, the almost yellowish eyes, and the perpetual hunger in its stare. I quickly reached for my crucifix and aimed it at the creature; but it had no effect. I was baffled.

The vampire laughed. It was an eerie giggle that was neither male nor female. “You may wear the priest’s uniform,” it said, “but you are not a man of God. Without Faith, Father Krueger, that cross is merely a trinket.”

I could hear Sylvia hurting and moaning in the background. “What have you done to her?”

“She has paid for what she has done,” it said.

“She has done nothing!”

“Ah, but she has. She has, with your assistance, marred the name of an innocent girl, her own daughter.”

“What do you know of this?” I asked with a dreadful tone.

“I know everything. I know the truth.”

“Then you must know that Angelica von Klausenberg was a wilful wicked girl. She brought down the House of von Klausenberg with her lustful activities with Lukas Rheingold! She has marred her own name!” I exclaimed.

“Come now Father,” retorted the vampire, “I can read your mind. You know that that is not true.

You saw something that night during the party. You saw Lukas running from the barn. You saw the bruises on Angelica's face. You knew what really happened—what he did to her—and yet you said nothing, why is that Father, why did you withhold the truth?"

I was confused, but I knew what the beast was suggesting. "No!" I exclaimed, "no, Lukas did nothing. It was Angelica who seduced him."

"Humph." The vampire looked at Sylvia. "She is in pain Father and near death. Shall I finish her off?"

"I will not sentence the woman I love to death!"

With astonishment, the vampire gave me a sinister smile. "The woman you love?" it repeated. "Oh my, you really are a sinful man. All right then, I shan't force you to choose. I shall relieve her suffering."

In a quick bite to the neck, the vampire took what little was left of Sylvia's life. I could hear her heart slowly beating as she tried helplessly to gasp for air. Then, it was all over. In a matter of seconds, Lady von Klausenberg was dead.

As I saw the drops of blood trickling from the beast's lips, I suddenly got hold of my senses and began searching for anything that could be used to exterminate the vampire. I quickly found a piece of wood, which protruded from the carriage window-frame. I took this makeshift stake and hurled myself towards the creature. My intent was to stab it through the heart. I vowed that my lover's death was going to be avenged. Nevertheless, killing the demon proved to be an impossible task. Indeed, the vampire succeeded in incapacitating and disarming me.

"Do not try to overtake me old man!" it said pompously. "My strength ten times exceeds yours."

"Then, if I cannot kill you," I said, "I demand that I be killed."

"No, you, I shall not kill. I will leave you, as you are now, weak and alone. You shall go back to Vatra Dornei and tell your gullible parishioners about what just transpired here."

Soon enough, I found myself lying among the debris beside two corpses. The vampire was nowhere to be seen. It had left as hastily as it had come. I tried to stand, but a strange feeling of disorientation overtook me. It was a while before I noticed that I was myself very deeply wound-

ed; I was without an arm. My enemy had gnarled at it during our brief altercation. To my stupefaction, I felt the sharp pain of my injury much later than I expected. I could not explain it then, and I would not venture into explaining it now.

After that terrifying encounter, I audaciously made my way towards the village. Once there, I informed the people of the Great Fear, which Satan had appointed as Angelica's protector and had so impudently taken hold of our land.

As any mortal would be, I was frightened out of my wits. However, I had never forgotten my vow, Sylvia's demise would be avenged!

Chapter 15

From the Journal of Peter Hummel

December 21st 1807

I looked at Father Krueger with astonishment. Having seen Angelica's clothes ripped and her face marked with bruises, how could he honestly believe that she had been otherwise but defamed? Never was I so ashamed of my clergyman, he who had overseen my entrance into the Lord's church, than at that very moment in the cemetery.

"Ever since then, the Great Fear has haunted us relentlessly," said Krueger.

"Enough!" I was suddenly overwhelmed with anger. This man's babbling enraged me. By his own admission, he flagrantly abused his Divine authority by unjustly condemning my friend. Why could he not admit his wrongdoing, why did he feel compelled to support with some weak fable about vampires?

"For God's sake Father!" I muttered in disgust, "Her dress was torn and clotted with blood. Anyone would have seen that she had been deflowered."

The priest looked at me with fascination. "How can you know this, you did not see the dress?"

"I did!" I carelessly announced, as I realised that the gown in question was the very one worn by Elizabeth last evening.

He laughed for a while. He probably thought that I had lost my mind, but I did not know why.

"Peter I am aware that she and you were friends, but that is impossible."

"It is not impossible, sir!" I argued.

"But it is. You see, when Angelica died, she was buried with the gown."

"What?" I could not believe what I heard. What did he mean died?

"Yes," he replied, "shortly after her daughter Elizabeth turned one year old, Angelica's body was found in her bedchamber."

"How did she...?"

“I do not know the particulars my son.”

I thought as much. I did not believe a word of what he was saying. ‘Angelica dead’? Nonsense, I had had tea with her just last night. She looked as alive as any woman did. “I don’t believe you Father,” I contested. I straightened my coat as I prepared to leave.

“Very well, go and see for yourself,” said Krueger amusingly. He saw me to my steed and added, “then, I shall accept your apology.”

“All right, we shall go presently. Which tombstone is it?”

“Heavens!” expressed Krueger. “Dear boy, she is not buried here; why, I would not hear of it, nor would her mother. Her body lies in Klausenberg Castle’s courtyard.”

“Enough Father! I have temporary residence at Klausenberg Castle and have seen Angelica. What’s more, I never saw a grave in the courtyard. Farewell sir!” On those words, I mounted my horse, but the old man held me back.

He became hysterical. “You say you have residence at Klausenberg Castle and that you saw Angelica?”

“Yes, that’s correct. She was very much alive when I last saw her.”

“God help us!” he exclaimed.

I did not say a word. I simply looked at him with pity and rode off towards the city. He was so filled with anger and hate. To me he was the worst kind of clergyman, a credit to none and a shame to all. I did not want to have anything to do with him. Then again, did I want to have anything to do with any Vatraian, a flock of sheep who witlessly believed this enraged charlatan’s message?

It was clear to me that Krueger felt great remorse for his sins, namely for having had a love affair with Lady von Klausenberg and exiling Angelica. Hence, to rationalise and justify his actions, he created this Great Fear. As for the loss of his arm, I had no doubt that it was the result of a fierce struggle with an animal of some sort.

Since my encounter with Krueger, I tried to forget my conversation with him—yet, his words still rung in my ear. I was annoyed and confused, so much so that I became unaware of my surroundings. I thought that I would find some type of catharsis in a tall glass of dark ale, but I was mistaken. I sat in a pub for hours doing nothing but think. There I was alone worried about matters that did not concern me. When I should be thinking about building a future in this village, my energy was being spent elsewhere. I felt hopeless.

Not knowing what to believe or what to do, I allowed my senses to roam freely for a while. It was then that I took notice of a couple of ladies sitting at the next table. At first, they were of no particular interest to me; however, I could not keep myself from eavesdropping on their conversation when one of them mentioned Bukovina.

“I tell you Edna it is true,” said one woman, “Lord Lukas Rheingold is dead. They say that he’s been murdered, killed by the Great Fear.”

“Why would it kill the Baron?” asked Edna.

“Father Krueger says that the beast is purposed on avenging Angelica Von Klausenberg,” responded Edna’s friend.

I could hear no more of this rubbish. I closed myself to the environment and focused on finishing my drink. ‘Krueger had them all at his mercy,’ I thought to myself.

Chapter 16

Soon the clock struck five. Due to the curfew imposed by Father Krueger, I had to leave the pub. There was nothing to do in Vatra Dornei after five, yet I was not ready to return to the fortress. Therefore I remained in the streets and enjoyed the crisp night air.

As I strolled randomly within the Village Square, I reached the frozen well, the very place where Angelica and Lukas sat. As I looked across from it, I could see the dark alley that led to the rat-infested stable. To the right, was the Great Hall where the party was held; and perpendicular to it stood the von Klausenberg Mansion. I was reliving the events of December 20th in my mind. I heard the music playing. I saw the baronial carriage arriving from Bukovina. I could imagine Angelica and her cousin walking in the Square and sitting here. I envisioned the overture to the nightmarish act as the couple disappeared in the alley. I had the eerie reflex to go and visit the scenes of the crime; but my morbid interest in the matter, I felt, went beyond the boundaries of good taste.

Inevitably, the clock tower's bells reminded me that it had been three hours since I left the pub as the chime of the eighth hour finally resounded. I sat on the stone bench as the cold winds gently penetrated my body to the bone. I was so preoccupied with the von Klausenberg scandal that I remained motionless for a long time, staring out into oblivion.

Sometime after, I saw someone running in the streets. I thought that it was one of Krueger's devoted followers quickly heading home before the Great Fear arrived. However, I knew that it could not be so when the same person ran back.

The second time around, I was able to have a more detailed glimpse at the rushed individual. The person in question was a woman. Her thin appearance and weathered clothes indicated to me that she was not from the village. Evidently, she must have come from the fields or forests. I watched her as she went from one building to the next, asking admission. I witnessed as every publican shouted at her, ordering her to leave. She was like every other vagrant, or so I thought.

As she came closer, she came across a constable, who was patrolling the streets. He shouted, "You again! You were warned never to come here Pauline."

I was stunned; did he say ‘Pauline’? Could this woman be Pauline Chjenova, Angelica’s nanny? I stood up and quickly intervened. “Is there a problem officer?”

The constable looked at me with anger. “Nothing I can’t handle sir.”

“My God, what happened to her?”

“You know her?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes, I do indeed,” I lied. “Eh... she is an old family friend. What happened to her?”

“She,” replied the officer, “has been roaming the countryside for about twelve years now.”

“She has been reduced to this, panhandling?”

“No sir, it appears she is quite happy with eating rodents and insects.” He turned to Pauline.

“Aren’t you? You like rats and bugs, hey?”

“So why does she go door to door?”

“Who knows sir!” he exclaimed with a sigh. “Why do crazy folks do what they do? People say that became insane after her mistress killed herself. But I’m not telling you anything new. Being her friend, you should know all of this?”

“I was away,” I explained, “I haven’t seen her for fifteen years.”

I do not think that the officer believed me; still, as he was finishing his patrol and anxious to get home, he was more than willing to leave her in my custody.

“Very well, then get *your friend* home safely,” he replied. He then gawked at Pauline, “As for you, next time you shan’t be so lucky.”

I watched as the policeman left the scene and disappeared from sight. I did not wish anyone to hear or see me speak to Pauline, for the matter of which I had to discuss was a private one.

Pauline looked at me in an odd way. Her head was lowered in such a way that her grey hair hung freely at the wind’s mercy, allowing only for one of her eyes to be seen. It took me awhile to notice it, but I came to realise that Pauline was not looking at me at all. She was peering at the mountains... towards the castle.

“She is alive, you know?” She finally stared at me with sad and earnest eyes. “She lives Peter.”

Pauline and I had never met before that evening; I was therefore startled when she uttered my name.

“My mistress talks about you often,” said Pauline.

“How did you know that I was the man in question?” I asked with some fright.

“You saved me from the law. No other Vatraian would have done that. Besides, you look a lot like your father. You have his deep blue eyes and wavy brown hair.”

I was pleased to know that I carried some of my father in me. The pride that I felt almost made me forget what Pauline said in the beginning.

“Pauline, what did you say?” I asked, “Just before, you said something about your mistress living.”

“My mistress,” she began, “is alive. Once, on the cold stony floor, the body of Angelica von Klausenberg laid in peace. Then, on the longest night of the year, out from under a sodden and dark bed, Angelica rose. Now she walks.”

“Your mistress,” I asked in confusion, “you mean Angelica von Klausenberg?”

Pauline looked at me as though I had offended her in some way. “Angelica von Klausenberg is dead.”

“I don’t understand. How can she be dead? Not a moment ago, you said that now Angelica walks.”

She gave me a smirk. Evidently, Pauline was toying with me. “Angelica walks, yes...but not Angelica von Klausenberg.”

I had neither the time nor the inclination for enigmas and games. Pauline’s crazed babbling had barely begun to annoy me when I remembered why I saved her from being arrested. I wanted to ask her about the Great Fear.

“Enough about Angelica. Pauline,” I addressed her expecting the worst, “I want to ask you about the Great Fear, do you believe in it?”

“Don’t you?” She replied in a simple manner.

“What is it, what is the Great Fear?”

“The Great Fear is an awesome nightmare, and a tragic play.”

“Pauline please, no riddles!” I exclaimed.

She smiled, more tenderly this time. “Very well Peter, the Great Fear has been dubbed so by the habitants of this village, but the name barely befits it.”

Pauline knew more about the creature than she had first led me to believe, and it irked me that she was not willing to share all that knowledge. However, I decided to exercise patience and hide my frustration.

I went on with my interrogation at a leisurely pace. “Are you suggesting that this creature is good?”

Pauline saw the bewildered expression on my face, and she seemed to sympathise. She stressed the point that the situation was not as simple as I made it appear. “What I am suggesting Peter, is that the creature is no more malevolent or less benevolent than any of us. I know of only three people it has murdered and of none it has terrorised. And yet, how many of our own people have we humans killed, how many have we menaced? The people’s fear of it is merely based on one man’s fables.”

“Father Nicoletti Krueger.” I concluded. “So, the Great Fear does not exist?”

“Oh no, it exists,” said Pauline, “to those who have done Angelica von Klausenberg great harm.”

“But is the creature essentially good or evil?”

The woman gave me a lengthy stare. I could tell that she was assessing the impact that her next utterance would have on me. “Well, you tell me. You saw it.”

I was taken aback considerably by her response. “I never saw anything like that, what do you mean?”

“Elizabeth told me about your encounter with the wolf,” she revealed to me.

I was overwhelmed by stupefaction. “Her pet, Angelica, she’s the Great Fear? But she is merely a lone timber wolf. She was very docile and quite harmless.”

“Was she?” retorted the woman.

Everything I heard thus far seemed to me to be quite unbelievable. I did not feel that Pauline was being completely honest with me. It was as though she were decided on handing me the tools to find the solution on my own, rather than giving me the answer directly. Despite this, I was compelled to ask the old nanny one last question.

“Pauline, what is the connection between Angelica von Klausenberg and the Great Fear?”

“Now Peter,” she replied playfully, “You cannot expect to have all the answers handed over to you. I think I told enough.”

“You haven’t told me anything!”

“Well, everything will be clear to you tonight when you see Angelica.”

On that mysterious note, Pauline ran towards the village’s eastern border. That was the last I saw of her. As for me, I return to my horse with a mind flooded with questions. Anxious to speak to Angelica about my conversation with her former nanny, I speedily rode towards Klausenberg Castle.

Chapter 17

When I returned to Klausenberg Castle, I was greeted by Angelica, who had just returned from her business trip. She told me that she heard of Lukas' tragic demise. However, she was very candid in telling me that she was not in the least sad. "Can you blame me, considering the hardship that I went through because of him?"

"I suppose not," I replied.

All through the meal, Angelica did nothing to instigate a tête-à-tête. She simply ate her portion of steak—as I recall it was thick and blood-rare—and looked at me with her piercing eyes. I felt uncomfortable, analysed, as though she were waiting for me to do or say something... anything. My uneasiness caused me to avoid her glare at all cost. I purposely focused my attention on what was in my plate; nothing, I thought, would make me raise my head and subject myself to her judgmental glare.

Angelica noticed that I was controlling myself. With the purpose of taunting me, she began playing with a gold necklace that she happened to be wearing. Still I struggled not to gaze in her direction. However, when she started ringing the pendant that hung from the chain, I was trapped and I had to glance her way. The noise that the pendant made was too familiar to me.

"You're wearing your wolf's collar?" I remarked with a bemused tone.

She did not answer. Instead she changed the subject. "How is Father Krueger... and Pauline, how is she?"

I was at a loss for words. She knew that I had met both the priest and the nursemaid; just as she knew what queries lurked in my brain. Having unveiled her mind-reading skill to me, I sensed that she did not want to pretend anymore. Finally, my questions would be laid to rest. That much I understood. Still, what I did not know was when and how they would be answered.

Chapter 18

Elizabeth came in the room carrying a huge picture-frame-like object. I quickly ran to her aid, as it seemed to give her quite some trouble.

“I say Elizabeth, what is this?”

“She said that you should have a looking-glass.” She answered.

“But why here?” I asked delighted. “My toilette is done in my chambers”

Elizabeth walked in front of the covered mirror and held it tightly. She instructed me to let go, as she would need to move about with it unhindered. “Yes,” she agreed, “but she insisted that I bring it here.”

I noticed that Elizabeth never used Angelica’s name. “She, your mother?”

“How many times will I have to remind you sir? My mother is dead!”

I had grown tired of that rhetoric. Now that I knew the truth about her lineage, I wanted to hear Elizabeth admit that she was the daughter of Angelica. I was about to ask her, but it suddenly dawned on that perhaps the girl truly believed her mother to be dead. It may be that Angelica never told her.

“Elizabeth, who was your mother? How did she die?”

“My mother was Lady Angelica Von Klausenberg, sir. She took her own life,” I could see that the girl was finding it difficult to speak of the incident. “It happened one night. I was one year old when I was entrusted into Pauline’s care. I remember that evening well. I can still hear her cries and woes echoing through the fortress halls. I remember the bucket that Pauline used to clean the blood-stained floors; how the clear water turned crimson very quickly.”

I did not understand her. “How could Angelica von Klausenberg have committed suicide, child? She is here, behind you! Turn and see.”

I took Elizabeth’s hand and guided her to look toward the lady sitting at the supper table that was Angelica. We both saw her. Elizabeth went to her and put her hands on her shoulders, but said nothing.

I waited for something to happen, a revelation. I expected Elizabeth to declare finally that her mother was alive, but that did not occur. Meanwhile, I heard the covering drape fall from the mirror. Startled by the sound I took a glimpse down at it. I raised my head to better see the looking-glass. I wished that I had not done that.

As Elizabeth walked away from her, Angelica turned her chair towards me to better reveal the truth of her existence to me. I was frightened by what I saw—or rather, by what I did not see—in the mirror. I had in front of me the proof of Elizabeth's affirmation. The looking-glass reflected the exact setting and people inside Klausenberg Castle. My counterpart stood where I stood and did what I did, as did Elizabeth's. The furniture was at the same place and the fire was burning as brightly. However, the scene was not complete...

Chapter 19

From the Journal of Angelica von Klausenberg

December 21st 1807

As I pretended to drink from a goblet, Peter looked in the mirror only to see a facsimile of the glass floating freely in the air. I could only imagine the horror that he must have been feeling when he realised that I threw no reflection.

He was frozen. His mind was filled with thoughts, scenarios of what his fate would be... now that he knew my secret. Would I kill him, or seduce him into joining my clan? I tried reassuring that I meant him no harm; however my effort was futile.

“Why did you bring me here?” he asked.

“Would you have rather gone to Transylvania?” I asked rhetorically. “You were cold and alone. You were brought here because no one in the village would welcome you into his inn. You were brought here as my friend.”

“Friend? My friend was Angelica Von Klausenberg!” he retorted. “You... whatever you are... are not her!”

“The von Klausenberg name means nothing to me now. So, in a manner of speaking, you’re right. However, I am still Angelica.”

Peter tried to compose himself. “You are still an abominable creature, an unnatural unholy thing.”

I became angry. “Elizabeth, leave us.”

The child walked away, but not without giving Peter a tearful stare. He had saddened her, but he did not know why. Elizabeth loved me as any daughter would love her mother. She was very sensitive to how people treated me. When one-by-one the villagers all rejected me, Elizabeth had found comfort in the belief that there was at least one man out there who still cared for me. Peter’s words, therefore, offended her deeply.

Once my daughter gone, I looked at my friend as I had never looked at him before... with hate.

“You will never say that in front of her again! Is that understood?”

He responded with a nervous nod. “You’re the Great Fear. You avenged your own death by killing or wounding those who injured you in life: your mother, your cousin, Father Krueger.”

His harsh and prejudicial words had pierced my soul, for indeed I had a soul. As an animal in pain, I immediately sought to defend myself. “I may not be your friend anymore, Peter. However, you are still mine. You once told me that I was as you remembered me...”

“Yes,” Peter quickly responded, “and I can now admit to you that it frightens me.”

“Why should it?” I was shocked by my friend’s stubbornness. “We vampires age more slowly than mortals; that is when we feed and sleep properly.

Damn you Peter, why can you not accept me the way I am? If anything, I am a better person dead than I ever was alive! When I arose from my grave on that fateful winter solstice, my feelings for you—that had lain buried in me during my entire mortal life—were suddenly awakened in this new existence.”

I tried convincing him that I was still the same Angelica, but he was caught in a web of preconceived ideas, an entanglement of lies and unsubstantiated rumours spread by authorities like Father Krueger. I began thinking that I had lost Peter to them.

“If only I could show you how it feels to be a nosferatu. It is like swimming in eternal grief,” I began saying. I told him how my senses were enhanced to pick-up the clamours and agonies of all the living things around me. They tormented me even to this day. At first I did not know why; however, I had come to realise that their sounds of melancholy were in fact echoes of my own lamentations. Nature was finally weeping with me, as I had wished it long ago.

In Life, I had been punished and wounded for a crime that I did not commit. But I was to find no release from all the pain in Death. Instead, I found more anguish. I was denied absolution and a resting-place on hallowed ground when I was excommunicated. I drew the last nail in my coffin when I compliantly extinguished my life. I knew then that, as in life, I was to walk this corrupted Earth and suffer for eternity.

Having been seldom loved when living, now that I was un-dead I knew nothing but hatred. I acquired a liking for that vital fluid which flows in the veins of God’s creatures. I drank animal

blood for survival; however, I had no scruples on shedding that of human kind for vengeance. I killed the two people whom I held responsible for my fate, Sylvia and Lukas. I also held Krueger accountable, but I wanted him to live and suffer by witnessing the rampage of the monster he helped create.

Peter looked at me perplexed. His thoughts were disorganised and irrational; he was caught up in a coil of emotions with which he had difficulty dealing.

From the Journal of Peter Hummel

December 21st 1807

I was perplexed. I was reminded of my encounter with the wolf—Angelica in disguise. Here again, I felt the distinct chill of horror running down my spine, and yet felt compassion and sadness. “But what about your father, what had he done to deserve such a horrid death?”

Angelica looked at me at great length before uttering another word. Although her eyes were not moist with tears, I could still read her facial expression. I knew that I had opened a sensitive wound. If she was not crying outside, she was indeed weeping on the inside. “His was an accidental death. The one person who loved me unconditionally, the one person whom I had vowed to protect... and I managed to kill him too.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.” I now understood everything. I now knew the secret behind the Great Fear of Vatra Dornei... but at what cost? I was confronted with a dilemma. I saw my love for Angelica at odds with my loyalty to the Church. I partook in my friend’s hatred for Father Krueger. Still, I recognised that Father Krueger was merely a man—his corruption and abuse of power had in no way tainted my faith in Christianity. As sad as it was, I had to accept the fact that the Angelica whom I loved was dead, and something else had assumed her identity, a vampire: a creature that every good Christian knew to be evil.

Angelica looked at me. I could not read minds as she could; yet I could sense that she was quite vexed. She stood up and gave me a look filled with disappointment and hopelessness. “I have done nothing to harm you. Yet, you would condemn me because I am a vampire! You mortals are all alike: without compassion, without love, without soul!”

“If I am without soul, why do you love me?”

She looked at me with a savage anger. “I don’t know!” She was about to exit through the courtyard when she spoke again. “I thought you and I were kindred spirits. We both have unresolved issues in this village. That is the real reason you came back, is it not?”

“I have no unresolved issues!” I replied.

“You lie!” shouted Angelica. “Just as my religious convictions are no more, so is your faith in your people. You feel disdain towards this village, hatred. Ever since your father died, you have felt nothing but contempt for Vatra Dornei!”

I was afraid to face my demons, but Angelica gave me no choice. “At first, yes.”

Angelica wore a sadistic smile on her face. “You blamed a whole village for one man’s stupidity. Your father should not have died.”

“No, he had no life-threatening malady; it was a mild case of pneumonia. Nothing that could not be cured with a high Vitamin C diet and rest.”

“What killed him then?”

I was more afraid by that query than any other that she had asked before. “I... I do not know.”

She heard me, I knew she heard, but she persisted. “What, or rather, who killed your father?”

“Dr. Yenke insisted on giving Papa a bleeding, thus flushing out the supposed bacteria that had invaded his patient’s body. But the doctor drained too much blood from him; Papa died consequently. It was a terrible loss, but God has led me to the path of clemency.” I looked at her and I could hear my soul screaming out in pain.

“That true vampire, Dr. Yenke, sucked the blood out of your father’s veins; and you forgave him?” Angelica asked facetiously.

“Yes.”

“Why can’t you forgive me?”

“The taking of Life is a sin Angelica,” I explained. “I cannot absolve you for having willingly destroyed one of the Lord’s greatest gifts. It would go against everything I believed in.”

“I see.” She looked at me at great lengths. “Then, we have nothing more to say to each other.”

Sleep well.”

It had started to rain. “Where are you going?” I asked with concern.

She stopped walking for a moment and responded with an abrupt tone. “I am going amongst my true companions. Tonight, I will spend time with the wolves. They understand me better than any human... even you, Father Hummel!”

That night, I could not sleep. I kept hearing the wolves howling outside, and I knew that one of them was Angelica. It was her way of releasing her sorrow, her pain, the wound that I had inflicted on her. I could not help but question the wisdom behind my faith. I realised that my hostess was right. I was without sympathy. I wanted someone or something to blame for my lack of thoughtfulness. Should I blame my religion for being so quick to judge? Should I blame my teachers for having interpreted the Bible for me? No, I knew that it was my fault. Still, I knew not what to think of Angelica the vampire. Since the only model of good and evil that I had resided in my teachings, my dilemma remained.

Chapter 20

December 22nd 1807

The next day, after a light stroll through the woodlands, I came back through the castle's main entrance only to see that my bags were packed and ready to be carried. I then saw Elizabeth coming down the stairs wearing a frown upon her brow. I asked her if she knew why my bags were brought here.

"Is it not obvious sir?" she replied with bitterness. "You are leaving us as soon as you have had something to eat."

"But Angelica is still sleeping." I retorted, "Can't I wait until sunset? Then I will be able to bid her farewell."

Elizabeth smiled. "You'll see her before you leave, I promise you that." She noticed that I was wearing the priest's black uniform and collar, as well as crucifix around my neck. Yet she made nothing of it.

We sat down for a light snack. I noted the way in which the table was set; although we were only two, there was a third seating. I looked at Elizabeth with puzzlement. She told me that a third person was expected.

Unlike her mother last night, Elizabeth was quick to begin speaking. "Angelica had told me many times that you were open-minded."

"I like to think so," I replied amusingly.

"And yet, when she needed your compassion the most, your mind narrowed."

I did not wish to debate about yesterday evening with anyone, especially after my personal soul-searching of last night. Yet, I could see that Elizabeth was determined on getting an explanation out of me. She wanted to understand why I judged Angelica and shun her as I did.

"This fiend is not your mother—she is dead Elizabeth, you said so yourself. Why are you protecting it?"

"Because I do not blame her for what she has become. Because I look at her through other spec-

tacles than those of the Church, I am able to see a person and decide on my own whether or not he or she is evil in my eyes.”

Her allegation stabbed me like a dagger. I had to offer my rebuttal. “I too have a mind of my own; the Church has nothing to do with it!”

“Really, I see that you are wearing your cross; tell me, do you believe in God now?”

“I do, more than ever,” I was confident in my response.

“And what does God tell you, Reverend!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “Does he not tell you to condemn my mother for no reason other than that of being a vampire? You would kill her, not to send the woman who died towards Heaven, but to thrust the demon to Hell!”

As agents of the Lord, we priests did practise a ritual, in which those bodies that were touched by the vampire’s mark were disposed of. It was thought to be a release for the souls who were denied passage towards the Kingdom of God. However, the brutal aspect made me understand how one could interpret our actions as persecutory.

Indeed, there was a time when I, myself, thought the heart-piercings and decapitations to be superfluous to the ritual. “Surely,” I once said in my younger years, “the rite need not be so violent. Surely, it is sufficient to consecrate the burial site with sacred hosts and holy water?” My query was never answered. Instead, I was accused of being naïve and promptly told never to speak of it again. In my frustration, I convinced myself that the clergymen actually enjoyed the barbarity of the procedure; there was no symbolism behind it. But as I aged, I grew wiser and understood that the violence did mean something. It was a knowledge passed on to me via contemplation, not one that could be transmitted through word of mouth.

Still, Elizabeth’s affirmation made me reconsider my former belief. I wondered about Father Krueger and others like him in the Order. The expert practitioners of sin that they are, they must derive some sadistic pleasure from the ritual—using it as a means to purge their own transgressions? In those cases, perhaps the girl was right?

“I cannot forget what God has done to my mother. She has done nothing to deserve such condemnation.”

“She took her own life,” I argued.

“Her life was taken long before she killed herself, sir.” Elizabeth gave me a lengthy stare.

“Perhaps, but she could have trusted God and remained alive. He would have cleared your mother’s name eventually,” I answered simply.

“He would have indeed, if a particular priest had not decided to banish her instead—in His name I might add!” Elizabeth walked across the room as though she was expecting something. “My mother was a good Christian, Father, and yet one man denied her the right to die properly.”

There was an uncomfortable silence hovering over us as Elizabeth and I both thought of the priest, whose heart had been soiled by lust and anger. We felt differently. Whereas I felt pity for the man, Elizabeth was unabashed in showing her bitterness.

“Angelica,” I asked her, “she told me that bringing me here was your idea?”

“It was,” she responded staring at the table.

“Why?”

Elizabeth took a letter out of her pocket and handed it to me. “This,” she said. “When she spoke of you, Angelica mentioned a letter that you wrote to her fifteen years ago. You informed her of your plans to become a cleric. I thought that you could perhaps bless her, make her rest a peaceful one.”

“But how did you know when I was going to arrive?” I asked. “When I wrote the letter, I didn’t know myself.”

“I didn’t know,” responded Elizabeth, “but Angelica knew.”

“How?”

“Her love for you is far-reaching. She is so attuned with your soul; she immediately became aware of your presence when the train entered the Carpathian Valley.” Elizabeth went on to reveal that Angelica, who objected to her daughter’s idea of seeking my help as a priest, sent her to meet me anyway.

Chapter 21

Our talk was interrupted by a loud knock echoed. Elizabeth went to the door and opened it. With a few dramatic steps through the threshold, the guest walked towards me carrying a small case, and with his eyes constantly peered on me.

“Where is she?”

“Where is who, Father?” answered Elizabeth.

“Do not toy with me, girl. You know very well who I mean—that thing you call Angelica, the vampire!” Krueger placed his bag on the floor. “I know she is here somewhere.”

I stood up and walked towards him. “I beg your pardon Father, but there is no one here but Elizabeth and myself.”

The priest’s smile frightened me. “You forget yourself Father.” Father Krueger giggled devilishly. “You already confessed to seeing Angelica alive and well within these walls. I know now that she is the Great Fear after which I have hunted for fifteen years!”

I felt remorse, but Elizabeth came to me and, in an unexpected gesture, reassured me that she and Angelica knew how sorry I was. It was an unavoidable turn of events.

“Enough talk!” shouted the cleric. “I want her, and I want her now!”

Suddenly a voice was heard on the top of the staircase. “You need look no further, priest!” It was Angelica. She wore a dark cloak, which covered her entire body.

I was surprised to see her awake. How could it be, as the sun had barely set? I too was familiar with the Vampire Myth. I was indoctrinated in all the rules that applied to these creatures. Never, throughout my clerical training, was there mention of a nosferatu being able to defy any of them. Evidently, the rumours of the rays’ power over them were greatly exaggerated. Indeed a nosferatu can roam the Earth when it is close to sunset, providing that it has hibernated for more than a normal period of time.

Angelica looked at me with sad eyes. She beseeched me with Elizabeth to come to her. I swiftly hid my crucifix from her knowing that, having reconciled with my faith, the mere sight of it would now have a devastating effect on my... my friend.

She took our hands and told her to listen to what she had to say. “Elizabeth, I know that you have always felt unwanted. I read your mind constantly; it speaks to me. It expresses your wish that you had never been conceived. Although I can never erase the painful experience with Lukas, I will never regret the miracle that resulted from it. Flowers have been known to grow out of soiled grounds—you are my flower Elizabeth.

“Peter, it had always been my secret desire that you and I would have a child. Although Elizabeth did not spawn from any lovemaking, I would like you to look after her as though she were your child. I love you both. And Peter, I forgive you. Now leave this place and never come back.”

It became clear to me that we would never see her again. She guided Elizabeth and me towards the door. “Mother!” Elizabeth whispered for the first time.

“Go child,” replied Angelica with anguish, “Peter take her away from here, please. Whatever happens, do not return!”

I took my bags in one hand, and held Elizabeth’s hand in the other. She was entreating me to let go, but I was compelled to obey my friend. She wanted us both out of the way for, inside the castle walls, a war was being waged against good and evil. There would be no victor in this battle.

Elizabeth cried a little, as did I; however difficult it seemed, we walked away from the castle. Despite Angelica’s warning, because of a horrific shriek coming from the fort, Elizabeth and I turned towards the castle one last time. We never said it, but we both knew what had just happened. A Great Fear was put to rest and Vatra Dornei could now begin anew.

The End

THE END

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