

Snow White
— Blood Red

by Alessa



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Kind Reader,

Having traversed through countless years of human existence, I now find myself an old woman in mind, if not body, with thoughts of death as my constant companion. I muse upon death not because I fear it, but because it never arrives. Memories, like ancient tendrils, entwine my consciousness, summoning forth spectres of events transpired two centuries ago, instilling within me a most disquieting unease.

Winter's damp chills relentlessly gnaw at my soul and stoke the flames of my remorse, and I curse the miserable solitude of my remote abode, forever beyond the reach of mortal kinship. Most evenings, even during the more clement months, I sit alone by the roaring fire and sip from a cup of freshly steeped tea, a balm to temper the anguish of recollection.

It is within these accursed hours that often I recall a particular episode of tribulation and gest that transpired during the twelfth year of my life when, amid turbulent months of war and fortunes lost, I chanced upon true love, pure and profound, in the most improbable of places.

Times were different then, and what you are about to read here, shall render my forthcoming narrative as the ravings of a demented old crone, detached from the shores of lucidity. However, I beseech you to heed my entreaty, dear Reader, for the words woven herein comprise but a minuscule fragment of the historical events that marked the early years of my life.

Pray, tread cautiously along this manuscript I lay before you, and in your benevolence, spare a thought and a prayer for this wretched soul, forever cursed by the torment of its existence.

Yours, in perpetual melancholy,

Princess Amelie

Chapter 1

I was born in a small, land-locked vassal principality belonging to the Kingdom of Bohemia, which itself was a part of the Habsburg monarchy and the Austrian Empire. The year of my birth was 1824—the year that also marked the death of Lord Byron in the Greek city of Missolonghi, and witnessed the premiere of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Vienna.

The land of my birth is where the legends wield the sway of unshakeable faith and where tradition holds fast like the Gospel itself. We haven't a solitary castle bereft of its ghost, nor a humble cottage

devoid of its ethereal spirit. From the opulent palace to the isolated cabin, both highborn and low, we embrace the tenets of good and evil, just as brethren do in lands far and wide.

Inevitably, clashes arise amidst these primal convictions as they wage a relentless battle against one another. In those moments of turmoil, inexplicable echoes reverberate through forsaken corridors, whisperings abound within the ruins of time-worn towers, and even stout stone walls tremble with trepidation. So chilling are these apparitions that they drive people from castle and hamlet alike, seeking refuge within the hallowed sanctuary of the nearest church, where they find solace beneath the shelter of the sacred cross, or huddled together in the comforting embrace of holy relics.

Added to these circumstances are two still more unforgiving emanations of the same principles. By this I mean the yoke of tyranny and the urge for freedom. Which was why, during the year of 1836, yet one more violent struggle broke out between the Austrian Empire and an assemblage of impoverished gentry—a struggle which drained the lifeblood of our people and threatened to bring our Kingdom to its knees.

My father and my two brothers had joined the forces moving against the Emperor and stood firmly together under the flag of Bohemian independence. That tragic flag, so frequently torn down, yet so often raised high once more.

Then one day, news was brought me that my youngest brother had been killed, and a few days later, I heard that my elder brother had suffered mortal wounds. Some time after this, I experienced the horror of a long afternoon when the frightful booming of the cannon came closer and closer to our Castle. Eventually, my father rode into the courtyard with a hundred horsemen—the sole remnant of the three thousand he had set out with. Beaten and anguished, he had come back to cloister himself in our Castle to die, if necessary, beneath its ruins.

Unafraid for himself, my father trembled at the danger surrounding me. For him, death was the worst possibility. But for me, a twelve-year-old Princess of a hated and despised nobleman, vicious rape, torture, and slavery were most certain.

Therefore, he chose ten men from the hundred left to him, and summoning his custodian, gave into his care all the gold and jewels we possessed. He had not forgotten how, during the previous rebellions in the Kingdom of Bohemia, my mother—then scarcely out of childhood—had found safety in the Monastery of Rámölk, high in the distant Carpathian Mountains. And it was here that he instructed his custodian and the ten selected men to spirit me away in high secrecy.

Our flight was something of a hurried nightmare because the Emperor's mercenaries were expected within sight of the Castle during the next twenty-four hours.

Hastily, I pulled on a riding habit, ran terrified down to the courtyard, and mounted the best horse in our stables. Thankfully, I had been trained since a young age in equestrian skills and had no problem handling even the most temperamental of my father's horses. Scarcely able to hold back my tears, I kissed my father, who slid his loaded pistol into my leather sling-bag, and within minutes we were galloping away at a swift pace.

Throughout the night and the following day, we covered more than sixty miles, following the banks of a river whose name I've forgotten. Yet another day of travel, and we were safely beyond reach of the enemy, first setting our eyes on the enchanted beauty of the Carpathians in one of the loveliest sunsets I've ever known. On the third day, we had reached their base and were soon gradually ascending by way of a deep, winding cleft in the hills.

Perhaps I should point out here that the Carpathians are very different from mountains in France, Italy, or England, for these are tamed and civilised by comparison. The snowy, windswept peaks of the Carpathians lose themselves in mist and cloud, and have an uncontrolled, majestic wildness far beyond the imagination of those who have never travelled in this remote area of Central Europe. The lower slopes are thickly patched with woods of pine and fir, whose melancholy grandeur is reflected in the crystal mirror of lakes forever undisturbed by boat or oar. The voice of man is rarely heard in these thoroughly isolated regions, which echo only to the wind, the storm, and the savage sounds of wild creatures whose natural habitat is this wilderness.

Mile after mile, one travels under the cathedral-like arches of the forests, knowing that danger hides everywhere, but one hasn't time to be afraid. In fact astonishment banishes fear, because so sudden, so varied, so beautiful, or so harrowing are the sights one comes across.

Then, after these endless forests, one enters the vast and boundless spaces of the steppes, bare, rugged, and unbelievably depressing in their monotony. One climbs a great deal and descends a little, climbs again, and repeats the process over an endless waste which looks eternally the same. Yet, mercifully, the awful silence is now and then broken by the long, shrill calls of small flocks of black birds circling overhead.

Finally, one begins to descend again, turning southwards, where the landscape recovers all its magical grandeur. With delight and expectation, one sees new ranges further off, ever higher, ever more impressive and inviting. Once again, there are woods, streams, and cascades of water falling incredible distances from tall, rocky heights.

With foliage and moist earth, life returns to the surroundings. And occasionally, from the distance, the procession of peasants returning from the fields or the tinkling of a cow bell is borne on the breeze. Sometimes a tiny village can be seen, nestling in a valley or clustered on the mountainside—the houses grouped closely together for protection from robbers and bandits, wolf packs and bears. For wherever man dwells in these hinterlands, danger is ever present and plentiful.

Nevertheless, despite every threat, we were drawing nearer to our journey's end. Two weeks of unremitting riding had passed without serious mishap, and the summit of Mount Lespezi was in sight. This is a giant of a mountain, impressive beyond description, and on its slopes the Monastery of Rámölk is built. Within another two days, all being well, we should be there, and I cannot tell you how much I was looking forward to the possibility of relaxing in absolute safety.

The time was September, and the heat had been intense. You can imagine our joy when, stopping to rest by the mouldering ruins of Istrati, we felt the first cool breeze of the evening. From here, the view was

magnificent. One could follow the course of the Bistrita just below, its banks liberally besprinkled with bright red poppies, flowers of a delicate gold, and enormous white campanulas.

Having eaten a little and refreshed ourselves, we made our way slowly along a narrow, precipitous track, which led steeply down to the river. So dangerous was the stony path that we were forced to proceed in single file, the guide going first, sitting side-saddle on his horse as he sang a melancholy song learnt long ago in the village of his childhood.

Then suddenly a shot rang out, its echo fading rapidly in the distance. The song stopped instantly, in mid-verse, our guide falling dead, without even a cry, over the edge of the terrible precipice. His horse trembled on the brink, an animal instinct of terror reflected in its eyes as it gazed questioningly into the depths.

There was nothing for us but to move on down the slope, since the narrowness of the way excluded the possibility of turning. We could not tell whence the shot had come.

Several minutes later, the path disappeared around a slight bend. Having successfully navigated this, we were deafened by a wild gang of men, shouting vociferously and threateningly, and found ourselves completely surrounded by a troop of at least thirty husky brigands. It all happened so quickly that we scarcely had time to think.

But my guardians, being some of the best of my father's soldiers, reacted instantly and gave vigorous fire. Surprisingly enough, as small and defenceless as I was, I found myself seized by an inexplicable surge of determination. With unyielding grit, I seized hold of my own pistol, its weight a testament to the gravity of the moment, and spurred my loyal steed into a frenzied gallop towards the more level country below, my golden hair like a waymarker streaming wildly in the wind.

But it was useless. We were dealing with expert mountaineers, natives who knew the secret of leaping from one rock to another with the ease and accuracy of eagles swooping on their prey.

We were cut off from behind, while just ahead, where the road widened, the young leader of the band awaited us at the head of a dozen wild horsemen. It was this group that stopped me, charging forward to attack us and killing three-quarters of our men in a little more time than it takes me to write down these words. They wore jackets of sheepskin, hats freely decorated with wild flowers, and guns which they aimed with deadly accuracy. Their belts, moreover, were furnished with sabres and pistols.

The leader was in his twenties, handsome but forbidding, with slanting dark eyes and long black hair falling almost to his shoulders. He was wearing a battle dress stitched from raw deer hide and trimmed with fur, and gathered in at the waist by a shining belt heavily embroidered with gleaming gold thread. In his hand was a cold, curved sabre, glinting brightly in the late sun, and as the battle raged, he bellowed wild, incoherent cries in a loud, savage baritone. These seemed to have some meaning, for the group closed in on us by answering his calls.

I felt my last moment had come, and closed my eyes briefly in prayer as I tried to remember the faces of my brothers and my father before death fell upon me.

Yet miracles happen, for when I opened my eyes again, it was to see a young girl, beautiful as an angel in heaven, leaping with lightning speed from rock to rock as she descended to the area of bloodshed. Suddenly she froze into immobility, stopping in mid-flight on a nearby boulder, looking for all the world like a statue on its pedestal, as she glared down at us with devastating eye.

Then, in a voice of command, charged with courage and conviction, loudly and clearly, she shouted but a single word, "Enough!"

In a flash, the enemy was transfixed and silent, every eye being cast up towards the newcomer. Only one man, already in the act of raising his gun, fired at us. One of our soldiers gave an audible groan, for the bullet had broken his left arm. He moved towards the man who had injured him, but before his horse had taken more than a few paces, a shot rang out, and his adversary fell, dead, his skull shattered, and his face streaming with blood.

At this moment, weak with exhaustion and shock, I slipped from my horse and lost consciousness. When I recovered, I found myself lying on the ground, my head resting on the knees of a girl whose pale hands were covered with magnificent rings. But that was all I could see of her. Opposite me, his arms crossed defiantly over his chest, stood the young Carpathian brigand who had attacked us.

The girl supporting me, her voice vibrant with authority, was the first to speak.

"Walahmar," she said, "withdraw your men immediately and leave me to look after this child!"

"Sister Elysen," replied the leader, who was on the verge of losing his temper, "don't go too far with me! The Castle is yours—leave the mountains to me! At home, you are the mistress, but here I am the rightful ruler."

"I am not a bastard child like yourself, Walahmar! Which means that I am master everywhere—on the mountain and in the forest, equally as in the Castle. I am a Rostov, and being of noble blood, I must be obeyed!"

"You can order your own servants, Elysen, but not my soldiers."

"Your soldiers, Walahmar, are bandits acting outside the law. If they do not obey me, I can have them hanged from the battlements of our Castle by sunset."

"Try it then—give them orders and see what they'll do!"

At these words, my protector drew away her knees and gently laid my head on a cloak rolled up as a pillow. I followed her movements with some anxiety, recognising the agile young angel who had fallen so opportunely from the skies within moments of our defeat.

She was no more than seventeen or eighteen, unflinching, with sun-kissed skin and enormous green eyes full of fierce determination. Her raven-black hair shone with light, giving to her face somewhat ethereal appearance, but her crimson lips were parted in a smile of disdain as she faced her brother, whose glance was that of an eagle confronting the intruder.

My saviour's dress was immaculate, consisting of a beautifully-cut doublet of black velvet, a loose hood decorated with an eagle's feather covered her head, skin-tight breeches, and heavily embroidered riding boots. A hunting-horn was slung around her shoulders on a thickly-twisted silk rope, and she carried the double-barrelled carbine which had so effectively silenced the disobedient rebel.

She raised her right arm with an imperious movement, which seemed to draw reverence even from her brother. Then she spoke briefly, but severely, to the crowd of men in a local dialect which I could not understand. They looked humbled, almost servile, and at a signal she gave, retired into formation behind us.

"Very well, Elysen!" exclaimed Walahmar. "We shan't take the child to our caves. But I swear to you that I'll have her. With her yellow hair and blue eyes, she's just to my taste, and since I captured her myself, she's mine by right!"

With these words, he took the few steps necessary to reach me and seized me, small and frail, in a grip of iron.

"She is but a child who needs care and protection, and shall be taken to the Castle and passed into my mother's care!" Said Elysen sternly. Then she continued, slowly and with emphasis on every word, "I intend, moreover, to see that this is done!"

Looking around, she quickly seized the bridle of a riderless horse and, in a flash, was sitting on its saddle.

Walahmar, although he still held me in his arms, was on his own horse as quickly, and in a matter of seconds we were off at a mad gallop.

Elysen's steed was a fiery, but well-trained creature, keeping neck-by-neck level with Walahmar's brute. It must have been a fantastic sight to see brother and sister riding with insane fury over rock and hill, through copse and wood, while the whole scene was drenched in the ruddy glow of the setting sun.

Elysen's remarkable green eyes never left mine for an instant. But Walahmar, noticing this, skilfully moved my position so that all I could see was his own sinister gaze as he stared down at me, like some impatient beast waiting to devour me.

I had never experienced man's lust in my short life until now, and I was terrified. But even when I looked away, I could still feel his searing glance burning its way to my very soul.

Some time later, though I could never gauge how long, when the riders had slackened their speed to a trot, I opened my eyes in absolute terror, certain that I should find myself in a graveyard, surrounded by open tombs and crumbling monuments.

What I did see was scarcely more inviting. For I found that we were in the inner courtyard of an enormous mountain castle—a dark, and virtually impregnable stronghold, built some time during the fourteenth century, judging by its architecture.

Walahmar let me slide to the cobbled ground, but in an instant was behind me again. Yet I need not have feared, for Elysen was, as she had claimed, supreme mistress in her Castle. It was then that I noticed the absence of the bandits, who must have left their leader to return to their secret hideout.

We were not, however, alone, for a number of servants had gathered in the yard, promptly summoned by the noisy arrival of the horses and their riders.

Two women came up to us. Elysen said something to them in Romanian and gave me a sign to follow them. Had it not been for the look accompanying this gesture, I should have been more apprehensive than ever, but so kindly were her features, so sincere her offer of assistance, that I found myself obeying her on the instant.

A few minutes later, I found myself in a roomy bed-chamber, sparsely furnished, but reasonably well curtained. The servants told me it was the best the Castle could offer.

It was so large and so high that my small stature felt dwarfed by its vastness. The bed was an enormous divan, covered with a rich tapestry overlay, and littered with colourful cushions of various textiles. There was a large, carved oak chest, two colossal oak settles, a beautifully carved wardrobe which must have been at least two centuries old, and finally, a reasonably comfortable-looking easy chair. Several thick fur rugs were scattered over the stone-flagged floor.

Scarcely had I had time to take all this in when my bags and trunks were brought up by some sturdy young lackeys. The women reappeared, and with a friendly, but reverential attitude, helped me unpack essentials.

During a half-hour of considerable difficulty in a copper bathtub, I managed to remove all traces of our nightmare journey from my exhausted body. I decided to continue wearing a summer tunic dress over my riding breeches, since this seemed infinitely more in keeping with the attire of my hosts, and my bare and desolate surroundings, than any evening gown could have been.

I dismissed the servant women, and had only just completed my toilette, when I heard a gentle knocking on the heavily studded door.

"*Veuillez entrer,*" I called, automatically lapsing into French, which is my family's second tongue back home.

Elysen entered, smiling as she walked across the room. Then, with the utmost graciousness and charm, she spoke.

"It's a blessing, Mademoiselle, that you know French. It will make everything much easier."

"I'm also glad," I replied, "for that was the language you used when you saved me from your brother's inexplicable attention—and I'm equally delighted to employ it now, because I want to thank you with all my heart for your courageous help."

"That is very kind of you, Mademoiselle, but it was perfectly understandable that I should come to the aid of a small maiden in circumstances such as yours. Fortunately, I was returning from the Xikuni Monastery in the mountains, and reasonably close when I heard the continued firing. Thank God I

arrived in time... Yet what, may I ask, causes a distinguished young lady such as yourself to travel in these wild and dangerously remote parts?"

Her solicitude increasing my confidence and warming my sense of gratitude, I felt obliged to tell her something of my previous life, and what had caused me to set out on this journey. Thus I told her that I was Princess Amelie belonging to the Bohemian royalty, that my two brothers were dead, that my father had probably been killed by this time in the defence of our Castle, and that I was travelling to the monastery of Rámölk, which had safely sheltered my mother throughout a similar period during her girlhood.

"I am deeply saddened by your misfortunes, and I am greatly honoured to have someone of your rank in our Castle. The fact that you have suffered so much at the hands of the Emperor's armies will stand you in good stead in these lands," exclaimed my charming young friend. "I'm afraid we also may have trouble from that direction very soon, and the struggle will be long and bitter... But, it is still a mystery to me: How did someone as small and frail as you make it all the way to our distant land?"

"Fear and inexperience make one take adversity and hardship for granted until the task is completed or death takes its due," I surmised my own understanding of the misfortune that befell me.

"It appears that you are one fearless Princess, and as such, you are more than welcome to our Castle." Elysen took one of my hands in hers and placed a reverent kiss upon it. "Now, my dear Princess, since you have acquainted me with the details of your own history, I think I had better tell you something about myself. This ancient stronghold is the Castle of the Vorigan—an illustrious name, and one probably not unknown to you."

"My Christian name is Heiden," I interrupted, a little confusedly. Then, pulling myself together, I quickly added, "Yes, of course—the fame and distinction of the Vorigan have reached us, even in the Kingdom of Bohemia."

Elysen gave a broad smile, obviously amused and curious at the childish way in which I had prefaced my reply with the introduction of my personal name—yet delighted with the compliment this might imply.

Then, having considered me silently for several seconds, a look of deepest sympathy in her eyes, she proceeded to tell me something of her own background.

Her mother, it seems, was the last Countess of the Villina line, and indeed the last descendant of the family. Her secret lover in the early years of her marriage to Elysen's father, Count Rostov, had been Anluo Voronin, a Count with whom she had an illegitimate child, a little boy named Walahmar. Count Rostov, who had been educated in Vienna, where he came to appreciate all the sophisticated refinements of civilised life, decided to abandon his wife after eventually learning about her deceitful infidelity.

"As a result," my hostess continued, "my father was intent that I also should join him on his journey west and become a perfect European in learning and in thought, as well as in outward manner. Thus, the years of my girlhood were passed in company with my father, living in Germany, Austria, France,

and Italy. My mother, not being welcomed to join us on our travels, remained here at Vorigan, where she managed the estates."

At this point, Elysen gave a deep sigh, shaking back a lock of hair that had fallen over her brow.

"I know," she resumed, "that according to the unwritten laws of family loyalty, I should not reveal the information I am about to disclose. Yet, it is essential for your own safety that you should know all about us... During the long years of our absence from home, my mother, lonely and bored, resumed her love affair with Count Voronin. After some time, she wrote to my father, admitting her guilt and asking for a divorce—strengthening her position by saying that she could no longer continue to be the wife of a man who had needlessly, and for many years, stayed away from his home and his native land.

"My father, I regret to say, was never obliged to answer the letter. Indeed, he didn't even cast eyes on it, for he died of heart failure some days before its arrival. On reading it, I considered the situation carefully, finally deciding that the best thing to do was to send my heartfelt wishes for my mother's happiness. This I did in a reply which told her of my father's death, and in which I also asked her permission to continue my travels abroad—a request which, not surprisingly, was immediately granted.

"Between you and me, it had been my intention to settle permanently in France so as to avoid meeting Count Voronin, a man who hated me, and whom I detested with equal fervour. Nevertheless, these arrangements were cut short by the news that he had been assassinated by some old friends of my father, within a year or two of the marriage.

"Although my mother had rarely shown any affection towards me, I still loved her more than I can say, and realised the extent of her suffering and loneliness in this sudden tragedy. As a result, I travelled back to my homeland with the greatest possible speed. Then one day, unexpectedly, I arrived back at Vorigan, not having sent a single word beforehand to indicate the possibility of my return.

"You can imagine my surprise when I found the servants obeying a handsomely dressed young man, whom at first I took to be a temporary guest of unusual distinction. Very soon I learned that he was my older brother, who had been born many years prior, during the early days of my mother's illicit liaison. By now, of course, he had been legitimised by her second marriage. His name was Walahmar, and you have seen him—that wild, ungovernable ruffian, whose only guides are his lusts, who recognises nothing sacred apart from his mother, and who obeys me only as the tiger obeys the trainer who has broken him by absolute strength of will. I might add that deep within himself he nourishes a profound and bitter hatred of me, a secret hope that some day he may find a chance of getting rid of me.

"Nevertheless, and only for the sake of my mother's peace of mind, we have come to a kind of arrangement. Since I am the legitimate daughter, it is understood that I remain supreme master in Castle Vorigan. But in the open country, beyond the impregnable walls of this straggling fortress, he is free to rule the depths of the forests, the open plains, and the rocky heights of the mountains. There, he is able to bend everything beneath the ruthless fist of his tyrannical will. And I cannot understand why, today, he gave way before my commands or why his men followed my orders. I can only suspect that it was due to the shock of surprise. But I shouldn't like to put my authority to the second test!

"Listen to me carefully, Princess Amelie. Your only safety lies in remaining within the precincts of this Castle. Stay in your room as much as you wish, but never leave the courtyard or stray beyond the gate. Providing you do this, I can guarantee you safety. Otherwise, my sword and my life are your only defence, and a single girl against that savage band of marauders and assassins, I would have little chance, save for a miracle."

"You mean to say that I cannot go on with my journey to the Monastery of Rámölk, that I can't possibly leave this place?"

"You can attempt it if you must, and you can rely on me to carry out any orders you shall give. But the result would be my own death—you would be raped by Walahmar and his band of thugs, and would certainly never reach the Monastery."

"Then what on earth can I do?" I gasped in distress.

"Only one thing," Elysen urged. "Bide your time. Stay here and see what happens. Chance sometimes offers unusual circumstances. Once you can accept the fact that you have fallen into a nest of inhuman bandits, but that you are safe within these walls, then your courage will do the rest. And you will find my mother, though she is very fond of Walahmar, unusually generous and considerate of a Princess. You'll meet her soon, and I know she'll protect you against the crude lust of her only son because you are a beautiful little maiden and of noble blood yourself."

Elysen stopped and looked at me tenderly. In the half-light, her unpolished beauty became soft and warm, and I felt myself, inexplicably, becoming drawn to her, whether out of my exhaustion, or fear of my new surroundings, or because her eyes glowed with such affectionate devotion, I could not tell.

"In truth," she added gently, "it is impossible for anyone to behold your presence, Princess Amelie, or spend even a fleeting moment in your company without loving you, for such uncommon beauty and grace in one so young are seldom seen in these untamed lands."

I turned away for a few seconds to hide my bashfulness. Then, rising to her feet, my host continued with more immediate matters.

"Come," she said. "Dinner will almost be ready in the main hall, and my mother will be waiting for you with not a little curiosity. But show no sign of awkwardness or distrust. And speak only French. No one here understands that language as well as I do, and I shall translate all you say to my mother. Finally, and it is a very important thing, do not breathe a word of our conversation to anyone, for you can have no idea of the guile and frequent untrustworthiness of my fellow countrymen."

As she said this, she walked towards the door and opened it. I followed her down the enormous staircase, which was now illuminated by torches held in skilfully fashioned iron hands protruding from the grey stone walls. We traversed a similarly lit gallery, and then Elysen threw open the door of a high, vaulted hall, announcing me as 'The Foreign Princess'. At these words, a most impressive woman rose from her high-backed chair near a blazing open fire, and came to meet us with slow dignity.

This was the Countess Villina. Her hair was absolutely white and coiled in thick plaits around her head, these being surmounted by an aigrette of lavish diamonds, which scintillated with a thousand colours in the brilliant fire-light. She was dressed in a long, full-skirted gown of gold material, richly peppered with carefully matched pearls. Her sleeves, waist, and the base of her dress were tastefully trimmed with the purest white fur.

Behind her was Walahmar, splendidly dressed in the traditional costume of the Magyars. The collar of a white silk shirt showed above a knee-length gown of bright green silk-velvet, the sleeves of which showed the remarkable strength of his arms.

His breeches were of red cashmere, and he wore slippers of soft Moroccan leather with pointed, curling toes, the entire surface of which were covered with intricate embroidery in golden thread. His long black hair fell about his shoulders, shadowing the tan of his muscular neck. In this costume, he looked even more exotic and more terrifying than when I first set eyes on him.

He bowed with some awkwardness, muttering a few words in his own tongue. But I could not understand these.

Then Elysen spoke. "You can talk in French, Walahmar," she said. "Mademoiselle is of Bohemian ancestry, but she understands that language as well."

Yet Walahmar's utterances in French were equally as unintelligible as his mutterings in Romanian. At this point, the Countess commanded them both to be silent and extended her hand with a regal air. I kissed it formally, after which she made a brief speech of welcome in her own tongue. The kindness of her features and the subtle inflections and modulations of her voice made perfectly clear the meaning of words which I couldn't possibly have understood otherwise.

Then she indicated an enormous, heavily carved, and indescribably beautiful refectory table, laid for dinner, suggesting that we should be seated. It was lit by four dozen candles set in twelve solid gold candelabra. The plates and cutlery were all of purest silver, and the wine glasses of exquisitely cut crystal. The tapestried walls were lit by torches flaring in ornamental polished silver sconces, each one set in a bare stone space between the magnificent tapestries.

After she was seated, the Countess made the sign of the cross in silence, then proceeded to repeat grace. I sat at her right hand, with Elysen beside me, whilst Walahmar was at her left. The conversation was quiet and subdued as the servants began to bring in numerous dishes of meats, local delicacies, and salads.

The remainder of the household dined at the same table, each taking his or her place according to superiority. But despite the excellence of the food and the comfort of the hall, the atmosphere at table was dismal and depressing. Walahmar didn't speak again, though Elysen did her best to keep up my spirits with conversation in French. The Countess Villina helped me to every course with her own beautifully jewelled hands, but always with an attitude of religious solemnity, as though she were serving at a rite, rather than welcoming a guest.

When we had finished eating, Elysen explained to her mother that I must be extremely tired after my long and eventful journey, and that bed was perhaps the best place for me. The Countess nodded her head in acquiescence, kissed me on the brow, and said that she wished me a good night and a sound and dreamless sleep within the walls of her Castle.

Elysen, my dear protector, couldn't have chosen a better moment, for I was desperately tired, and most anxious to get to bed and be alone to sort out my thoughts. I thanked the Countess, who accompanied me to the hall door, where I found the two servant women who had previously waited on me. Bowing to Countess Villina, I took my leave, retiring immediately to my room, accompanied by my attendants. Thanking them for their solicitude, I informed them in sign-language that I would prefer to undress myself. They left the room immediately, with marks of respect that made it very clear they had received orders to obey me implicitly in all ways.

All I had to illuminate the enormous apartment was a single candelabrum holding three candles. But the light was sufficient to make clear only the small area near my bed table. Picking it up, I walked around the room—if it could be called that, for it was more like a small hall—exploring every nook and cranny. My tender age made me sensitive and easily inclined to fright, and I was chilled by a strange sense of fear, increased by the oblique beams from a clouded moon as they fell through the open window in sinister competition with my candles.

Besides the main door, which gave way to the staircase, there were two others in the chamber. But each was furnished with massive bolts on the inside. These gave me renewed assurance. Next, I looked at the entrance door. This, too, had a pair of strong iron bolts, which I immediately pushed into place. Then I walked to the window and looked out of it before closing it. Beneath was a sheer precipice of some hundreds of feet.

I sighed with relief, realising clearly enough that Elysen must have chosen this particular room to keep me safe from any danger.

Returning to my comfortable, almost luxurious bed, I found a sheet of note paper lying on one of the pillows. Opening it, I read the following words:

My Dear Amelie,

I beseech your forgiveness for taking the liberty of using your first name, yet I humbly wish you a peaceful sleep with the unwavering assurance of complete safety. You have nothing to fear, my dear child, as I have previously imparted, so long as you remain within the Castle boundaries.

*With my sincere devotion,
Elysen*

Somewhat graceless as the expression of this note may have seemed, I experienced an abiding sense of relief. My terrors vanished, and drowsiness overcoming every other sensation, I got into bed, and soon was fast asleep.

Chapter 2

When I awoke, the sun was rising in a cloudless blue sky, and an incredible variety of birds were singing joyously. Far below, the green of the forest spread itself out like a calm emerald sea, and all my anxieties had faded like a dream.

I must try and be a little more brief, since otherwise this story of mine will take up the entire night. And, after all, it is the essentials—the highlights—which matter most.

I was very soon firmly established in the Castle of Vorigan. All went well at first, but shortly afterwards, the awful drama in which I was involved began to unfold itself.

Needless to say, Walahmar had acquired unhealthy desires for me in his own peculiar manner. His hunger showed itself as the lust which burned in his devilish eyes and in the sly, lascivious leer which occasionally came over his features every time he set his eyes upon me. Being only a child at the time, I was greatly distressed by his lecherous attentions.

At the same time, Elysen's own affection revealed itself in the tenderness of her glance and emanated from her heart with a radiant purity of intention. But even to a twelve-year-old girl like me, Elysen's love represented more than devotion of an older sister, and one which I embraced and returned with equal fervour.

Elysen's love, however uncommon, remained closely guarded between the two of us, but her brother did not wait more than a few days before explaining his feelings, emphatically telling me, not only that he loved me, but that I should belong to him or no one else. His emotion rising to mania, he blurted out that he would kill me rather than let me become the bride or mistress of any other man.

Elysen realised what was going on, but was wise enough to say nothing. She remained friendly and considerate, spending most of her leisure time with me, playing with me, and doing everything in her power to keep me happy and contented. This was not difficult, since she was closer to my age than her brother and was a girl like myself, but also had the advantage of the best of education and a background of extraordinarily prolonged travel, during which she had resided as an honoured guest at the most brilliant of European Courts.

Within a few short weeks, the mere sound of her voice made me feel like she was the only person to whom I could ever belong. Looking deep within her eyes—as I often did—I knew without any doubt that, even though she was only a girl like myself, Elysen was my soulmate, my protector, and the only person I could give my love to.

During the subsequent three months, Walahmar continually declared his lustful passion for me and equally repeated his disturbing threats. But his mere presence only increased the profound revulsion I experienced when he was anywhere within the sight. Even his polite manners could do nothing to soften the indescribable feeling of panic which seized me when he entered the room.

As for Elysen, never once during this period did she so much as hint the word 'love'. Yet I was fully aware that should she do so, I could do nothing but reply, 'Yes!' with every fibre of my being.

At this point, Walahmar abandoned his outdoor life as a bandit completely, temporarily conferring his authority on one of his aides, and lingered around the Castle and its precincts in moody disconsolation.

Then the mystery deepened. Countess Villina, who had always shown me the utmost consideration, not to say kindness, began to reveal a passionate concern for my welfare, which virtually terrified me. This was shortly followed by her openly taking sides with Walahmar, whose praises she sang at any possible opportunity. In fact, she seemed to become more jealous of me than her criminal son. Of course, she knew only a few words of French, but she would kiss me from time to time on the forehead and then slowly repeat, in a repulsively gentle whisper, "Walahmar loves Princess Amelie..."

In the midst of this awful situation, I received some frightful news which temporarily abated my growing dread of the Countess. The few of my retainers who had survived the fight with Walahmar's men had been allowed to return to the Kingdom of Bohemia. Four months afterwards, one of them came back to Vorigan—as he had promised he would—only to bring me news of my father's demise when the enemy had razed our Castle to the ground.

Thus, I remained an orphan and all alone in the world, with only Elysen and the two servant women who waited on me as my friends.

Walahmar increased his attempts, and the Countess her sugary kindness. Fortunately, I was in the position of being able to interpose my grief at my father's death as an impassable obstacle, at least for several weeks. But eventually both mother and son began to belabour me with their opinion that, in my present depressed and lonely state, I needed love and protection more than ever.

During my stay at Vorigan, I had discovered the incredible power of the Romanians to hide even the slightest vestige of their true feelings. This was not hypocrisy but a kind of natural discretion or diplomacy, sometimes utilised for purposes of cunning. It was also utilised to prevent embarrassing the feelings of others, which, I am sure, is why Elysen never betrayed by any word, sign, or gesture, the depths of love which I knew she felt for me. Instinct alone could have led Walahmar to a notion of his sister's possibility as a rival, just as only an accidental revelation could have informed Elysen of my endless devotion to her.

Yet this fantastic degree of self-control began to bother me. I knew within myself that she loved me, yet under such circumstances, how could I be certain? I was aching for definite proof.

I was in the throes of an agonising mood such as this, having only recently retired to my room for the night, when I heard a gentle tapping at one of the doors which had never been unbolted. Somehow I knew that the sounds were made by a friend, so I tiptoed barefoot up to it, and, in a whisper, inquired who was there.

It was Elysen, whose voice I could recognise even when borne in a whisper through the darkest of forests.

"What is it?" I asked, nervously yet hopefully.

"If you feel you can trust me, Princess, will you grant me a favour?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied, "but what is it?"

"Extinguish your candles," she said, "and pretend you have retired for the night. Wait for half an hour, then unbolt this door and let me in."

"I have no means of knowing the time," I answered, "but I shall do as you say and will draw the bolts when you knock."

My heart was beating wildly in my chest, for I felt some desperate situation had arisen and that she had come to warn me of danger. The time passed so slowly that it seemed like hours, but as soon as I heard the gentle tapping, I withdrew the bolts. Elysen came in, closing the door silently behind her and making it fast again without the slightest suggestion of noise.

She remained still for a few seconds, listening carefully. Then, certain that she had not been followed and noting my state of near-collapse, she carried me to a chair by the light of the moon.

"In the name of God," I gasped, "what on earth's wrong with you—and why all this secrecy?"

"Please forgive my indiscretion, dear Amelie, but your life, as well as my own, depend on what we are about to discuss and what you personally decide."

I broke out in cold sweat, grasping her hand in fear. She raised it to her lips and kissed it, looking into my eyes with kindly smile which begged forgiveness.

"Don't be frightened, little Princess, for I love you more than life itself," she whispered gently, her voice tender as the cadence of a song. "You are a beautiful maiden, adorned with celestial magic, your hair as radiant as the sun's golden embrace. And your eyes, my beloved Princess, shine like sapphires, captivating all who meet their gaze. Please forgive my audacity," Elysen held my hands close to her heart, "but your beauty possesses an enchantment, conquering hearts like a fleeting dream from forgotten realms, and I am now forever your obliging captive."

A shiver ran through my breathless body, for never before had anyone uttered such declarations of love to me in my whole life. "And I love you, Elysen," I replied, my voice filled with a breathless ardour, not knowing what else a mere child like me could say to her and be deemed deserving of her adoration.

She sighed with joy. "Then you will marry me?"

I shuddered at her question. "But how can I, a twelve-year-old girl, marry another girl? Who has heard of such blasphemy? We shall forever be banished from Christian lands if such design ever comes to fruition!" Exclaimed I in utmost astonishment.

"Fear not, my beloved! I have planned everything with the utmost care. There will nothing come between us. The monks at the Monastery of Xikuni must obey my command, or they will be exiled into far-flung provinces where no one will see or hear from them again. As for our marriage, nobody else will know, and we shall never be seen here again."

"Then I will marry you whenever you wish!"

"And you will promise to elope with me wherever I may choose to take you, whatever the danger?"

"I promise, my dear Elysen! No matter where, no matter what the danger!"

"I say this," she continued, "because we can only find peace and contentment by getting away from this Castle, even from this country..."

I was so excited by the idea that I exclaimed, eagerly and in rather a loud voice, "Oh! Please help me to escape from Vorigan; do get me away from here and from your brother! He terrifies me greatly, and so does your mother!"

"Be quiet, my little Princess!" she murmured, gently placing her soft fingers on my lips. "On no account must you speak above a whisper..."

I felt my flesh creep as I realised what Elysen implied.

"Let me explain myself," she went on. "If I have kept my love for you to myself, it was only to be sure that you returned it, and to save us both from Walahmar's retaliation and my mother's misled designs in his favour.

"I'm a rich heiress, Princess Amelie, rich in land, property, and cattle. Recently, I sold to the neighbouring Monastery of Xikuni some land, villages, and herds to the value of a million. They paid for part of the purchase in valuable jewels, a large amount in gold, and the remainder in letters of credit payable at Vienna. Do you think that will do for us?"

I squeezed her unwavering hand which was resting in mine. "Your pure love is more than sufficient for me, Elysen," I said, affected so deeply that my eyes misted at the words of her sincere devotion.

"My love is all yours, precious Amelie, but we shall need luck on our side, too! Now listen carefully. Tomorrow morning, I am returning to the Monastery to make final arrangements with the Superior. He will have first-class horses ready for me, fitted with saddlebags and all we shall need for our journey. These horses will be hidden in a secluded spot very near the Castle by mid-evening.

"After dinner, you must go up to your room and, following the same routine, blow out your candles and pretend to have gone to bed. I shall knock, in the same manner, at the same door, and you will let me in. But tomorrow, instead of my leaving you, you will come with me. We shall leave by a little used side-gate, mount our horses, and by dawn we should be a good fifty miles away."

Following the delivery of her plan, in a moonlit bedroom, amidst the fragrant embrace of blossoming roses, she gathered me tenderly into her arms and kissed me long and passionately. This was the first time in my short life that anyone, let alone a girl barely older than I was, has bestowed love upon me in such sensuous manner.

"My dear child," Elysen sighed into my ear, "your beauty tempts me more than the forbidden fruit of Eden." Her sun-kissed complexion, adorned by cascading ringlets of raven hair, met my enthralled gaze as our fingers laced with passion—a testament to our shared longing. A gentle breeze whispered

through the centuries-old windows, carrying with it the anticipation of a forbidden connection, when her gentle fingers disrobed me of my garments.

As the moon cast its ethereal glow upon our naked forms, my heart beat like the wings of a captured sparrow, fragile yet filled with an intoxicating fervour. I yearned to taste the nectar of Elysen's lips, to savour the forbidden sweetness that only she possessed. Our breaths mingled, forming a delicate symphony of illicit desires.

Elysen leaned in closer to my small, trembling body, her bosom rising and falling with every heartbeat. Our lips brushed with the delicate grace of a lover's sigh, and our embrace deepened. Our naked bodies melted together like a painter's brushstrokes merging hues upon a canvas. The world around us faded, leaving only the tender melodies of our whispered promises. In this clandestine haven, we knew no boundaries, no restraints. Our hearts, aflame with a passion as old as time itself, entwined like ivy on ancient walls, defied the chains of convention while our souls soared, unshackled and free.

My head spun in delirium as her kisses rained down from my face and neck, all the way to my feet. In the darkened room, Elysen's eyes shone in the moonlight like two fireflies adrift above a distant pond, and when her adoration became too intense for my sentiment, I gathered courage to sigh into her kisses: "Please, don't exert me so, dear Elysen. I am but a child—not yet versed in unbridled expressions of love."

Elysen swiftly disengaged herself from my warm embrace, her countenance fraught with worry. With a gentle and concerned voice, she spoke, "Princess Amelie, please forgive me. I found myself unable to restrain the desires that stirred within me after finding myself in the presence of such an innocent and delicate maiden as yourself."

Upon regaining her poise and apologising profusely once again, she wished me good night, then disappeared as she had come, warning me to bar the door carefully.

The night seemed interminable. I was so possessed by feelings of love and obsessed with the thought of escape that sleep was an impossibility. The mad ride to the Castle when I had been captured had been so sinister, so harrowing, that the thought of riding off with Elysen made me tremble with delight.

Oh, Elysen... How I adore thee!

Chapter 3

Day came at last, and I went down to the hall. But Walahmar's morning greeting seemed odd, to say the least, while his smile contained something of an unspoken threat. The Countess Villina was her usual self, yet something made me feel distinctly uncomfortable.

After breakfast, Elysen casually told one of the servants to see that her horse was got ready. She left about an hour later, asking us not to await her for dinner that evening, since she might be delayed. She

was wise enough scarcely to take any notice of me, apart from a polite excuse as she strode from the room. As for Walahmar, he seemed completely uninterested in his sister's arrangements. Yet, as the door closed behind Elysen, I detected a malign flash of hatred in his eyes, which not only made me shudder, but caused me to wonder if he had guessed at anything.

The late morning and early afternoon dragged even more slowly than the night had done. The effort of remaining composed and behaving calmly, in the face of such anxiety, can easily shatter one's nerves. I stayed alone as much as I could possibly manage, tormented by the imagined notion that everyone in the Castle could read not only my thoughts, but knew even our secret intentions and the illicit events that transpired last night in my bed-chamber.

Luncheon was absolute hell. It was unusually chilly and formal, a macabre silence descending on everyone. The only words spoken were by Walahmar, who appeared to grumble to his mother in Romanian at infrequent intervals. And some inexpressible quality in the timbre of his voice increased my fears to an almost unbearable pitch, so much so that I experienced the utmost difficulty in swallowing each mouthful.

As I left the table to go up to my room, the Countess gave me her usual kiss and repeated, for the first time in weeks, a phrase I detested, "Walahmar loves Princess Amelie."

The effect was so powerful that when, exhausted, I threw myself on my bed, her words kept echoing and re-echoing in my ears with all the intensity of a vituperous curse. And it was then I remembered something Elysen had told me: "Walahmar's love meant death!"

Gradually, I fell into a deep sleep, untroubled by dreams, only to wake with a sudden start just as twilight was creeping across the sky. I could hear faint but unusual noises rising to my window, presumably from the courtyard, and since the room adjoining my own had a view of this part of the Castle, I took the risk of unbolting the door and entering it.

Hiding myself within the window embrasure, I peered out. Below, I could see Walahmar walking with determined strides across the cobbled stones towards the stables. As he entered, he gave a rapid backward glance at the window of my bedroom, probably to make certain I wasn't watching. Within a few minutes, he emerged with his favourite horse, already accoutred and saddled for attack. He was wearing the identical clothes in which I had seen him on the day his band attacked our party, yet carried only a single weapon—a two-edged sword, which was belted round his waist.

A torch was burning in one of the side-entrances, for nighttime falls early in these mountains, and it was in this passage that Walahmar rode quietly into the starry night, in the direction of the Monastery of Xikuni!

My heart began to pound in an absolute paroxysm of fear. I knew within myself—by intuition, or whatever else you like to call it—that Walahmar was intent on killing his younger sister. Although I was well aware that I could do nothing, I continued to watch until the horseman vanished into the darkness of the forest, which was over half a mile away.

I stayed in the embrasure as though frozen to stone. For how long I cannot say, but it must have been at least three-quarters of an hour. Finally, exhaustion wore itself out, and renewed energy began to arise in my body and spirit. With this resurgence came the realisation that whatever news arrived, it would reach the main hall long before it reached the privacy of my bed-chamber.

Therefore, I pulled myself together, miraculously assuming the calmest of attitudes, and descended earlier than expected for attendance at dinner.

Countess Villina was sitting, as usual, in her fireside chair. I looked at her with some curiosity, but her serene and quiet expression revealed not a sign of nervous tension. She greeted me in friendly fashion, and then continued giving instructions for dinner to a couple of men-servants who stood near her. This gave me an opportunity to glance at the table. It was laid in the habitual manner, with the customary places set for Elysen and Walahmar. Whatever was happening, it seemed clear that the Countess knew nothing of it. Nor could I ask her, for our knowledge of each other's languages was almost nonexistent.

I watched the castle clock, which stood in the dining hall. My fears nagged ever more incessantly with each passing minute. As the loud bell rang out for eight-thirty, I found myself silently questioning whether my dear Elysen would return alive.

Just before nine, which was the time set for the meal, I heard the loud hoof-beats of a horse riding furiously into the courtyard. The Countess heard it as well and walked towards the tall castle windows. But the darkness had become too intense for her to distinguish anything.

Fortunately, she didn't look at me, or she might have wondered at my expression, for there was only the sound of one horse, and momentarily, I was unable to control the look of terror which passed across my face.

Heavy, dragging steps were soon heard, slowly crossing the stone flags of the antechamber. Within a few moments, the door opened, and I could make out the dim figure of a human shape, not clearly visible in the candle-light. The apparition stood in darkness without moving for about half a minute. My heart began to thud unbearably. Then, as it stepped forward and began walking into the room, I found myself breathing a great sigh of relief.

It was Elysen, my beloved Elysen, who stood before us, but haggard, exhausted, and pale as someone recovering from consumption. One glance at her, and it became obvious that something dreadful had happened only recently.

"Is that you, Walahmar?" asked Countess Villina.

"No, mother—it's Elysen," she answered in a discordant, unrecognisable, and toneless voice.

"And how long do you expect me to await you for dinner?" She snapped back at her daughter, irritable and disappointed.

"But, mother," said Elysen, "I told you I might be late, and it's barely nine o'clock, which is our regular time for eating!"

As she uttered these words, the loud, slow ticking of the enormous clock was drowned out by nine strokes on the resounding bell.

"I suppose that's right enough," she replied, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. But where's your brother? He went out earlier tonight, and I can't for the life of me tell either why, or where!"

This was the question I myself was longing to ask, and for a horrible moment I found myself tormented by visions of a violent duel between the brother and sister.

But Elysen did not reply.

"Hasn't anyone seen Walahmar?" demanded the Countess imperiously.

The Steward went to make inquiries. On returning, he described events very similar to those I had witnessed from the upstairs window. It was at this precise instant that my eyes met those of Elysen. Looking at her face, I saw a large drop of blood running down the whiteness of her forehead.

Keeping my eyes fixed on hers, I slowly raised a forefinger to my brow. Elysen appeared to understand, and taking out her handkerchief, began wiping the spot as though trying to remove dirt and sweat.

The Countess was gazing with annoyance at the Steward. "Continue!" she exclaimed.

"He must have spotted a wolf, or perhaps a fox, and chased one or the other for the fun of it. Your Highness knows what he's like when the mood's on him..."

That's no reason why he should keep us waiting," murmured Countess Villina angrily. Then, turning to her daughter, "Elysen," she asked, "Where did you leave your brother? Was it many miles away?"

"Mother," she replied in a quiet, controlled voice, "Walahmar and I did not go out in each other's company. If you remember correctly, I left the Castle much earlier in the day."

"Yes, of course, that is so," answered the Countess. Then she moved slowly to the dining table, took the appropriate seat, signalling the reminder of us to do likewise, and ordered dinner to be served.

Just as the first dishes were brought in from the kitchen, a diabolical noise, accompanied by a blood-curdling neighing and stamping, arose from the direction of the main gateway. Seconds later, a half-crazed servant rushed in, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Highness! Highness! Walahmar's favourite horse has just galloped into the yard. It's riderless, covered in blood, and is stampeding as though all hell were after it!"

"God in Heaven!" gasped Countess Villina, rising to her feet and growing visibly pale in the candlelight. "It was like this that his father's horse returned, about ten o'clock one evening."

I was told later that Count Voronin's horse had come back to the Castle one night without its master, the saddle drenched in blood. An hour or two afterwards, working by torchlight, his retainers found his body on a deserted track several miles away. It had been hacked virtually into pieces.

A half-elated, half-paralysing admixture of relief and shock was pouring through me. Automatically, my glance reverted to Elysen. Her countenance was ashen, yet she seemed to command, from unknown resources deep within her being, the most admirable self-control.

Countess Villina called for torches. Taking one from an obliging servant, she held it high in her right hand and, walking rapidly through the open doors, with majesty led the way down the rough steps into the open courtyard.

Walahmar's horse, thrashing about and neighing as if possessed by nefarious spirits, was being held down as much as was possible by eight stable-men.

The Countess walked fearlessly up to them and began to examine the poor creature. Turning from the blood-soaked saddle, she immediately noticed a wound over the animal's muzzle.

"My son was killed by a single man," she said, "and he was stabbed or cut down by a thrust from the front. Let every available male in the Castle go and search for the body!"

Immediately, there was a scurrying hither and thither. Torches and crude weapons were brought, and shortly after, every man in the place was rushed down the steep incline towards the fields or the forest. As they vanished into the distance, Elysen's eyes found mine in the torch-lit darkness, and I could clearly discern in them her absolute love and unending worry for my well-being, conveying a message that everything will be alright because she was there to protect me with her life.

Countess Villina, cold as ice, rigid as a statue, remained motionless in the gateway, directly under the portcullis. Her pale cheeks bore not the trace of a tear, yet beneath this incredible display of regal dignity, it was clear that her heart was breaking with despair, for her love-child meant infinitely more to her than the child of her marriage.

Elysen was standing to the left of the Countess, and she moved me to stand behind her, protected by her back. Momentarily, she attempted to give me the support of her arm, but with a guilty look, withdrew it.

After staring into the darkness for at least twenty minutes, a cold wind blowing through our hair, we noticed a solitary torch make its reappearance in the far distance, just where the road turns towards the forest. One by one, each individual flame commenced to show up again. But instead of being scattered here and there, as in the beginning, they now formed what can only be described as a long, narrow rectangle—as though the men holding them were marching slowly through the mud, forever homeward in steady double-file.

At last, we could make out the details of this bizarre procession. At its centre was a hastily constructed litter, with the body of a man stretched full length along it.

The advance continued at a snail's pace, pausing momentarily at the Castle gate. We stepped aside to let the bearers pass, following them across the yard and into the main hall, where, reverently, they set the body down in a convenient space, right at the very centre of the room.

Countess Villina, with a dismissive gesture, commanded everyone to draw back as far as possible. Calmly and sadly, she approached the corpse, kneeling down before it. Without any sign of a tear, she parted the long strands of thick dark hair which had blown around its face, kissed its lips, and gazed tenderly, but determinedly, at the blood-soaked shirt.

The wound was a deep one, on the left side between the ribs, and had clearly been made by a double-edged weapon. I remembered with horror that, during breakfast the same morning, I had seen in Elysen's belt a hunting knife, which could have produced exactly this kind of fatal injury. Instinctively, I glanced at her waist—but it was no longer there.

The Countess, calling for a bowl of water, soaked her handkerchief in it and carefully washed the dead flesh. An ebb of fresh, red blood seeped up, overflowing the edges of the dreadful gash.

The atmosphere was electric and had attained a sombre and almost epic grandeur. A few years previously, I had been read the poetry of the *Nibelungenlied* by my governess, and here, I felt, was the counterpart of the death of Siegfried, with Countess Villina playing the sublime, if sinister, role of Kriemhilde. Yet, whereas Siegfried had been a hero and a demi-god, Walahmar reflected only the composite image of robber, sadist, and demon.

The enormous hall stood before us, its atmosphere cloaked in gloom. Giant shadows danced upon the walls, flickering and shifting with an eerie presence. The air was heavy with the pungent scent of pine torches, casting an otherworldly glow upon the surroundings and the gathering of grotesque peasant faces, their features contorted into fierce expressions, their eyes gleaming with a ferocious intensity.

The scene unfolded like a vivid tapestry, adorned with the dazzlingly barbaric colours of the various garments worn by those in attendance. It was a sight that evoked both awe and trepidation—a fantastical display of grandeur. And amidst it all, the icy demeanour of the mother kneeling by the body of her son, yet deaf to the continual sobbing of his band of cutthroats, as she attempted to guess how long he had been dead.

Finally, Countess Villina kissed Walahmar lightly on the forehead, and standing regally, she threw back the tresses of her long, white hair, as she called deeply, in hoarse voice, "Elysen! Come to me at once!"

Elysen visibly shuddered, stepped forward, and said obediently, "Here I am, mother!"

"Come closer! I wish to speak to you!"

But the nearer she approached the body, the more freely the blood trickled from the open wound.

Fortunately, the Countess was looking at her daughter and not at the corpse, otherwise the very sight of this accusatory flow would have informed her that there was no further need to seek the murderer.

"Elysen," she continued, "I am perfectly well aware that Walahmar and you detested each other. I know equally well that, by your different fathers, you are a Rostov, and he a Voronin. But since I gave you birth, you are both Vorigan. You are a sophisticated and educated lady of the civilised world. Walahmar was a wild child of these beautiful and rugged mountains, which keep us so far removed from the luxuries of civilisation. Yet you are brother and sister! That is an incontrovertible fact."

Here the Countess paused, looking at her daughter with solemnity.

"I would like to know, Elysen," she went on, "if you intend carrying your brother's body into his father's tomb and making an oath of vengeance against his murderer? I should like to know if I can trust you to play your part in defending the honour of our noble family name?"

"I shall do as you bid me, mother, but I must decline the call for revenge and bloodshed. Nothing good can come out of perpetuating injustice. But more importantly, I must take care of Princess Amelie, for she is still of tender age and needs my care and protection until I can escort her to the safety of the Monastery of Rámölk."

Then something terrible happened at the precise moment Elysen declared herself my protector. It may have been my imagination, it may have been a preternatural apparition—I don't know... But Walahmar's eyes opened and bored into mine. It was as though a ray of white lightning had flashed between us, searing itself through my brain.

The last remnants of my strength failed me. The room began to turn and swim, and I fainted away into oblivion.

Chapter 4

Returning to my senses some hours later, I found myself lying on the immense rug of bear fur which covered my bed, propped up against many pillows of coloured silk, with another fur rug spread over me. Being so young and small, I was practically lost within the confines of my bed, which itself was rather insignificant compared to the sheer immensity of my vaulted bed-chamber. My two women-servants were seated by me, one on each side of the couch, and the room was lit by several beeswax candles, flickering in the slight draught from the half-open window.

At first, I could not remember where I was or what had happened to me. Then, memory slowly restoring itself, I asked what the Countess was doing and how she was. She was kneeling in prayer, they said, beside the corpse of her favourite son.

When I inquired about Lady Elysen, they told me she had gone to the Monastery at Xikuni. This was a considerable relief, for I felt that, should my suspicions finally prove correct, she was safer in that supposedly inviolable sanctuary than in the Castle.

As I pondered upon my circumstances, a realisation slowly took hold within me—escape was no longer a pressing necessity now that Walahmar, the source of my captivity and torment, had met his demise. A newfound sense of liberation unfurled its wings within my soul. However, despite this nascent freedom, the prospect of a wedding between me and Elysen still appeared insurmountable—a seemingly unattainable feat that lay beyond the realm of possibility.

Elysen, my beloved and saviour, attempted to persuade me otherwise, yet, deep within my heart, I harboured a steadfast belief, an unyielding conviction that echoed within the chambers of my conscience. No matter how ardently I cherished Elysen, and no matter the depths of gratitude I held for her for rescuing me from the clutches of peril, I could never fathom the notion of becoming married to another girl.

Such a union, to my understanding, would be regarded as a despicable heresy, an aberration that defied the sacred customs and traditions upheld by our society. The thought of it sent a shiver down my spine, for I knew that such a sacrilegious ceremony would be vehemently denounced by the clergy. Their staunch adherence to the doctrines and principles of our faith would render any matrimonial union between two girls an unthinkable transgression, an act deemed abhorrent and abominable in the eyes of God.

And so, despite the love that bloomed between Elysen and me, a profound sense of longing mingled with resignation settled upon my heart. For in the labyrinth of societal norms and religious doctrines, my path seemed strewn with thorns and obstacles, leaving me to grapple with an impossible dilemma. How could I reconcile my affections with the constraints imposed by tradition? The answer eluded me, leaving my soul adrift upon an ocean of uncertainty, torn between the love I held for Elysen and the sacrosanct bounds that imprisoned my desires.

I spent three days and nights lying on my bed, tormented by wild, fantastic dreams. Not only was an uncertain future with Elysen pressing upon my soul, but whether awake or asleep, I could never banish from my vision the indescribable sight of those two burning, living eyes, set in the head of a corpse. Piercing eyes filled with malice, which followed me everywhere.

Walahmar's funeral was to take place three days later. Early on that morning I was given a complete set of widow's weeds. They were sent by the Countess, who must have been half crazed with grief and imagined me already married to her deceased son. In a disturbed state of mind, I dressed myself, descending to the ground floor. The hall and all the other rooms were silent and empty. But there was a Chapel in the Castle, and trembling somewhat at the thought of the ceremony, I slowly made my way to its doors.

As I entered, Countess Villina, whom I hadn't seen for almost three days, came forward to greet me. Her face and hands were white as marble. Her lips had the colour of darkish blue, and she was garbed from head to foot in black velvet trimmed with sable fur, with a triple necklace of finest pearls around her neck. Her ghastly movement, as she glided towards me, was that of a statue propelled by unseen force.

To my horror, she kissed my forehead passionately, with lips as cold as ice, then, in a hollow voice which appeared to echo from the bowels of the earth rather than from her throat, she uttered her deadly phrase, "Walahmar still loves you!"

I was mortified. It would be impossible for anyone to grasp the depths of shock these words produced in me.

Immediately afterwards, as she swiftly moved away, a gently sibilant whisper vibrated in my ear—coming, apparently, from nowhere—and quietly informing me that the world of the dead had chosen me from the living, that I was undeniably the child-bride of the murdered man, and could never, in a thousand years, wed his living sister.

Looking around, I saw nobody close enough to have murmured these words, so extremely softly, within my hearing. One of my female servants was standing about four feet away, with her back to me. I stepped over and asked if she had heard them, or any other sound.

"No," she said. "All has been silence since the Countess spoke to you."

I was at my wits' end. A feeling of panic was creeping over me, and my eyes, despite my will, were repeatedly attracted towards the coffin, accompanied by the thought of the living eyes which it enclosed. The only way I can clarify my reactions is to say that I was something like a small, defenceless bird, or a tiny creature, fascinated by a serpent.

I began to search for Elysen among the large crowd, finally discovered her standing with her back to a pillar, as if for support. She was pale and haggard, her eyes dull and lifeless, and I cannot say whether or not she was aware of my presence. Respecting her despair, I approached no further.

The monks of the Xikuni Monastery were grouped around the funeral bier, chanting prayers according to the Romanian rite, but with a monotony which I found unbearable.

I was longing to pray—for Elysen, for myself, for all of us. But the possibility escaped me. My mind had become numb, and I felt myself surrounded by a horde of demons rather than being supported by the fathers of the Church.

When the coffin was lifted by the bearers, I attempted to join the procession. But my strength gave way. My legs trembled beneath me, and I grasped the doorpost for support as the scene undulated before my eyes, like some kind of phantasmagoria seen in the reflection of a distorting looking-glass.

Countess Villina came up to me, accompanied by Elysen, and said something in Romanian.

"My mother asks me to translate what she is saying," Elysen said, continuing with exact rendering of her words:

"You are weeping for my son, Princess Amelie, because you loved him. You have my thanks, just as much as if you were married in reality. From this moment on, you have a country, a mother, and a permanent home. We shall together remember our dignity and reveal ourselves faithful mourners of that wonderful man who is no longer with us... I am his mother—you are his true bride. Now, take my advice—go back to your room and rest. I shall follow my son to his tomb, and when I return, I shall have overcome my sorrow."

My only reply was a silent, but irrepressible cry, for self-control had almost entirely deserted me.

I left the Chapel and climbed the long staircase to my room, where, from the window, I watched the slow procession make its way round the distant bend of the road towards the Xikuni Monastery—for it was in these precincts that the tombs and vaults of the Vorigans were situated.

By this time, February was nearing its end, but the days were still short and cold. By five at the latest, it was almost dark. At seven, I noticed torches in the distance, indicating the return of the mourners. Everything was over, and Walahmar was lying for ever in the tomb of his fathers.

Worn out by the emotions and tensions of the day, I felt more distressed than ever before. One after another, I heard the hours booming from the enormous bell in the clock-tower of the Castle. I have already spoken of the strange, obsessive fancies which possessed my mind since that fatal evening, but the most unsettling was the unusual, ghastly whiteness of my features. However, unable to do anything, I simply lay back and tried to relax.

The hours passed like interminable centuries. Alternately I dozed and then returned to awareness of my surroundings. But it was not until evening that my servants appeared, explaining that the Countess felt it was best for me to be left undisturbed for a day. With them, they brought my supply of candles for the night, but I asked for several more candelabra, dreading the gloomy shadows of the long, dark night-hours. These kindly peasant creatures offered to stay with me. Yet I refused their company, preferring silence to the exhausting strain of sympathetic chatter in a language of which I could understand but a few words.

The minutes dragged on. Then, at the same time as on the previous night, I experienced the identical emotional and physical sensations of panic-terror and near-paralysis. Once again, I attempted to rise and call for help. But I couldn't get even as far as the door. Remotely, in the background, as though muffled by heavy curtains, I could hear the sound of a bell striking the hour of quarter-to-nine. Stepping rapidly backwards, because the faculty of hearing had failed me, I collapsed on my bed. My eyes closed of their own accord, and the only thing I remember after this moment is that I felt something bite viciously at my throat. Then the pain was succeeded by utter blackness.

I came to my senses near midnight, as if waking from a deep and distressful slumber. I was weaker, and even paler than before.

The next morning, disturbed beyond measure and almost unable to stand, I decided to go down to Countess Villina and explain my situation. Just at that instant, one of my female servants came in and announced Lady Elysen, who entered the room almost immediately.

I attempted to rise from the high-backed chair in which I had managed, with some difficulty, to seat myself. But it was impossible. The effort was beyond my endurance.

Elysen, who was still haggard, gasped at my appearance and rushed forward to help me.

"What on earth has happened to you, my dearest Amelie?" She asked, an anxious tremor manifesting in her voice, which was normally soft, gentle, and caring.

"I'm dying, my love," I replied weakly. "Since the murder of your brother, something has come over me and is robbing me of my very soul. I'm afraid that from now my hours are numbered..."

A look of incomprehensible horror crossed her beautiful face.

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "And why are you so pale? Your skin is the colour of ivory!"

"Perhaps God is taking care of me, and releasing me from this terrible world," I replied.

Elysen came close to me and, kneeling by my chair, took my little hand in her own. I hadn't the strength to resist her. Then, looking me straight in the eyes, she said, "This bloodlessness isn't natural, Amelie! You haven't been ill... Tell me, for God's sake, what's behind it all! I have my suspicions, but I want to hear from your own lips exactly what has been happening during the past few days."

The atmosphere suddenly became electric. I scarcely knew where to begin or what to say.

"If I even tried to explain, Elysen," I said, "you'd think me absolutely insane or making up childish lies. To be quite honest, I've even thought so myself!"

"You must tell me, Amelie," she implored in a voice which betrayed unusual trepidation.

Her anxiety frightened me even more than the events of the past few days. I began to suspect that I might be drugged or even poisoned.

"My beloved child," she exclaimed again, "you must tell me! You don't realise the truth! You are living in a country vastly different from any other country in the world, and, what is more, in the midst of a family which is so uncanny that it's unlike any other group of people you've ever met!"

Trusting Elysen, and fearing for my safety, I told her in detail of the strange physical sensations, the odd coldness, and the inexplicable attacks of unconsciousness I experienced at precisely the hour when Walahmar must have been killed. I told her about the slow, dragging footsteps, and how I had sometimes heard the bolted door opening, just as I lost grip of my awareness. Above all, I explained the bite on my throat and the increasing weakness, day by day, as I showed her the punctures.

She listened intently, but even after I had finished, remained silent for a while. A new fear caused my heart to palpitate rapidly. What if she was thinking I was mad and ready for the asylum? I grasped the arms of my chair to support myself.

"You tell me, Amelie," she said, "that you fall asleep, or faint, every night at quarter-to-nine?"

"Yes," I replied. "And no effort I make can prevent what happens."

"And sometimes you can hear the creaking of the door as it opens?"

"Yes! But that must be my troubled imagination, for the door is always securely bolted..."

"Then you feel a bite or a stabbing pain in your neck? Let me look at your throat again," she asked.

I bent my head slightly backwards, and slightly to one side, so that Elysen could see more clearly. She bent very close, giving an involuntary gasp, followed by a subdued exclamation of "My God!"

Then she lapsed into another brief silence, a look of anguish passing across her lovely features.

"Amelie," she said firmly, "can you really trust me?"

"How can you possibly doubt it, Elysen?" I murmured, feeling irritated that such a thought could enter her head.

"Will you believe what I am going to tell you?"

"I can never disbelieve a word you speak, Elysen!"

"What I have to say, then, is this: Unless you agree to follow my instructions from now onwards, implicitly and to the very letter, you will not live even for a week—and we must begin immediately!"

"I will agree to anything you ask of me, anything!"

"Good! Then perhaps we'll manage to save you, my dear Princess," a grim expression furrowing her brow.

"No matter what happens, Elysen, no matter how difficult it may be, I'll do whatever you tell me..."

"Then listen carefully," she said, "and don't let terror overcome you."

With this, she looked deeply into my eyes, with love that seemed to infuse me immensely with new strength.

"In your country, as in ours," she continued, "there are several unpleasant beliefs. I refer to one in particular..."

My skin went icy and felt like goose-flesh, for I instinctively knew the belief to which she was making reference. She realised this, for she said, "I see that you understand what I mean!"

"Yes," I replied, horrified. "In the Kingdom of Bohemia, I remember seeing people who suffered this damnable curse."

"And you are speaking of... the vampire?"

"Yes! During my early childhood, I was exposed to the most harrowing sight I've ever seen in my life."

"What happened?"

"It was in a village cemetery on land belonging to my father. More than forty of our peasants had died within three weeks, quite inexplicably. No disease or cause of death could be found. Owing to general dissatisfaction over these events, the bodies were shortly exhumed for further examination. Seventeen revealed every sign of being vampires. Their bodies were as fresh, even as warm, as in life. In fact, they looked as though they were still living, apart from the absolute stillness in which they lay. The other bodies, apparently, had been their victims. And, as you know, the victim of a vampire frequently becomes one himself, though this is sometimes disputed. Anyway, I saw all this because I only turned eight years of age when I accompanied my father, and it is a sight I shall never forget."

"Can you tell me what method was used to save the countryside from this pestilence?"

"A wooden stake, sharp-pointed, was hammered through their hearts at crossroad, and the bodies were burned on an enormous funeral pyre."

That is the most usual method," said Elysen. "But I doubt if it will be enough in the present situation."

"Elysen, you're terrifying me!" I exclaimed, tears brimming my eyes.

"I've already told you that fear is your worst enemy," she said. "Conquer that, and half the battle is already won! Now listen, my love," she continued. "I don't know who or what is attacking you. But I have my suspicions. Did you ever notice anything peculiar about Walahmar?"

"Yes," I replied. "On one occasion, although it may have been imagination on my part, he came into this room to ask if my servants were sufficiently attentive. He was standing with his back to that looking-glass, and I could swear that his image was not reflected in it!"

"I have suspected this possibility for a long time," Elysen said. "I do not know if my mother is aware of it, but she loved him so much she would keep silent in any case."

She lapsed into thought for a moment, and then continued, "Before God, whether it's my brother or not, I'm going to put an end to this! But you must give me your word of honour that you'll faithfully carry out every instruction I give you, no matter how unusual it seems."

With an extreme effort, I hoarsely whispered, "Yes!"

"You must overcome your terror, Amelie," she said. "That is absolutely necessary. If it overcomes you, then all is lost... Now tonight, at seven in the evening, we will sneak out to the Castle Chapel. I shall come for you and take you with me to the Chapel, and there we shall be married according to the rites of the Church."

"I nodded my assent, petrified and exhausted. But I couldn't resist exclaiming, "Elysen, if it is Walahmar, surely he'll try to kill you!"

"Don't worry, my precious girl," she said in the softest of voices. "All will be well. You only have to listen to what I tell you..."

With this, she rose to her feet and, wishing me good rest, left the room.

Immediately after she left my bedroom, I fell to my knees and prayed as profoundly and fervently as I had ever prayed in my entire short life. Then I lay down on my bed, sleeping now and again, waiting in a half-dazed state for seven o'clock to sound. Thus, I remained, arising only with the first stroke of the hour.

Looking at myself in the looking-glass, I threw a long black gauze veil over my head to conceal the ivory pallor of my skin.

A soft knock on the door averted my attention. I opened it to let Elysen inside, who was dressed in her finest riding attire, and at her side she wore an historic sword, a family heirloom which had come down to her from an ancestor who accompanied Villehardouin at the Crusades. It had been blessed, she told me, by a saintly old priest, centuries previously.

"My dear," she said, grasping the hilt with her right hand, "here is a weapon which can successfully avert the misfortune threatening you."

With those words, she scooped me into her arms and carried me easily through the unlit side corridor and down the back staircase until we reached the courtyard, where her horse awaited us, already saddled and ready to take us to the Castle Chapel.

In no time, we found ourselves galloping furiously to the sound of horses hooves through the darkness of the moonless night towards the Monastery of Xikuni, where, fortunately, we arrived without meeting either the Countess or any of her servants.

As it happened, the Superior of the Xikuni Monastery was already waiting for us, and one after the other, contritely, we made our confessions. Then the marriage ceremony commenced.

The memory of our wedding remains etched in my mind. It was a poignant and heartfelt occasion that left an indelible mark upon my soul—a ceremony of profound simplicity, stripped bare of the pomp and grandeur that typically accompanied such joyous unions. Only the three of us stood as witnesses to this sacred union—Elysen, myself, and Father Konstanty, who presided over our wedding.

The priest, while resolute in his duty, bore the weight of evident distress upon his countenance. The nature of the sacrilegious ritual he was compelled to perform gnawed at his conscience, casting a shadow of conflict within his eyes. Yet, with a solemn determination, he proceeded, recognising his obligation to fulfil his role. He gently placed the symbolic bridal crowns upon our heads, an act steeped in tradition and symbolism. The weight of those crowns, while physical, carried a far greater significance—a testament to the bond we were forging in defiance of established norms and expectations.

With a measured solemnity, Father Konstanty extended a hand, presenting the ring to Elysen. Its gleaming presence served as a tangible symbol of our commitment and a reminder of the love that bound us together. As Elysen accepted the ring, the air hung heavy with unspoken sentiments and understanding of the sacrifices and obstacles we faced.

Yet, the coercion of the priest was not the sole sorrowful aspect that cast a sombre pall over this godless ceremony being carried between two girls, one of them a mere child of twelve, but the fact that I stood before the altar, still draped in the garments of mourning. The dark robes clung to my small and frail form, a constant reminder of the recent ghastly events and a visual relic of the danger that still surrounded us.

But despite these ominous undertones, a surge of elation coursed through my veins. Elysen's unwavering love for me illuminated the dimly lit room, casting aside any shadows of doubt or hesitation. In that fleeting moment, with Elysen standing steadfastly by my side, I found solace and joy unlike any other. It was as if time itself paused, granting us respite from the crucibles that had beset our lives.

Eventually, we were both given a lighted candle, which we were instructed to hold as we knelt before the altar, and Father Konstanty pronounced us a married couple. Following his declaration of our union, I grasped Elysen's hand tightly, intertwining our fingers. Despite the trials that still lay ahead of

us, I knew deep within my heart that this moment, this precious union of two souls, would forever remain as the pinnacle of joy in my life.

"Now, my children, you are joined in Holy Matrimony, and I pray to God Almighty to bring you all the courage and fortitude you may need in overcoming the evil which surrounds you. Eternal justice is on your side; therefore, go forth into the world in peace, with the Lord's every blessing, to empower and protect you both."

He handed us the Bible to kiss, made the sign of the cross over us, and slowly and quietly left the Chapel.

I leaned on Elysen's arm. We embraced and kissed for a long time, and with this contact, new and vigorous life seemed to pour through me.

"Now all will be well, my poor little kitten," she said.

But an unexpected doubt crossed my mind, like a dark cloud. "Won't Countess Villina be driven to frenzy when she discovers we're married? She still, in her meandering state, thinks of me as Walahmar's bride!"

Just then, the castle bell tolled the hour of eight-thirty.

"She'll miss you at dinner," I added. "Besides, she might take it into her head to come and visit me in my room..."

"That's not likely," Elysen answered. "She hasn't left her own chamber since the burial... What little she eats is taken up to her there."

These words gave me some relief. Perhaps we could escape the Castle before any discovery was made, for I dreaded the wrath of Countess Villina. But Elysen broke into my thoughts again.

"Now," she continued, "you are to keep your promise, following my instructions exactly. But you have a choice in what to do... You can retire to your bed, allowing yourself to sink into the unnatural sleep you have described. Or, by sheer effort of will, you can force yourself to stay awake, watching the horror that unfolds. I shall be with you throughout, concealed in a dark corner of your bed-chamber."

"I shall stay awake," I said. "I want to solve the mystery and see what happens."

Elysen then took from her purse, which hung from the belt at her waist, a little sprig of box-tree, still damp with the holy-water with which the priest had consecrated it. Handing it to me, she explained its purpose.

"Keep this sprig in your hand," she said. "Never letting go of it for even a second. Hold it tightly! Now lie down on your bed. Repeat your usual prayers, asking protection for the night. Above all, keep fear from your mind, because with this holy box-wood you can hold even demons at bay. Finally, and this is very important, Amelie, do not scream or make a noise of any kind. Just pray, and continue praying."

We ascended the stairs softly with a single candle to lighten our way, entering my room and closely bolting the door. I lay on my bed in a half-reclined position, resting against an arrangement of

enormous cushions, and clutching the precious twig to my chest. Elysen disappeared behind the gigantic, heavily-carved high-backed chair, which stood diagonally across a corner of the room, throwing it into deep shadow.

Continuing the minutes in an almost breathless state, I waited for the bell to strike the hour of eight forty-five. No sooner did I hear it than I felt the same strange sleepiness, the same cold chill of terror, creeping up from the base of my spine to the crown of my head. But I held the blessed box-leaves close to my heart and felt reassured.

A minute passed, and I could hear the slow, heavy footsteps, creeping closer and closer to my door. It opened gradually, without noise of any sort, as though operated by some infernal contraption.

Then, inexplicably, as though he had appeared from thinnest air, Walahmar was standing on the threshold...

His long, black, shoulder-length hair fell lankly around his neck. It was dripping with blood. He was pale as a corpse, yet somehow living, somehow moving. He wore his customary dress, but the tunic was open at the front and showed the gaping wound in his chest, which was still bleeding. There was no doubt but that this was a man from the tomb, because even his movements seemed those of an automaton, and the stench of the graveyard filled the room with its vile smell. Only the eyes—those piercing, burning eyes—were truly alive. Walahmar had come back, and I was his prey!

It may seem peculiar, but instead of falling into panic at this unbelievable sight, I felt a distinct upsurge of strength and divine protection. Perhaps it was because I knew that Elysen was in the room with me. Perhaps it was the blessed sprig I grasped with such faith and trust. Perhaps it was both...

The figure of the living-dead took three slow and calculated steps towards my bed. I stared deep into its burning eyes, which were fixed on me with hypnotic and demoniac intent. At the same time, I made the sign of the cross with the spray of leaves I held in my right hand.

The evil creature hesitated and stopped, groaning deeply as an omnipotent power came between us.

I rose to my feet, yet I could not withdraw my eyes from the unflinching gaze. This was, indeed, fortunate, since it kept his attention fixed while Elysen silently emerged from her hiding place, sword drawn in her hand. Slowly, she walked forward, the tip of her blade threatening the vampire. With her free hand, she made the sign of the cross...

Instantly, Walahmar was aware of the presence of his sister. He drew his own sword and struck with all his force. But scarcely had steel struck steel than the dead bandit's blade splintered into several pieces, falling noiselessly as they scattered themselves over the thick fur rugs covering the floor. The dead man's arm dropped to his side, paralysed, as he heaved an enormous sigh, loaded with viciousness and loathing.

"What do you want, Elysen?" he asked his sister.

"I command you, in the name of all that is holy, to return to your tomb, to remain there forevermore, and may you rest at peace, in the name of the Lord," she replied.

At these words, the living corpse replied, in a voice trembling with fury, "Yes, Elysen, I shall return to my tomb—but only with this child in my hands, for she belongs to me!"

And as he uttered them, I could see him doing his best, but unsuccessfully, to move a few steps closer to me.

"You shall go alone!" yelled Elysen. "Princess Amelie is my bride!"

Walahmar still held the broken half of his sword in his right hand, and upon learning of my fate as Elysen's newly-wed bride, roared with an ear-piercing cry and attacked his sister, who defended herself in desperate battle.

The fight couldn't have lasted more than thirty seconds, yet it seemed an eternity...

When Walahmar fell on his back, the remnants of his sword shattered from his grip. Within a split second, Elysen was standing astride him. I saw the holy blade raised in the air, watching in a delirium of relief and terror as it plunged down and straight through his heart, nailing him to the earth just beside the open doorway. There was an inhuman, blood-chilling shriek, then utter silence...

Just as Elysen staggered, weak and shaken, to a nearby wall, using it as a support, the moon emerged through the window from a veil of smoky cloud.

Rushing forward, I wrapped my arms around her, kissing her fervently, my heart thudding like a drum.

"Are you hurt, my love?" I asked in all desperation.

"I am not, my fair Princess," she replied. "But we need to hurry before the poisoned bite makes you one of the undead. That is where the danger lies..." With difficulty, she raised herself from the wall and, taking me into her arms, kissed my mouth passionately as the moonlight shone upon us and the dead creature lying in the pool of blood, with sword piercing its evil heart.

"You must continue to follow my instructions immediately," she said after breaking the kiss. "Take in your hand a little soil combined with the blood from my brother's wound. Then smear it over the bites he inflicted on your neck. This is the only certain means of protecting yourself against any remaining power he may have over you."

Almost stupefied with horror, I did as she commanded. Kneeling by the body, I could just make out a stream of thick, dark blood, slowly seeping into the earth. Mixing it into a small quantity of paste, I rubbed it into the wounds on my throat.

Elysen turned to me, her face lit by love, but her voice weak as that of a dying bird. "Amelie," she said, "we are going to flee this evil place and this accursed land at the earliest possible moment. You and I shall vanish like the wind to a better future, far from these castle walls and mountain forests inhabited by vile spirits. I have horses readied by the well outside the Castle. We will ride down to the river, where a barge is waiting for us to take us westwards. But first, we must sneak out without being seen by the Countess, or she will unleash the Castle guards on us after finding her only son murdered for the second time."

I shuddered at her words and the thought of being imprisoned in the castle dungeon and most likely raped and tortured by the Castle guards. "Let us not waste any time, Elysen," I implored her. "We must egress swiftly as soon as possible."

"Follow behind me, Amelie." She took my hand in hers and led me to the door. We stepped over Walahmar's corpse and into the vaulted inner corridor, where, to our surprise, a servant woman came from the opposite direction.

The first thing she saw was the dead creature lying in the pool of blood, then, stopping dead in her tracks, dropped her candle, and cried out a howling shriek that echoed throughout the stone walls of the Castle.

"Quick now, Amelie," Elysen called in the darkness and pulled me by my hand down the hall. We passed along the gallery, and down the great staircase, still lit by guttering torches held in the hands of the curiously-human iron arms. There was something indescribably horrible, something beastly and nauseating about this candle-lit scene, and all this while I was terrified that Countess Villina might appear.

Somewhere in the Castle, we heard a commotion and distant voices issuing orders. "They are coming for us," Elysen cried out breathlessly, and the utter horror of our situation struck panic in me like never before in my life. We were running now through the castle maze of halls and corridors until we finally reached the courtyard, shadowed by the shifting clouds passing over the silvery moon. Outside the Castle gate, by the stone well, were the two horses waiting for us, just as Elysen had planned. As we mounted the animals, the Castle guards burst through the heavy oakwood gates with savage expressions on their peasant faces, spears and swords held in their hands, poised to attack us.

Alas, their attempts to catch up to us were in vain, for we thundered down the treacherous ravine with relentless speed, the wind whipping through our hair. The urgency of our escape propelled us forward, leaving any pursuers in our wake. Whether it was fear or sheer exhaustion that left me breathless, I could not discern amidst the terror coursing through my veins. Yet, throughout the tumultuous journey, Elysen remained steadfast by my side, a beacon of unwavering support—her hand ever ready to offer assistance, her eyes a radiant glow of love, reinforcing the bond that fortified us in our perilous flight.

In a treacherous ride, the passage of time became a mystery, its measure lost amidst the chaos. A relentless horde of vengeful savages, now bolstered by Walahmar's bandits, pursued us with unwavering determination, their murderous intent etched upon their faces.

The sky was as dark as death, hiding the moon's guiding light as we weaved through dense woods and shadowed copses. Somewhere in the distance, an owl's cry pierced through the night, just as we halted at the mist-laden river's edge, concealed from our relentless pursuers by the ethereal fog that enveloped us, granting us a fleeting sanctuary amidst the encroaching danger.

I was about to collapse delirious to the ground when I felt Elysen's hands close around me and fold me to her chest, protectively, like an angel enfolding me in her soft wings. She carried me in a hurry to the

barge, already pulling away from the river's bank, and handed me to one of her conspirators while she set the horses loose.

"Come in, my child," said the old man, surrounded by a nimbus of light cast by a candle some distance behind him, and led me to a welcome seat not far from the cabin entrance.

"Who are you, and why are you helping us?" I managed to ask, though my eyes were searching for Elysen, who was still outside on the deck, watching out for the chasing horde of bandits and the Castle guardsmen determined to prevent our flight.

"You must understand, Princess," he spoke with unwavering patience, "that Lady Elysen, as a rightful heiress to the Castle of Vorigan and all its vast domains, has many devoted and loyal disciples who stand ready to aid her in overcoming her enemies even at the peril of losing their lives. Though we dwell in secrecy, concealed from the prying eyes of many, we are ever vigilant and invariably aware of the unfolding events at the precise moment of their occurrence. I know what has just transpired, and we shall offer you our devoted assistance."

The barge drifted swiftly down the river tributary, leaving our enemies behind in the dense darkness of the night. Soon after, Elysen joined us in the cabin, and for the first time, I could see how overcome with emotion she looked because no sooner I could approach her, she gathered me up in her arms and held me tightly to her chest as if a band of marauders was about to snatch me from her embrace.

"I nearly lost you, my beloved," she broke down in a voice strained with anguish, her emotions cascading into a desperate cry. "I nearly lost you... I nearly lost you, little Amelie..." And her tears came falling down her cheeks so hard it felt like summer rain.

Epilogue

Joined by an unbreakable bond, we lay intertwined in our bed, cocooned beneath the warm embrace of animal furs, until the gentle caress of morning light stirred us from our slumber within the confines of our humble cabin. The remaining leg of our westward journey unfolded without notable incident, as the days melded into a tapestry of uninterrupted bliss. Every passing moment was a treasured delight, for I revelled in the company of Elysen, who tended to me with a tenderness akin to that of a long-lost sister.

Weeks unfurled beneath the wheels of time, our path first guided by the gentle currents of the river and later carried forward on horseback of our trusty steeds. The air carried a sense of renewal, mirroring the blossoming buds and the vibrant spirit of a new beginning that awaited us at our desired destination. It was a voyage that spanned landscapes and seasons, until we reached France early in the spring of 1837.

In pursuit of seclusion and a life steeped in pensive contemplation, we established our haven deep within the august embrace of the French Alps. Only within their grandeur and isolation could we unearth the sanctum we yearned for—one that would safeguard our well-being and grant us respite from the tempestuous world beyond.

A lone and reclusive cabin, stood sentinel amidst the vast expanse, ensconced miles away from the nearest vestige of human habitation, all the while enshrouded by a sable forest of dark pine trees. Within its timeworn walls, we forged our new home where our souls could revel in solitude, enraptured by the intertwining strands of love's ardour and the bittersweet remembrances—those fragments of ephemeral bliss and irretrievable loss, of audacious exploits and perilous gambles, of wars waged, and the grotesque spectre of otherworldly horrors. Yet above all, it was the flame of affection, the delicate dance of adoration and tender caresses, that illuminated the dim recesses of our secluded domain, binding us in an ethereal embrace of love for one another.

It is in these remote and wild parts that we have lived ever since, and though I retained the marks of grief in my features, and the indelible look of tragedy in my eyes after my childhood encounter with the creature of the underworld, as Elysen had prayed ever since, the hauntings ceased completely, and within a few months of our escape, health and vigour returned. The only remaining sign of my terrible adventure being the sickly pallor of my skin, which apparently endures throughout life with every victim who has suffered the bite of a vampire.

Under the cloak of night, Elysen would often find herself captivated by the ethereal pallor of my skin, calling it snow-white, but my lips blood-red, and I would call her foolish for thinking of me in such poetic ways, pausing only momentarily to kiss the tender curve of her neck and sate my thirst, but with the gentlest of bites, before I close my eyes again and sink into a dreamless sleep.

The End