

# Nocturne

*Nocturne* by K.G. Bolingbroke

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# Nocturne



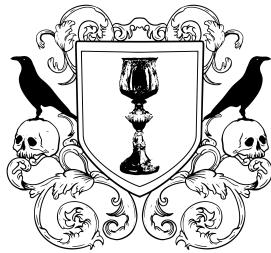
K.G. Bolingbroke

*To Mr. Bolingbroke*

*Ours is an eternal union*

Nocturne

# PROLOGUE



*“I have traveled thousands of miles and hundreds of years,” the woman dressed in all black said so softly it was nearly a whisper. “I do not intend to turn back now because of your fear.” Her voice transformed from a murmur to a snarl, tinged with a timeless dialect that sounded from nowhere yet everywhere at once. The man stood still, waiting.*

*She occupied his favorite armchair by the window of his bedroom. It sat in the corner of the dimly-lit room, illuminated by a single candle and the dying flames in the fireplace. Her face was shrouded by the hood of the cloak she wore and on her lap, her hands cradled an object that was difficult to discern. She clutched at it more defensively as his gaze flicked towards it again, seeing it glitter. Was that an urn?*

*“I will not do it,” he replied, his voice braver than he felt, although he was unable to withhold it from trembling still. “It is against the will of God. A perversion to all that is holy.”*

*She sneered. “You will. Otherwise you will suffer the same fate as your father and that of his father before him.”*

*“You are her, aren’t you?” he stammered, taking a half step back and wiping the sweat dripping from his brow.*

*“Her?” she repeated, amusement seeping from her voice.*

*“The daughter of Lilith, the spawn of the Devil... you seek to restore—”*

*“Enough!” she interrupted. “You know what I have come here for. If I am cursed to walk this Earth eternally, I do not wish to walk it alone.”*

*Had he not been so frightened, he might have been touched by this hint of humanity, but it was odd coming from her. His heart pounded in his ears and sweat now dripped into his eyes.*

*“And if I do it, will you lift the curse you have bestowed on my family for centuries?”*

*“I will. You and your descendants will never see the likes of me or my kind ever again.”*

*“You will never harass us, follow us, threaten, or murder us ever again?”*

*“You have my word.”*

*His usually comfortable bedroom felt small and stifling, like the walls were closing in around him, trapping him, warning him that he had no other choice but to comply. “Very well. I will need remnants of the deceased.”*

*She rose to her feet sharply and he stumbled back to create more distance between them. The room felt even more like a prison suddenly; he was like a caged hare and a wolf had just been set loose into the enclosure. She continued to clutch what he had confirmed was an urn, holding it close to her.*

*“I have them here, but should you make any attempt to tamper with or destroy them, you can rest assured your death will come to you swiftly and violently. Your death and the death of your family.”*

*“Spare my family and you have my word.” He was surprised at how brave he sounded when he felt nothing close to the sort.*

*“I stand by my promise. Do what you need to prepare and only I will handle the remains.”*

*He took a deep breath, searching for any courage he could muster, and began to back up towards his bed, keeping his eyes on the woman. She did not move but he could feel his flesh prickle as her eyes remained fixed upon him. Slowly, he lowered to his knees and began to pull a chest out from under his bed. He opened it, still eyeing her warily, and removed objects out of it one by one—various jars, feathers, and then finally, a worn book bound in black leather.*

*Straightening to his full height, he opened the ancient book passed down to him from his father, flipping through the pages until settling on the page he was looking for. He then lowered cautiously to his knees once more and took a piece of chalk from the chest, drawing a five-point star on the floorboards and enclosing it with a circle. He carefully placed an object from the chest at each point of the star one by one: a black feather, a small skull having once belonged to some indiscernible animal, and a withered severed finger.*

*“The remains, madam,” he asked, reaching for her urn. She did not relinquish it. Instead, she placed it down at the point of the star nearest her, ignoring his request. She loomed over him, making sure that no harm would come to the contents of the urn.*

*“Then finally, I need—” Before he could finish, she procured a vial from somewhere beneath her voluminous cloak and handed it to him. Their fingers touched briefly as he took the vial from her and he shivered at how cool her fingers were. Not quite as cold as the dead but neither the warm touch of the living.*

*“The blood of the living, Madam?” he asked.*

*“Yes, the blood was drawn from a willing participant,” she confirmed, “who is still living.”*

*He opened the vial and smeared some of its contents on the star’s final point. Then, with the rest, he smeared it on his forehead, chin, and then finally his chest after he had removed his waistcoat and shirt. Before he continued, he threw another log on the fire and stoked the flames, coaxing them to grow mightier. When the room was better lit, he cast a cautious look at the face of the woman. The hood still shielded her features but from what he could see, he reckoned she was exquisite with the soft curve of her chin and her plump lips that arched slightly upward. He also caught a flash of her long pale neck.*

*“Remain focused,” she chided him, and he was ashamed that she could seemingly read his thoughts.*

*Clearing his mind not only to spare any further embarrassment but to focus on the task at hand, he began to read aloud from the timeworn leather-bound book. His eyes began to cloud over as the words on the page began to take hold of him and he slipped into a stupor. The words were all he could sense, feel, and even smell. The words of perverted Latin incantations of summoning, calling, and gathering. Words of fear, unholiness, and darkness.*

*He remained in this stupor for an immeasurable amount of time, whispering the incantations from the black book. His companion sat completely still, only rising to renew the log in the fire or relight the candles. She said nothing the entire time, not that he would have noticed if she had, so consumed as he was in this nocturnal text, never meant to see the light of day. The words it carried bore the fruit of a condemnable craft, of dark powers that had been passed down to him from his father who learned them from his father and so on.*

*Suddenly, he began to convulse, eyes rolling back in his head as he was thrown from the book. His enigmatic companion caught him swifter than a flash of lightning, cradling his head before it reached the floorboards. She needed him alive to complete the task that only he could perform. Few remained who carried this dark power.*

*The words consumed him still, despite the convulsions. He could hear them reverberating in his head as froth began to spill from his lips. The flames from the candles turned blue and the flames from the fireplace turned black before they flickered and extinguished entirely. An animalistic groan echoed from some place. Was it from his own lips or from somewhere beyond this room?*

*The woman's hood was thrown back as she leaned over him, dabbing his forehead with a cloth. As the delirium halted for a brief moment, he saw large round eyes bearing into his, and they were encased in the thickest fringe of eyelashes he had ever seen. He was captivated, clinging to that as his delirium returned and his body continued to convulse for an eternity. Then, just as suddenly as they came, the convulsions stopped, and he was pinned to the floor. The groan sounded again. The urn near his feet shuddered, then crashed, its contents spilling.*

*Ashes.*

*His companion rose to her feet, her features somewhat disguised by the pale blue flames illuminating the room. But as he remained pinned to the floor, he could finally begin to make out her face.*

*And she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.*

*She pulled a short blade from the depths of her cloak, now ignoring him entirely, and she raised it over their heads. He winced in anticipation, envisioning the blade plunging into his heart, but that is not what happened. She threw back her cloak to reveal the pale top of her breast swelling from the bodice of her gown. She pressed the blade to her skin, slicing her flesh along the swell. There was a trickle of blood, the blackest color he had ever seen.*

*She knelt down and grasped at the ashes that had spilled from the urn, taking a handful in her small delicate hand, her long fingers enclosing around them protectively. With her other hand, she pressed on her wound, causing more blood to spill and trickle onto the ashes.*

*After a few drops, she blew the ashes towards the pentagram on the floor and the candles flickered. The ashes then quivered and began to move, taking shape. That was his cue. While still pinned to the floor, he continued his incantations, struggling through the sweat and weariness beginning to take hold of him. The ashes continued to tremble, move, and shift until they formed the silhouette of a man. The groan sounded again, deafening this time, causing him to begin to convulse again but he did not let that stop him from whispering the words of the leather-bound black book.*

*Then it stopped and all was still.*

*His convulsions had stopped, but he was still pinned to the ground and therefore unable to see what was occurring. It wasn't until he heard soft whimpering that he had some semblance of what was going on. His eyes were beginning to droop and the corners of his vision were starting to grow black. He fought against the current of shadows threatening to overcome him, wanting to see the fruits of his labor after all this time, but it was difficult to resist as it was taking a strong hold on him.*

*Then, he heard a sudden intake of breath of someone who had just emerged from a body of water after nearly drowning.*

*The whimpering took the shape of a gasp which then morphed into soft crying.*

*Then he heard a man's voice.*

*The newcomer spoke hoarsely, with a deep voice that had remained unused for some time. But he spoke tenderly.*

*Guided by the woman, the newcomer rose unsteadily to his feet where the ashes had once lain. The necromancer, pinned to the floor, could no longer force his eyes open and he succumbed to the darkness enveloping him.*

*"Thank you, Herr Van Helsing," was the last thing he heard before the darkness consumed him.*

# I



## October 1495

“This cold is going to be the death of me,” Helene muttered under her breath. A hacking cough further emphasized her displeasure.

“It is going to take a lot more than a chill to bring you down,” I assured her. “Besides, this chill is nothing. We have this all the time back at home.”

“It’s different here,” she croaked before clearing the phlegm that had risen to her throat. “The air. It’s thicker. Not at all like the air in Austria.”

It was no use rebuking her, she was in one of her moods today, antsy I am sure, after having been cooped up for so long. Instead of challenging her, I extended my legs, stretching them in the carriage carrying me to my new home, Romania. As I was the eldest child of the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian—and a daughter at that—I had the unfortunate privilege of marrying a lesser ruler east of the Holy Roman Empire. One would think that being the eldest daughter, I would be married to a French or Spanish prince, princes of more progressive and powerful courts, but that privilege was being given to my younger sister, Margaret.

When I was a child, I came across a rumor that had been spread about me when I was born. It was said that I was cursed; that I carry my curse in my raven-colored hair—the color of a gypsy’s—suggesting that I am not my father’s daughter.

The night I was born, a raven flew into the birthing chamber and became disoriented, crashing into items, throwing them about, and causing chaos. The midwives screamed as they flapped their own arms, trying to catch it and expel it from the chamber while my mother

remained helpless on the bed with birthing pains coursing through her body. This was seen as a bad omen. Then, when they saw I was born with an inky thatch of hair, the suspicious midwives began to whisper. The raven crashing into the room was a curse from my real father, cursing my mother for having forsaken him for Maximilian. My mother was fair-haired, and my father was redhead, so when I was born, my dark hair was quite a shock, I was told. My birth also did not match up with the date that my parents were married. I was born in secrecy a few months before they officially wed. So the whispers grew louder, and it was believed that one day my real father would come to claim me as his heir to rule the gypsies.

I remember hearing this rumor when I was about eight or so. I was devastated as I had heard it from a group of children at my father's court—children of his various nobles—on a day they felt they needed to be particularly cruel. I came crying to Helene, throwing myself into her lap and telling her I didn't want to be kidnapped by the Gypsy King. Of course, she assured me that no such thing would happen, but it was also then that she began to school me in the ways of politics.

Helene has been my nurse since birth, and she confirmed that Maximilian the First was my true father as she was the one who had provided cover for my parents during their premarital rendezvous. My step-grandmother, who was a large influence in arranging the marriage of my parents, also reassured me as I grew up, telling me that my grandfather, too, had very dark hair. Even still, that never quite quelled my insecurity about my hair, feeling dark, odd, and ugly among the other bright and pretty girls at court. Despite their reassurances, the rumors continued to fester, and my existence became a thorn in my father's side when I was constantly overlooked by potential suitors. My brother, Philip, had been betrothed to Juana of Castile and the negotiations of Margaret's betrothal to Prince Juan of Spain began before the negotiations of my marriage to this Romanian prince even started. My brother was to marry next year, and my sister the year after that, though their contracts had been set and sealed long before mine. Out of courtesy, and to spare me any further embarrassment, my father requested that those marriages wait until mine was completed.

Finally, an ambassador from the Prince of Romania came, solving my father's political woes. So now, at the ripe old age of eighteen, I was traveling with Helene and an escort to be married.

I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of leaving my home and the life I knew before, especially when I knew so very little about my soon-to-be husband. But my father expected me to do my duty as the daughter of an emperor, so I found myself torn between my sense of duty and my own personal desires, which were to remain home with my family and continue my passions of music and painting.

All I knew about my betrothed was that he had recently inherited the throne as a result of his uncle passing away of old age, but negotiations of our marriage had started some time before his uncle's health grew worse and it became clear he would inherit the throne.

Despite no other marriage prospects, my father would not agree to such a marriage unless he was certain this Romanian prince had a throne to sit upon.

I also understood that I was not to be his first wife, but instead his second. His first wife had passed away under mysterious circumstances several years ago. I was shocked when I first heard this, for I assumed my betrothed would be around my age, but instead he was about a decade older than me. It was not uncommon for royal women to acquire husbands much older than them, but I suppose I had been rather naive thinking that I could escape that fate. Now I had spent the last couple of weeks during our travels wondering what my new husband would look like, as he seemed so old already, our age difference feeling like a wide chasm that I wasn't sure we would be able to overcome.

When I was not daydreaming about what he would look like, I was busy studying Romanian, my new language, while the carriage rattled on towards this new country. While I wouldn't consider myself a quick study of languages, I could speak French and Latin just as well as my native German, and found Romanian somewhat easy as it was rooted in Latin just as French was. I hoped I would be fluent by the time we arrived.

In addition to studying this new language, I had a lot of time to think on this journey. As I pushed the curtains aside to look out the carriage window, the ring on my right hand caught my eye, and my thoughts drifted once again to my last day in Austria.

I had been packing my last few belongings—the ones I insisted to my chambermaids that I handle, as they were near and dear to me. I held my paint brushes in my hand, wrapping them carefully and placing them gently in the trunk while Margaret watched me curiously, draped on the stripped mattress of my bed.

“Why don’t you let the chambermaids do that?” Margaret had a tendency to be nosy. Most found it endearing, but as her older sister, I did not. Everyone found everything Margaret did to be endearing, and she seemed utterly faultless—whereas I was always regarded with suspicion and dubiousness. I regarded her for a moment, putting my hands on my hips in thought.

A few years younger than me, Margaret wasn’t a beauty, but nor was she unattractive, falling somewhere in between. She did have large chestnut eyes, and they were very becoming, but between them was a nose that started out thin and grew a bit bulbous and thick at the bottom. Under the thick bottom half of her nose were wide full lips that pursed rather perfectly. Under her headdress, she had thick abundant fair hair, like our mother, but with a tint of red that came from our father.

“Because I want to make sure that I have everything and there is no oversight,” I responded. “It’s a long journey from Austria to Romania, and I can’t very well have any items that were missed sent to me very quickly, can I?”

What was ultimately striking about Margaret was how clever and witty she was, traits similar to our father that even I found myself compelled towards. She was well-read and educated, having spent ten years at the French court after our mother’s accident.

Our mother’s horse had tripped and fallen on top of her during a falcon hunt, breaking her back. When she succumbed to her injuries, Father was devastated, but had hardly any time to grieve her. I saw very little of him during that time, but I came to understand later that Mother’s death had forced him to protect her lands from the French king, who had hoped to seize control of them despite them being my brother’s birthright. To appease the French king, Father sent my sister to France at the age of two, where she was eventually to marry the dauphin. His attempt to keep the peace through marriage was rebuked, though. The dauphin married someone else. My poor sister was sent back home to Austria and my father was forced to quash revolts instigated by the French king in Flanders. The revolts continued until three years ago when Father was able to finally repress them. Then shortly after the revolts ended, when my father ascended to Holy Roman Emperor following my grandfather’s passing, he relinquished these lands to my brother, Philip.

“No, I suppose not,” she conceded. Then she sighed. “I will miss you very much.”

I smiled. Despite Margaret being the most advantageous between us sisters, I knew she could not control any of it and that she bore no ill will towards me. I held nothing against her as well. When she was sent to France, I was only five years old, so we didn't grow up together. When she moved back home, her chambers were assigned near mine and we grew close.

"I will miss you too," I replied, my tone warm as I meant it genuinely. "It's a shame that we grew up without one another only to reunite and then be separated again. But this time it is me that is to depart."

Margaret sighed again. "I suppose this is the price we pay for being the children of an emperor."

She stared at one of the gowns I had pulled out and began to finger the hem. I could practically hear her thinking from where I stood.

I reached over and took her hand in mine. "We will see each other again."

"But you will be in Romania and I will be in Spain. They are on completely opposite sides of one another."

"We will find a way," I assured her, giving her hand a gentle little squeeze. "Especially when we are on our thrones, there will be no one to prevent us from meeting again. Perhaps we can meet halfway and reunite here in Austria. I am sure Father would not mind."

A gentle rap at the door interrupted us. "Come in," I called.

The giant maple door opened and a chambermaid came in. "His Majesty requests your presence, Your Highness." Her eyes remained lowered as she curtsied.

Margaret flashed me a look of encouragement and I nodded slightly, only for her to see, then I followed the chambermaid. As she led me to my father's chambers, my stomach began to flip at the realization that this would be the last time I would travel through these great imperial halls with their high ceilings and immaculate paintings of our ancestors decorating the walls. As I inched closer to my father's chambers, paintings of my mother in various styles became more frequent. It would be obvious to anyone that my father still missed her.

At last, I reached his chamber and saw the fireplace had been lit, crackling merrily and roaring with a hearty flame. Sitting before it was my father's familiar figure, leaning towards the light while reading a parchment. Even leaning, one could see his impressive height as one of his legs was extended before him, and the flickering flames emphasized his prominent jaw and rather large nose that hooked at the bridge.

“The Archduchess, Your Majesty,” the steward announced with a bow.

My father’s attention turned towards me immediately and he broke out in a warm smile. While he wasn’t traditionally handsome, his pleasant and optimistic demeanor was appealing to nearly everyone. I had seen people melt at his feet time and time again and it wasn’t merely because he oversaw a vast empire, but because of his charm.

I curtsied as he acknowledged me. “Your Majesty.”

He held his hand out to me and I reached for it to kiss his ring, but he stopped me with a slight gesture of his other hand. “No need for that this evening, my daughter, we are alone. Come and sit with me by the fire.”

He took my hand while I did as he asked and he regarded me for a moment or two in silence. As he did so, I refrained from shifting in the chair beneath me from discomfort. I always hated when people stared at me.

“You truly are very beautiful,” my father said softly, almost as if he was saying it to himself. “Even more beautiful than your mother, I daresay. Those other suitors truly missed out on obtaining such an exquisite wife.”

I lowered my eyes as I felt my cheeks burn at the compliment for I had never felt beautiful, instead always thinking myself rather uncomely.

“Do not lower your eyes. There is nothing to be ashamed of. The rumor isn’t true and I should know. I was there when you were made.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his crass remark, despite not wanting to imagine my parents... well...

“I think this marriage will do well and it certainly will benefit the empire,” my father continued. “Your future husband is a very intelligent man and comes from a ferocious lineage. A line of *dragons*, I have heard. ‘*The Dragon*’ is what they called his grandfather. And his father, ‘*Son of the Dragon*.’ His family history with the Ottoman Empire is a turbulent one, but an alliance will serve us well. Your husband gets an alliance with an even more formidable empire, and I get to keep an eye on both Hungary *and* the Ottomans, as you will serve as my eyes and ears in the east. King Wladislas, that Hungarian bastard, will feel the pressure of being in the middle of us should he decide to betray the terms of the treaty we established after those long five years of war. And if he does, your husband has agreed to come to my aid, forming a front on both of the Hungarian borders should conflict arise. Yes, it will be a useful alliance. But that kind

of talk is not why I summoned you to my chamber this evening. I know you leave in the morning so I wanted to grant you one last gift in addition to your dowry.”

He rose and I moved to do the same when he again gestured slightly with his hand, preventing me from rising. His smile glittered at me once more as he turned toward his bedchamber, located behind the door on the opposite side of the sitting room. He was gone momentarily but returned with a small wooden box in his hand. He returned to the chair opposite me near the fireplace and he leaned towards me, propping his elbows on his knees, holding the box out.

“Come look,” he invited with a smile. I felt a smile creep across my own lips as I leaned forward, feeling like I was about to be let in on a delightful secret.

He opened the box and inside was a small delicate ring with a gold band and a seal bearing a coat of arms I did not immediately recognize. “Out of all my children, I understand that you have been overlooked despite being my eldest. Therefore, I would like to grant you the title of Countess of Hainaut, a title that once belonged to your mother.”

My breath caught as a lump began to grow within my throat. I stared at the ring, unable to move. I could only stare in awe. My father then took the ring from the box and pushed it gently onto the smallest finger of my right hand. I continued to stare at the four lions stacked over one another in two columns, facing left. While it couldn’t be carried over onto a small ring, I remembered the lions as being black and red, alternating in their colors from left to right over a gold background, a banner I had seen once or twice before when my mother was being honored.

“I do apologize for the lack of a grand ceremony, but I had to wrestle your brother from part of his inherited lands, so I’m afraid this will have to do. However, it was imperative that before your long journey to Romania, you know that you always have a home within this empire.”

I stared in disbelief at the ring on my little finger. As I looked closer at it, I could see that it was indeed the seal of the County of Hainaut. “Thank you, Father. This is more than I could have asked for.”

The lump gathering in my throat brought me back to the confines of the carriage, pulling me out of my memory and reminding me of my current situation.

“At least the landscape is beautiful,” I offered to Helene, swallowing the lump in my throat and reclining back in my seat. I didn’t want to weep in front of Helene, especially since I

was fulfilling my role as a daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor. This is what I was born to do, what was required of me, and I wanted to do my father proud by meeting my duty with bravery instead of tears. Instead, I continued admiring the endless landscapes we encountered while traveling through both Hungary and now Romania.

The recent peace with Hungary allowed us to travel through unscathed, and I welcomed the beauty Hungary had to offer and, due to the extensive plains, it was easy to navigate through. However, our travel began to grow difficult as we reached Romania—the terrain became much more uneven, even mountainous at times. Accompanying this mountainous terrain were thick swathes of forests that stretched beyond where the eyes could see. It became particularly treacherous as the sun went down and, because of the forests, darkness seemed to envelop us far quicker.

Admittedly, I became uneasy the further we traveled into Romania, as the reality of my situation was really beginning to settle in. The trees and landscapes were beautiful, but my compliments of them were portrayed with more confidence than I actually held, and I didn't feel as though it was just the nerves of getting married. It was more than that, and I was very unsettled—as if I was descending into a cave dense with shadows, never to return and see the light of day again. As the feeling began to escalate, I reached for the red rosary that had once been my mother's, holding it between my fingertips, seeking comfort by caressing the soft beads made with pressed rose petals.

Helene continued her grumbling. I chose to ignore her and instead prayed silently, wondering into what fate my father had thrust me.

## II



“My Lady.”

I heard a voice gently calling me. Deep, but pleasant. A man’s voice. Someone whom I did not recognize. The sensation of smooth velvet washed over me. Yes, it was though his voice was made of the softest velvet. And it caressed me in a way I had never felt before. Awakening my senses as if they had been long asleep. I was more aware than I ever had been.

“My Lady.”

My body warmed, tingling pleasantly as if I had just slipped into a warm bath. I was overcome as this sensation began in my scalp and traced slowly down my body, ending at the soles of my feet.

“My Lady.” I heard it again, but this time the velvety baritone voice was gone, replaced with something familiar. A woman’s voice. I felt the sensation of suddenly and forcefully landing on the ground, my breath being knocked out of me. It was very much akin to the time I was climbing a tall oak tree as a child with my brother and had fallen out.

“My Lady!” The woman’s voice repeated, more insistent. My eyes fluttered open and I was met with Helene grinning at me, something I hadn’t seen since before we left Austria.

“What is it?” I growled, perturbed that Helene’s shrill voice had interrupted my dream of the lovely male voice calling to me.

“Look,” she said breathlessly, which was then succeeded with a round of coughing. Once she regained her composure, I leaned over and peered out the window opposite mine.

I was met with a startling sight and a little gasp escaped me.

Embedded in the thick blanket of the forest’s foliage were red-bricked turrets piercing the gray sky. The turrets sloped into beautiful sand-colored stone walls surrounded by thick, imposing pine trees creating an overlay, covering the rest of them.

The backdrop only added to the beauty of the castle I was beholding, nourishing this spectacular sight as the castle was encased by rolling hills and mountains behind it, brimming with trees whose leaves fully embraced autumn, greeting me with brilliant gold and auburn. Austria had many breathtaking sights, but a semblance of mystery shrouded this castle which I presumed I would be calling home. I knew so little about this country and its prince, which only further emphasized its wonder, making it all the more titillating. This majestic sight was situated on top of a tall hill overlooking a small village. We were too far away for me to tell details of the village, but I could see the roofs of homes that paled in comparison to the splendor of the castle stronghold that overlooked them.

“Bran Castle, Your Highness,” Helene announced, still grinning. “A gift from your future husband. He purchased it from King Wladislas with the persuasion of your father, as part of the negotiations for your hand.”

“It is lovely. Helene, we have many wondrous sights in Austria, but this is magnificent.” I remained breathless, unable to take my eyes from the castle cradled by forests and mountains. “I don’t know that I will ever tire of the sight of it.”

“Good, because I understand we may be spending a lot of our time here. His Highness also has a residence in Târgoviște, where his father used to hold court, though I do not know if that is where His Highness will continue to reside since purchasing this castle.”

“He would not live with me?”

“It all depends, my dear, though do not expect it. We have discussed this before, your sole purpose is to provide an heir and serve your father’s empire by being his eyes and ears in Eastern Europe. You must expect your husband to take mistresses, and perhaps to even bear illegitimate children. And you must turn a blind eye to it at all times. You must endure it and rise above any humiliation that it may bring. While your father was madly in love with your mother, he had every right to take on mistresses. Had that happened, I’m certain your mother would have borne it in great stride.”

I barely remembered my mother. My memories of her were fragmented. The most prominent of those memories were of her fair hair and her gentle, musical voice. And she always insisted on holding me, never passing me over to a wet nurse, even well up until she passed away when I was five years of age.

Helene regaled me of what a strong and imperative figure my mother was in her own right. It was she who chose my father as her spouse, and when they did marry, she did not step down from ruling her lands. Instead of taking them over, my father remained co-ruler. Nor did her lands go directly to my father after her passing, instead passing to my brother. My father only remained regent until my brother was of age.

My father lovingly allowed my mother's independence. As Helene reemphasized, my parents were madly in love, even going so far as to share a bedroom and sleeping in the same bed together each night. To me, this seemed perfectly normal growing up, but it wasn't until later in my life that I learned this was a rare occurrence in other royal families. In fact, my father's parents couldn't have been more opposite and spent very little time together. I hoped my own marriage would take the shape of my parents', but it would more realistically take the shape of my grandparents'. Perhaps that was for the best, for I found the idea of sleeping beside a complete stranger to be rather unsettling. Besides, if we did spend little time together, then I would at least be left alone to pursue my artistic endeavors.

"Well," I replied, "I guess we will have to see then." Even if it was a loveless marriage, this beautiful castle ahead of me would be enough, for I was already in love with it.

A stinging sensation burst from my lip and I realized then how hard I was biting down in anticipation of arriving in Brașov, the town outside of Bran Castle. I had been mistaken before in thinking it was merely a village, the trees shrouded many of the buildings, and as we came closer I recognized it was a beautiful town instead.

"On the contrary, Brașov is hardly a village, Your Highness," Avram Ionescu, the Romanian ambassador who had negotiated my marriage to the Romanian prince, informed me. When Bran Castle grew closer, he fell back, walking his horse beside my carriage. I remarked how I had been mistaken in the town's size. "It is a thriving town housing all sorts of people. There is a hearty Saxon population that still resides here as well."

"I see," I replied. "So in addition to having a relationship with the Holy Roman Emperor, your prince thought an Austrian wife would increase his popularity with the Saxons that remain."

Ambassador Ionescu grinned. "Her Highness is very keen." Then his face fell a little bit and I swore a shadow flickered across it. "The prince's—or rather, *Voivode's*—family has had a strained relationship with the Saxons that still occupy the area. So, yes, it does not hurt to appease them by taking on an Austrian wife."

“It always boils down to politics,” I retorted.

“I think you will enjoy the town,” he continued, his sunlit-beam of a smile returning. “It is brimming with trade and craftsmen. Should there be anything Your Highness requires as you make your home at Bran Castle, I am certain it could be easily found in Brașov.”

“Well, we shall see. I hope to not only win the popularity of the Saxons but of the Romanians as well.”

“I am certain that all that lay their eyes on you will fall in love with you.”

I regarded him for a moment, my brow raising at his effortless flattery. Ambassador Ionescu was not particularly attractive. He was stout in stature and a bit thick around the middle. He had a patch of dark hair that grayed at the temples which extended out to a mustache that covered his upper lip almost entirely. Despite his rather mediocre appearance, he was a pleasure to be around, as his demeanor was always jolly and he was rarely in a sour mood.

“Such flattery, ambassador,” I chided him lightly. “Something I haven’t come across from you before.”

His grin managed to grow wider. “Maybe it’s just the joy of being home, Your Highness, though I do not speak any untruths.”

Home. Hearing that word caused a sudden pang in the center of my chest. I instantly envied Ambassador Ionescu, a man who could come and go as he pleased, whereas I would be bound to remain in Romania for the rest of my days. The home I had known before was long gone, and after experiencing this arduous journey, I did not know whether it was possible for me to ever return.

“You must be delighted to be home, ambassador,” I replied, masking any sadness I was suddenly feeling. “And after traveling through Romania, I can see why. The country is beautiful.”

“There is nowhere else in the world like it,” he agreed. “I will ride ahead, Your Highness, to make sure that all is ready for your arrival.”

With that, he tapped the stirrups of his saddle and was off before I could manage a reply. Meanwhile, our line was slowing as we entered the town, receiving entry to the town’s fortified walls. I suppose with the Ottomans at the southern border, one could not be too careful. I pushed aside the curtains of the carriage and watched as we entered, immediately met with the familiar sounds of a bustling town. It almost reminded me of Innsbruck, my father’s chosen capital and

where we lived together at the imperial palace. My heart leapt at the sound of it and while I wasn't met with the sight of the Alps looming over the town, the mountains of Romania were similar, so it wasn't terribly different. The homes tucked together in close proximity shared an unexpected familiarity, with similar half-timbered architecture which I had been accustomed to seeing my whole life. Even the cobblestone road on which we traveled didn't appear dissimilar to the one in Innsbruck.

Our arrival had caused quite a stir because—in some sort of strange phenomenon—the town seemed to grow quiet for a moment or two, but then there was an uproar of sound, people calling out and chattering at once. They began to line the streets to meet their Princess Consort, a title I learned from Ambassador Ionescu I would be receiving. I leaned out of the window to wave and greet them after Helene managed to stuff me into a nice clean gown specifically set aside for this occasion. It was a lovely red Milanese gown with slashed sleeves that revealed my white long-sleeved chemise underneath. A black panel adorned the front, and the bodice laces were loosely tied to allow the panel to show through. My hands traced the red skirt trimmed with black velvet along the hem, absent-mindedly grazing along the vines and leaves embroidered with gold thread as I eagerly watched the crowd for signs of their approval. Helene thrust my long black hair into a gold-netted caul, as that was easiest to arrange in the small confines of the carriage, and I had hoped it was enough to contain my unruly locks as I passed by the gathering people.

As we continued down the cobblestone streets, it dawned on me that Brașov's similarities to Innsbruck ended with the town's architecture. With every passing second, I was bombarded with cascades of color from the finely woven embroidered clothing worn by the townspeople. Admittedly, it was exquisite. Their garments seemed to be transported from an older time, but the embroidery on the fabric was unlike anything I had ever seen—incredibly detailed and just as colorful. Both the men and women wore the colorful and intricate designs on their loose-fitting cotton shirts. Then, for some of the women, it continued onto their skirts and head scarves.

I was met with plenty of waves and smiles, though there were some that regarded me sternly under their bushy eyebrows or furry caps. As we continued through the town, I began to notice people dressed rather well and more modernly, with their elaborate gowns and doublets made of expensive fabrics; wealthy people, I assumed. They waved at me energetically, whistling or cheering at times.

“The Saxons of Brașov, I presume,” I said to Helene while continuing to wave.

“I understand the Saxons tend to be merchants and the nobility,” Helene replied. She also peered out the window as even she could not contain her curiosity.

While I do not mean to be vain, I could only imagine what a sight we must have been. Our line stretched down the street as far as one could see with fully dressed and armored knights of the Holy Roman Empire, bearing the Emperor’s golden imperial banner of the black two-headed eagle, talons outstretched, each of its heads looking off to the side with the combined arms of Austria and Burgundy on its chest. I was thrilled, excitement and curiosity getting the best of me as we traveled through the streets. I loved seeing the people smile and wave at me. In the distance, I could smell meat roasting somewhere and I wondered if perhaps we were close to the marketplace.

As we rambled closer to the castle, children began to run alongside my carriage, waving and laughing. One young boy managed to catch up and press a bouquet of wildflowers towards me. I took them from him and passed him my handkerchief, a souvenir he could bring back to his family. Any nerves rattled by my arrival were soothed by the overwhelmingly warm welcome I received from the people of Brașov.

Finally, I heard the call of the captain to the guards and the carriage shuddered to a stop. My heart began to thud in my ears and nervousness welled up in my throat.

“It will be quite all right, Your Highness,” Helene insisted, as if she sensed my nervousness. “I will see what I can do about getting you something to eat, as well as a bath. It is imperative that we wash the dirt of the road away before meeting your betrothed. He has waited this long, but I am certain he can wait a bit longer to meet you.”

“Your Highness,” the captain of the guards said after opening the carriage door with a bow. He extended his hand and I took it, allowing him to assist me out of the carriage. It felt good to stand and stretch after sitting for so long. He released my hand and turned to assist Helene out. Meanwhile, I took a moment to view the castle up close.

It was just as impressive up close as it was from afar. Though not nearly as large as the imperial palace in Innsbruck, it was still lovely. What I had not seen from afar was the exquisite stone base of the castle, specifically near the entrance. The castle was built quite literally on a hill and partially into a rocky crag. I knew that if I was to go to the tallest of its many towers, I would be able to see all of Brașov below. It was absolutely breathtaking.

“Your Highness,” I heard a familiar voice say.

I looked to the entrance of the castle, and at the top of the steep staircase leading up to the front door was Ambassador Ionescu. His usual jovial countenance was replaced with a furrowed brow.

“What is it, ambassador?” I called to him, my voice swept up by the chilly wind trailing up the hill. I clutched my fur cloak closer to my neck. Behind me, my guards were dismounting and the captain was overseeing the care of the chest that held my dowry.

Ambassador Ionescu stumped down the steps more swiftly than I thought him capable. “Your Highness, I am afraid I have something to tell you.” I waited for him to meet me at the bottom of the stairs and catch his breath before he continued.

“What is it?” I asked, trying my best to keep agitation from escaping my voice. After all, I was craving a bath, a meal, and perhaps even a nap more than anything.

“I am sorry to say that you will not be meeting the Voivode, for he is not here.”

“Not here?” My brows furrowed at the news and I turned to Helene with my confusion.

Her eyes rounded as she overheard. “Not *here*!?” she repeated. “What can you possibly mean?”

“Exactly that. His Highness is not here, I was just notified by the Chief of Staff. He informed me that His Highness’ arrival has been delayed.”

“Delayed? How?” I inquired, my confusion taking the shape of annoyance as well as disappointment.

“Yes, how? It is not as though our arrival is a surprise,” Helene added with a scoff.

“My best understanding is that he was involved in a raid. A skirmish with the Ottomans near the border.”

“A skirmish? Is he unharmed?” The sound of my heart thudding in my ears resumed.

“I believe he is. I received a short letter written in his hand. Here.”

He handed me a small piece of parchment and as I brought it closer to my face, Helene leaned over my shoulder to read as well.

“Ambassador,

*Forgive my absence. I was called to answer a raid of Ottomans as Bayezid was sending his men to terrorize our people, hoping to instigate the rivalry of our fathers. I will not be there in time for the arrival of the Archduchess. See to it that she settles in and informs the staff I have*

*hired that they are to be at her call should she be in need of anything. I will be there as soon as I can to honor the terms of the marriage contract agreed upon between myself and the Emperor. Signed, His Highness, Prince Vlad V.”*

I read it twice more, somewhat in disbelief and in partial agitation. I understood that the border had been attacked, but could he not have sent other men and stayed behind? After all, as he stated in his letter, he had a marriage agreement to fulfill. I traveled all this way, therefore I had assisted in completing my father’s end of the bargain. He needed to meet his. I felt rather insulted. Furthermore, he gave no indication in his letter of when he anticipated to arrive. Was I to wait endlessly for him to decide when he would like to marry me?

“This is an insult to the Holy Roman Emperor!” Helene cried out, almost as if she had read my thoughts. “Her Highness did not travel all of this way only to be slighted in this manner.”

“My apologies, madam,” Ambassador Ionescu said, lowering his head. “I am certain no insult is meant by His Highness. He is a very passionate man, you see, and his feud with the Ottomans goes back from before his grandfather—”

“None of that is our concern!” Helene interrupted.

“It will be after the Archduchess’ marriage! It is the concern of all of the Western world, Christianity itself is at stake...”

I tuned out their bickering as I thought for a moment, trying to swallow my own pride and agitation. Yes, this was an insult, but on the other side of the coin, I could not blame him for overseeing the care and keeping of his lands; my father would do the same had the roles been reversed. Sometimes it was better to take matters into one’s own hands than rely on someone else, especially in such a dire situation. Besides, I really craved a bath and was longing to see if the inside of this castle matched the beauty of its outside.

“Enough!” My voice echoed through the trees bordering the hill that the castle was perched upon. Helene and Ambassador Ionescu stopped their bickering immediately and looked at me with wide eyes. “Three weeks,” I continued, “we will give the prince three weeks to return. And if he does not, then we will return to Austria, dowry and all. Three weeks and then we can consider the marriage contract null and void. Now, Ambassador Ionescu, I long for a bath. Please, escort Helene and me inside so that I may tidy myself.”