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The Stygian Oblivion

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Author's Note:

This is a small piece of fiction that I endeavored to write to push my own personal limits in creating powerful, descriptive prose. The intent of this writing is not to wow my audience with a rich, enthralling story; it is to try and envelop them in a world. It is a tech demo in a way, and, more than that, it is a derivative work; I drew very heavily from the works of Lovecraft in particular, with a bit of Poe added in for good measure. I had always been interested in writing horror, and reading the nightmarish scenes that those magnificently bright men managed to conjure only spurred me on. In this sense, I would like to dedicate this short novella to H.P Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe. I can only hope that I have managed to create something with even the fraction of terror that those two men inflicted upon their readers, so as to do them some semblance of justice.

Chapter 1

The flames had no mere insignificant radiance to them as they flickered, making good work of the wood collected from the forest; the orange and yellow danced and cackled together, as though they were two lovers at a ball. The light that shone forth from such a union gave life to the world, their offspring the warmth that was gifted to those brave enough to embrace such a destructive force. Or, that was what wiser men than Wilhelm Mahler often said.

Wilhelm thought such flowery, metaphorical gibberish was little more than a pretentious way to lull others into some *wisdom* that old men often praised. To him, the flames that *danced* in his fireplace were all he had between warmth and cold. That was all that mattered, and indeed, that was all that *should* matter. The days when he could give any thought to more metaphysical matters were long gone. Good riddance to them too; they had done little but toy with his sanity, and darken his temperament.

Practicality. That was something that interested Wilhelm now, more than anything else. He had, in some immature stupor that had burdened him throughout his years, dreamed of many great things, always making sure to shape his life to match an ideal. The world, to that younger self of his, had been a sandbox, malleable and shrouded in some thin mystique to those willing to look at it with a different perspective. A lie, if an innocent one.

. To the new Wilhelm, though, the *better Wilhelm*, life was now just a box. To deny that, and, more importantly, *to defy that*, would be to break one's sanity. The count had had enough of that, certainly.

And yet, still, those very flames that Wilhelm dismissed as trivial did at times pique his curiosity. He could swear that, within that inferno, there were often *things* that appeared. These were no mere abnormalities, the naive little creations of devilish imaginings. No, these were more than that, and yet he never could quite put his finger on it. There was some magic at work, and it was both tempting and terrifying. As much as he wanted to simply embrace a strict, pragmatic rationale, this castle around him seemed intent on breaking him wherever he turned.

The count turned his gaze away from the fire, no longer wishing to peer into its lustrous hues. He sipped at his wine, fresh from a new bottle, off to the side. That alone was his one comfort in this forsaken village. Indeed, if it was up to Wilhelm, he would stay within this keep, within these apartments, within this chamber, *upon this seat*, for all of eternity. He could wallow in this bitter tasting drink, and he would derive no small measure of happiness from that. The coldness would not reach him inside his sanctuary, and for time immemorial he would revel in his debauchery.

It was not up to Wilhelm, suffice it to say. This wine was the one luxury that he still had in this world, that and his books and pipe at least, but that was not some mystic wine that lifted the burdens from his shoulders. He had a duty to those that had freed him of the madness that had so long tampered with his wellbeing. The Imperial Family had placed in him, their esteemed relative in both blood and spirit, a task of most critical importance. Or so they said. The count had to repay his debts, either way; that alone *he could say* with utmost surety.

Wilhelm eased into the velvet cushioning of his chair, trying to keep his mind from straying into dangerous lines of thought. There was little use in turning to the past. It was dead and gone. All that remained was *now*, the present; that was a universal truth, one of the few that

could boast agreement amongst all mortals. This fact alone, Wilhelm knew, was all that stood between his newfound sanity and the madness that lurked in the depths of his mind.

He sipped at his wine again, drinking deeply, letting the crimson linger in his mouth for a while. Wilhelm closed his eyes, the flavor slowly sinking in. His glass would be over soon, of course, and then he'd get up, grab the bottle to the side, and pour more for himself. That would go on for at least another three hours, judging by his present state of mind. He didn't mind, of course. It just amused him to think that this sort of behavior was something that he had once so strongly objected to. It was funny how the cruelty of the world so often shattered any semblance of moral foundations.

Opening his eyes again, Wilhelm gazed around the chamber for the umpteenth time, as though he was expecting the damned room to change for his amusement. The previous resident of the keep had not had the most *original* tastes in his furnishing of the place. Ancient stone busts, vague paintings of ancestors and a few landscape portraits were not unique by any means. It was funny to think that such a dull character had died such a gruesomely colorful death.

Yet, Wilhelm had to admit that there was some genuine allure to a few of the pieces, particularly in this room. It was meant to be a spare bedroom, apparently, but the previous resident had decided to convert it into a personal study of sorts. There were two things that Wilhelm could appreciate about any abode; a good wine cellar, and a decently sized collection of books. The keep had the latter, at least.

It would seem that the previous owner had made sure that this room proved itself to be of some significance beyond the generic, if cozy, furniture and the menacing bookshelves along the walls. The paintings had an odd quality to them; they were, first and foremost, far older than any Wilhelm had laid eyes on. Not even the capital city could boast works quite as ancient as these, and it made little sense to the count that a barren, backwards little village like Schattenwald could ever produce something of its quality.

Indeed, more than just that, the paintings in this room had some odd texture to them, as though they had been imbued with some heinous sorcery. They were paint, that was sure enough, but Wilhelm could swear that they often resembled texture work of some sort, as though they had been sewn. The one that depicted the nearby forest especially looked as though it was the work of a quilter, not a painter.

Strangest of all though was the coloring. The hues that were splashed upon the canvas were not any that Wilhelm could ever name. The brilliance to them far surpassed any creation he had personally witnessed, almost to the point of a maddening impossibility. There was a very sinister sort of *radiance* that emanated from the damn things, though, for the most part, they depicted the little natural 'beauty' that the village could boast; that was hardly something that was meant to elicit some terrible horror. And indeed, Wilhelm did not fear the paintings, much unlike his servants, all of whom dared not even enter the chamber. No, he did not fear the paintings; he was perplexed by them.

That is to say, he did not fear *all* of the paintings. There was one that went beyond the simple depiction of mountain ranges, rivers and forestry, sitting miserably above the fireplace, the brightness of the flames doing little to mask its baleful presence. Wilhelm refused to look at it for more than a few seconds, even now, after a month of living in the keep.

It was hard to explain, but the accursed piece seemed to *ooze* a malice that Wilhelm could not comprehend. Evil was not something that he was altogether unfamiliar with, for the many grievances he had suffered in his life could be classed as evil of some sort, but that painting outdid

even some of his worst memories in terms of its wickedness. The barbarity, the spectral horror; the painting seemed to celebrate its own terror.

The *thing* was but a depiction of the same, terribly beautiful mountains that stood outside the keep's window, right besides the painting itself. The hue, though, the shadowing, the scale: it was all wrong, heinously and indescribably wrong. The mountains in real life itself seemed to radiate a certain weirdness, true enough, with their violet allure and hypnotic omnipresence. But the painting took all that a few steps further, and it was maddening.

The night sky did not resemble any that Wilhelm had ever laid eyes on, either. There were no stars that glistened amongst the black, no moon nor cloud to bestow some merciful solace to the sky. No, instead, there was that horrible void, that pure and utterly *hateful* black, all by its lonesome, threatening to devour the world beneath it. It was not the idea itself that horrified the count, but it was that the painting could dare to show it in such a remorseless manner.

Moreover, there was *something* that lurked in the shadowy forest at the base of the mountains. The painting was focused on it, in fact. Wilhelm could barely try to describe what the figure resembled; the painting seemed to assert that the beast that stood among those lush trees was something that simply should not *be*. No worldly creature could have such a malevolence burning through its silhouette.

Wilhelm quickly glanced over the horrible thing, hoping that by some miracle it would endeavor to abandon its own evil. If he was a braver man then he would take the infernal thing down, and throw it into the destructive flames that awaited just feet away, so as to unite the creation with whatever demonic thing had spawned it, in whatever pit of oblivion that was deserving of such wretchedness. And if he was a fiercer master, then he would simply order his terrified servants to do it for him. Wilhelm was neither, though, and for now would have to content with the painting's unwanted company.

He quickly emptied what was left of his drink, and left his seat to pour some more, clumsily tipping the bottle over the glass. The wine poured forth, offering him its illustrious comfort. Now, *that* was wanted company. Much wanted, in fact.

Indeed, the count felt he could do with continuing his reading, as well. Setting his glass down by the table near his armrest, Wilhelm picked up a rather dusty tome from the floor, sitting back down. He had been looking for a spell to help tune his magic. There had been little time for the practice of the arcane in the last month, certainly. The locals in particular were not fond of the stuff, and Wilhelm had been advised to avoid mentioning it entirely. What man could resist having the power of a thousand flames right at his fingertips, though?

He scanned through the book, flipping through page after page, chapter after chapter. There was a particular set of runes that he needed to decipher, but he could not for the life of him remember what. The wine had something to do with that, no doubt, but it was still more than a little irritating. His memory in general had suffered some weakening ever since the Imperial Family had him treated in their private clinics. He had little to complain about, however.

Wilhelm quickly grew frustrated at his own failings, and threw the book at the chamber door before taking a particularly hasty gulp of the wine. Tipsiness had now become a drunken stupor; it wouldn't be long until he would be forced to retire to his own quarters. And then a new day would dawn, and once again the count would be subject to his *duty*.

He gazed longingly at the runes upon his scarlet gloves, watching as they pulsed with some unknowable energy, synchronized with the machinations of his heart. The mark of those that had been granted entry to the Magistracy; that was the only way to be a count, a leader of one of the sixty-three provinces of the mighty Empire, stretching for as far as a feeble mind could imagine.

Some had to work for decades to be bestowed with such a great honor. Others were given it soon after birth. Wilhelm had, for years, uneasily straddled the line between the two extremes.

He had little affinity for magic, even with the gloves. That was not uncommon amongst counts, certainly, and indeed only the Imperial Family itself could ever boast a true and pure connection with the arcane arts. Still though, those gloves had given him so much, and taken away much more. Wilhelm could, and indeed previously *did*, stare at those gloves for hours, watching the runes with an awe that rarely graced him nowadays. At the very least, they were a more interesting sight than the cackling flames that mocked his past frivolity.

The count sighed a little, looking at the wilderness outside from the comfort of his velvety chair. The night was still young, by the looks of it. Certainly there was little point to simply go to bed and wake up bright and early, unless Wilhelm wanted to be *amused* by the petty problems of the villagers and his servants for even longer. The little shits had all caused him no degree of boredom. If indeed he fell back into insanity, then the blame would lie on the *merry folk of Schattenwald*.

Getting up from his chair, Wilhelm endeavored to look through the chamber's bookshelves. He knew half of the tomes here, of course, seeing as half of them were his, but he had never really paid much heed to the collection of the previous resident, sitting messily on the largest of the bookshelves. He had certainly seen no reason to; from what he knew, the dull little man had been a local himself. Anything to do with Schattenwald was immediately *less* than appealing to Wilhelm, by default.

His hands traced the damp leather of the tomes' bindings, his eyes straining to try and make out some of their titles. *Local Foliage*; not exactly the most entertaining of reading material, certainly. Indeed, for whatever reason, the previous resident of this place seemed to have been awfully concerned with the local wildlife in general, if his book collection was any indication. Tomes upon tomes, dedicated to the forests of the area. It was a shame; a waste of parchment, more than anything else.

There was, among that vast and dull collection, a nameless volume as well, its blank, grey binding immediately catching Wilhelm's eye. He reached for it upon the top shelf, gently pulling it away from its uninteresting neighbors. Not only was there no title; there was no cover either. It did not seem like the other books; it was not old, the binding having a certain smoothness to it, as opposed to the creasy dampness that plagued the other tomes in the collection.

Wilhelm eyed the book a little more, before returning to his seat by the warm fire. There might not be anything at all to this tome, but at the very least it was certainly bound to be better than reading about the different types of trees that grew in the region. Easing back into his seat, he slowly flipped the book open.

It seemed as though, for a moment, all went quiet, the cackling flames losing their great, ecstatic fervor, the wind in the world outside all but dying entirely. Within a moment's notice, as though the world had decided to briefly pause so as to note some important event, all was returned to normal. The trees outside shuddered once more at the presence of the howling gales, and the flames gleefully roared.

Wilhelm took no notice of these things, too enamored with the enigmatic title page of the book. It was blank, the parchment fresh and pure, save for a collection of runic symbols that danced along the edges. And danced they did; they seemed to flicker with the same energetic light that he found in his gloves. It was as though they sang some silent song, their mysterious pattern lulling Wilhelm away from the security of his reservations.

This was clearly no ordinary tome, as if that was not obvious enough. Wilhelm could very clearly smell magic, sense it cracking and popping amongst the air. But it was a different sort of magic to anything he had ever felt; there was no warmth to it, no delightful power that had so often seduced even the most resolute of men. This was a very saturnine sort of magic, cold and unwelcoming, yet mysteriously appealing all the same.

His hands traced the glowing runes, for a while, before turning over the title page, only to be met with more of the same. A new set of runes were on the next page, and another set were on the one after that; every page that Wilhelm turned to bore some new symbols and patterns, lighting up as soon as he set his gaze upon them. The colors were different too, a broad spectrum that could encompass all that mankind could ever dare to imagine, and perhaps even more than just that as well.

Wilhelm knew that runes were a sign of the older civilizations, the ancient societies that had discovered magic, a time so far back that even the history books could not quite remember. The capital city of the Empire had been founded upon the ivory ruins of one of those primeval civilizations, and it was there alone that all known runes of the world were compiled and examined. The Imperial Family could hardly afford for such power to fall into the hands of its enemies, after all.

Yet, here he sat, with a volume full of the things, flickering with some carnal intensity, in a northern province that few could ever even *pretend* to care about, in the home of a man that had only ever been interesting with the bizarre circumstances of his death. How could a dull figure like that have ever had in his possession something so infuriatingly, *puzzlingly*, alluring?

Wilhelm did not know. But he did know that, by some unknown divinity, he had managed to stumble upon something truly fascinating amongst the filth of Schattenwald. It would be his to keep, at least for a while. So, he sipped on his wine for what he intended to be the final time for the night, before flipping back to the first page of the tome, studying the runes with both a visceral fondness and an academic interest.

He looked at his gloves again, comparing the runes. Not only were the runes of the book unique in that Wilhelm had never seen them amongst the gloves and tomes of his fellow counts, but they were entirely different in their execution as well. The style was impossibly abstract, for one, and they seemed to pulsate with a ferocity that had been altogether *unheard of* in anything Wilhelm had ever laid his eyes on. It was not hard to see that this book harbored some terrible, hateful rage within. The count did not know whether that terrified him more than it mystified him.

After all, what had experience taught him if not that wrath was the purest of emotions, the most primal human feeling? Just as pretentious old men always spoke with flowery metaphorical nonsense to convey some artificial wisdom, so too did they denounce fury as barbaric and unrefined. Passion sat upon some elevated dais to them.

But the passion that had once graced Count Wilhelm Mahler's mind had been made impure with frenzy, embittered by the cruelest of fates. Where there was once love now stood rage, and to him, the book that he was reading, the runes that he was analyzing; they were all but kindred spirits, calling out to him with a majesty that he could scarcely understand.

He would unlock the secrets of this tome. As he further immersed himself in the taunting runes, he could see, out of the corner of his eye, that blasphemous painting above the fireplace glowering at him, its contemptuous malice seeming to grow with every waking second.

Hours had passed, and Wilhelm felt no closer to deciphering the runes of the first page, let alone the other fifty. His glass of wine was empty again, as was the entire bottle. He was at wits' end here, but he felt strangely content, regardless of that. True, it was frustrating to be kept away from the secrets of the tome, and with such obscurity that not even the most brilliant professors of his alma mater back in the capital city could hope to do any better, but the count was not too bothered by it. He simply remained absolutely *infatuated* with the runes, with the pages of the obfuscation that sat upon his lap.

He had made some progress; that could hardly be denied. It was not as though he had simply sat staring blankly at the pages of the book for *all* the hours of the darkening night. He had indeed managed to take in some of the more complex patterns of runes that could be found on the final pages, forming images of incomprehensible geometry. He could have sworn that one of the pages' runic symbols seemed to take the shape of a mountain of sorts, with immensely menacing, jagged peaks and the like. That was more than likely the wine playing with his senses, though.

Wilhelm struggled to close the book, understanding that it would hardly be of use to stare at it in a drunken stupor. His hands were shaking as he placed it near his glass, and sweat dripped down his forehead. He took off his spectacles, nearly dropping them on the floor, and wiped at his face with his bare hands, his breathing heavy and ragged. He might have pushed himself more than what was acceptable for his current state of mind. The thought of what might follow such a transgression was a fearful one, to say the least.

He rested upon his chair for a while, trying to calm his nerves. He ached to look upon those dreadful runes again, but resisted the call, if just barely. Wilhelm could hear their silent chanting, even now. He had been lulled in by his fascination, and it seemed as though that had, once again, proven to be his downfall.

But the old Wilhelm was gone. He was a practical man now, a man of scientific pragmatism. Such a man would not be overcome by some childish delirium, caused by a collection of runes. Wilhelm sought solace within his mind, and, by some chance, he found it, drifting into the sanctuary of his own memories.

He saw his daughter, little Klara, playing in the grass of their old home in the southern countryside. He did not want to think of her mother, for that foul woman had been the root of all his discontent and madness in the past few months, but that little girl of his had committed no sin, and was undeserving of his rage. He could not hate her, but his desperation to throw off the shackles of his weaker emotions meant that he could no longer love her. At the very least, though, the memory of her could provide him with some comfort to combat whatever it was that now plagued his tormented mind.

He opened his eyes, realizing that the silent chanting of the pulsating runes no longer disturbed his peace of mind, the book now lying still. He sighed with no small degree of relief, and picked up the book, intending to place it back upon its shelf. He could not afford to gaze into its abyss again; there would be no escape next time. Whatever cold magic that possessed that tome was not for any mortal to deal with, and certainly it was not for a mortal with so fragile a sanity as the count.

He turned to the hideous bookshelf of the previous resident, and raised an eyebrow when he saw that there *was no room on the last shelf* for the tome that he had picked up just hours before. He calmly analyzed the other shelves, so as to make sure that he had not actually picked it from another; but, no, it was indeed the top shelf that he had grabbed the nameless book from. He

tried to squeeze it between the two that had once flanked it, but it was to no avail. It was as though the shelf had decided to rid itself of the accursed tome.

Fear and anguish both crept back in, and Wilhelm furiously marched towards the fire, before flinging the book into the flames, watching as the orange and yellow mercilessly tore into its terrifying pages. He felt an immediate remorse for his foolishness, desperate to try and recover the piece, but it was too late. The fire was making short work of it.

“What madness has corrupted my soul, that I would throw away such a mystic tome!” Wilhelm cried out, before sinking back into his chair. He looked again back at the bookshelf, before looking into the flames. He had not been imagining anything; there was indeed no place for the text, and the tome was most certainly being destroyed. There was a sincere remorse, true enough, but that was more of a remorse for his rash behavior. He was secretly glad that the infernal thing was gone for good, even if it had been destroyed in a way that was not becoming of an academic count.

He sighed a little, and gazed out of the window, the winds still tormenting the trees of the forest below. It seemed to grow stronger and the window was suddenly violently opened, the howling gale sending a chill down the count’s spine. He grumbled and lifted himself out of his seat. This was not an entirely uncommon thing; the ancient castle often seemed to shudder from the pressure of even the weakest breezes, let alone the tempest that raged outside.

As he closed the window, he gazed deeply into the dark green below, the violet mountains in the distance lit up by the stars aplenty. He often wondered why Schattenwald had never bothered to expand the borders of its village farther into the wild. The place could very well have been a massive, sprawling city; there was certainly plenty of room for it to grow. But, it was as though the village was confined in some miserable stagnation, trapped within the constraints of a time long since dead.

The count turned back towards his chair, but as he did so, he saw something from the corner of his eye. The door of the chamber was now wide open, the bleak hallway pouring in. Wilhelm frowned a little. Surely the wind could not have *pulled* the door open, of all things?

He slowly edged towards the door, eyeing it cautiously. If the servants had dared to intrude upon his apartments, they would be very sorry indeed. Wilhelm had but a single rule in the keep; no one was allowed to enter this place, for it was his own, personal domain. To transgress that was to wound his pride in a way that was utterly intolerable.

A figure appeared in the doorway, standing rigid, cloaked by the darkness of the hallway. Wilhelm froze, his eyes unable to pierce the shadows, before shouting angrily: “Get out, get out! Get out or I shall have your job, and more than that still!”

The figure simply stood there, completely immersed in black, and Wilhelm steadily grew fearful. He dared not approach, and he dared not repeat himself; the servants of his were meek, they were stout. This *thing* was clearly brazen, tall and slender, meeting the count’s gaze with an invisible one of its own. This was no servant of his; this was no resident of the castle.

He found himself shaking as the figure crept in closer, very slowly leaving the shroud that had kept it hidden. Wilhelm tried to concentrate, to summon whatever small flames he could from his gloves. He was of the Magistry, a noble count of the Empire: magic was his weapon, his great defense. But it failed him now; he could not for the life of him reach out to that arcane power.

The figure emerged: a slender woman, her blue dress the first thing to escape the dark of the hallway. Wilhelm found horror striking against the most primal aspects of his being, his soul, and he clutched at his heart, as though to somehow prevent it from bursting entirely. That blue dress was one that he knew all too well.

The woman's raven hair fell gently upon her naked shoulders, her face slowly appearing from the shade. Her features were gaunt but not without beauty, but as she left behind the doorway entirely and stepped into the light, the heinous nature of her appearance became all the clearer; her eyes were *wrong*, dull, without any sign of emotion or the mysterious brightness that was evident in all of earthly life. This was indeed Wilhelm's Konstance, but it was not the woman that he saw in his memories; this was a specter, evil, haunting, emanating a ruinous damnation from its very *essence*.

The woman's eyes seemed to widen as she approached Wilhelm, growing paler and even more lifeless, before giving way to the oblivion of blackness. The count backed away, stuttering madly. The woman did not walk naturally; her movements betrayed her otherworldly nature. The blackness of her pupils seeped into the iris of her eyes, before completely infecting them. Her gaze was now completely onyx, terrifying in a way that no mortal could ever describe.

Wilhelm heard the silent chanting of the runes again, quickly turning to the fireplace as he continued to move away from the ever approaching demon. The flames were truly alive now, the dancing lovers no longer a mere flowery metaphor and they were mocking the count with their horrendous cackling. The woman was suddenly right in front of him, and stared deeply into his soul.

The blackness of her gaze, it was familiar to the count now. He had realized it before, but he could not quite place it. It was the blackness of the void; the lightless night sky that horrified him about the painting above the flames. He let forth a tremendous scream upon this last realization, before unconsciousness swept him away from the nightmarish scene.

Chapter 2

Wilhelm gazed down at his servants below as they scurried around the keep, cleaning and making sure that everything was as it should be. This was the usual routine, of course; every single day, just as noon struck. The count usually stood here, watching as his underlings did their duties, just to provide them with some authoritarian presence. Not that he suspected them of ever failing to put in the necessary effort, granted, but even still, as the Imperial adage went, *the absent king is no king at all*.

He sucked at his slender pipe, puffy rings of smoke floating down from the staircase. He gazed at them rather sleepily as they dissipated, the piercing light of the overhead chandeliers making quick work of them. He squinted a little, a smudge on his spectacles proving to be rather irritating, before taking out his handkerchief to clean them. He was surprised that the things had actually managed to remain intact after last night. That fall of his was rather nasty.

Fortunately, he had not landed face first, the back of his head bearing the brunt of the blow. His hand instinctively scratched at the shabby bandages plastered upon the shallow wounds; the damn thing was beginning to itch. The local physician had said that Wilhelm had been rather lucky that it was not worse, seeing as how he fell upon stone. Judging by his rather *piss poor* bandaging skills, the old man was clearly less than qualified to make such a remark.

. Wilhelm was simply thankful that he had managed to pick himself up off the floor before the break of day, so as to save himself some measure of embarrassment. Only the village physician and his head butler, Albrecht, had any knowledge of his injury.

His head ached; both from his fall, which was obvious enough, and from the excessive amounts of wine that he had foolishly drowned himself with. Tobacco and a little opium did wonders for the pain, though. And what better way to revel in the taste than with an antique pipe?

The smoking, at the very least, could keep Wilhelm's thoughts clear. Convolution would do little to help his peace of mind, certainly. Though, in truth, contrary to his own expectations, what had occurred last night had not harmed him in anyway. Well, save for the obviously wounded head that was.

It helped that Wilhelm could hardly remember what exactly it *was* that frightened him so much. He remembered seeing Konstance, and he remembered gazing into that specter's hellish void of a stare, but the memory lacked the same appalling nature. Now that the count was thinking clearly, and more importantly, *soberly*, his mind could no longer be so easily tarnished by his maddening psychosis.

He stared for a while at the tiny puncture in his wrist, barely concealed by his shirt sleeve. Taking another puff of the pipe, he thanked the good fortune he had in the Imperial Family's act of kindness. Their personal physician, a well-respected man and the dean of Schönau University, had gifted him with a large supply of the medicine needed to keep the madness at bay. Without those injections, Wilhelm would be quite the sad sight, no doubt.

Indeed, as he pondered further, he realized that yesterday's bizarre events could be explained away rather easily. All it took was a touch of pragmatism, as was always the case, to unravel the seemingly impossibly insane happenings; if ever there was a time that the count felt so infuriatingly foolish, it was now. It was all that he could do to prevent from blushing.

He had not had his afternoon injections yesterday. Coupling with that damning lack of dosage was the unusual strength of the wine that he had gorged down. Surely there could be no

greater gift to the infernal demon of psychosis than a delirious drunk, wallowing in his own intoxicated misery, with no medicine to keep his mind from stumbling down the ever winding path of madness. Wilhelm chuckled a little, admittedly out of some relief, and nearly choked on the smoke of his own pipe.

It was all coming together now. In the morning, as he had awoken upon the cold stone of the study floor, the count had seen no trace of the book that had brought him to a crude, infantile obsession; it had been destroyed in the flames, sure enough, but there were no traces of any real cinder save for the charred wood itself. The count had more than likely imagined that blasphemous tome, which, to him, was not the least bit shocking. He had suffered far more grievous hallucinations than a book and some ghastly clone of his wife.

Taking one last whiff of his pipe, Wilhelm felt the opium kicking in, and whistled for one of his servants to take it away. Standard procedure; the count did not trust himself to refrain from overdoing his smoking. He had seen far too many opium lounges in the capital city for his own good. The appeal of such a languishing existence, of such a careless lifestyle, was at times rather overpowering. The damning weakness of all men was certainly their sloth, after all.

Albrecht approached, heeding his master's call as he gracefully ascended the flight of stairs, looking as stoic as ever. If Wilhelm could claim that anyone in the forsaken village of Schattenwald was an acquaintance, let alone a friend, it would be that strange, elderly man. He could not quite understand *why* exactly it was; certainly, the butler would hardly have been among his companions back in his previous life, by any stretch of the imagination. However, it certainly helped that the old man was, seemingly, from the capital city. Indeed, if Wilhelm did not know any better, he'd have thought that Albrecht was a learned intellectual of sorts. It would be rather odd for such a person to have wound up as a *butler* of all things, though.

Regardless, Wilhelm appreciated that he was not *completely* surrounded by the dimwitted locals. There was something distinctly dumb about the brood of the province of Nebelthal, and that truth was even more evident in the harshness of the northern border upon which Schattenwald rested. It was as though the harshly cold weather had managed to dull the wits and senses of the local folk, to the point where one could hardly say that they were civilized at all. That Albrecht seemed to have at least some level of intelligence was something that Wilhelm truly welcomed.

"Your pipe, Count Wilhelm?" the old man held out his hand, after bowing slightly.

"Thank you, Albrecht," Wilhelm handed the wizened butler his pipe with a surprising gentleness. "How goes the work in the ballroom?" The ballroom had suffered some water damage, and Wilhelm found the place rather revolting as a result.

"Oh, the renovations, sir?" Albrecht tapped at the embers of the pipe, extinguishing it rather quickly. "They are going fairly well, if slowly. The local carpenter did not arrive on time. It seems the storm has gotten worse today; I fear that it won't be long until the road to the castle will be all but impassable with snow."

Wilhelm frowned a little. "Ah, so it has gotten that bad then? Shame. Is that the case with most of the province, do you know?"

"I can't be sure sir, but, judging by the power of the storm, I would certainly wager that we are not alone in our suffering of the storm."

"Then any messengers dispatched here will no doubt be delayed," Wilhelm sighed rather irritably. "I don't suppose fortune has smiled on me today, Albrecht?"

"I am afraid not, Count Wilhelm," the butler's stare seemed to offer his sincere condolences. "There have been no letters arriving at this location, let alone any Imperial orders."

Wilhelm remained silent for a short while, contemplating his situation. He had been expecting some correspondence from the capital city. He was the Count of Nebelthal; surely then, it would only be fitting that he actually live in the *main city* of the province, down in the south, as opposed to some forsaken northern outpost. Granted, Schattenwald Castle was the only such fortress in the entirety of Nebelthal, and was, formally at least, its capital, but the count hardly cared. He simply wanted to leave the ruinous village as quickly as he could.

Indeed, the previous Count of Nebelthal had not even lived in the province; he had lived in the capital city, along with the Imperial Family. Wilhelm could hardly understand why it was so crucial that *he* be forced to actually stay in the province, and, if indeed that was to be the case for his entire tenure, why he could not, at the very least, live in the place of his choosing *within that very province*. It was madness. But, then, he could hardly question the authority of the Magistry, especially since its decision had been so manipulated by Wilhelm's enemies. That they had so easily managed to influence his fate was infuriating. He supposed it could have been worse; they would have stripped him of his titles had the Imperial Family not intervened.

"Do you expect that you will be forced to stay here much longer, sir?" Albrecht asked, evidently catching on to the count's obvious displeasure at the news.

"I am afraid that it certainly seems like that will be the case," Wilhelm rubbed at his short beard, before sighing. "I suppose there is little that can be done about it from here, though. I can only hope that the Magistry will recover some semblance of sense, and soon. The Imperial Family will vouch for me, I think, and then the entire matter should be resolved."

Albrecht smiled a little, before turning to walk away. Suddenly, Wilhelm felt a distinct question probing its way through his mind. Though the events of last night had done little lasting damage to him, he still admitted that there was something about his delusions that had piqued his curiosity as to the previous resident of the keep. Albrecht had, after all, served in the castle for at least a few decades; he was certain to be able to provide some insight into that dullish man's existence.

"Albrecht," Wilhelm spat out, and the butler stopped immediately, turning to him with a raised eyebrow. "I have been meaning to ask you: Just who was the previous master of this castle? I know little of him beyond the villagers' mutterings of some *bizarre death* that befell him."

Albrecht suddenly, if only for a very brief moment, lost the façade of his stoic expression, his face contorting with tremendous fear. It was soon completely smoothed over again by the butler's usual expressionlessness, but it was all too clear that he felt increasingly uncomfortable, his gaze betraying his terror. Wilhelm felt disturbed at this sight, but said nothing, only waiting for the elderly man to regain his composure.

"Erwin Fischer was not too interesting a man I'm afraid," the butler mused, his voice cracking slightly. What was it that plagued him so terribly? "He was a lesser noble, I believe, his bloodline having once ruled over Nebelthal when it had been a free kingdom. Lived here for most of his life, save for a brief stay in the capital city, at the request of the previous Count. Spent a good deal of his time in the private apartments, just doing his reading, and often went out for a few walks among the forest below. Nothing particularly unusual, overall."

"And his death?" Wilhelm pressed on, an impatience growing within. The old man was hiding something, that alone was true, and that only served to further pique the count's interests. "The other servants have often talked of something that was entirely *unusual* about that, Albrecht."

"I... Well, yes, I suppose there was at that," Albrecht seemed to return to his usual self, gaining a control over his previous erraticism. "I was overseeing the cleaning duty of the main

entrance, just after noon, on a day not too different from today, in fact. Lord Erwin had been acting even more curious than usual, which was saying something, and had locked himself in his personal study for a few days at the very least; we had not seen or heard of him for quite a while, save for some mumblings from that tormenting room.”

“Indeed, coming to think of it, I think the last time we had seen the man had been a fortnight before, on the eve of a local festival. The other servants, being natives themselves, had attended, and had accompanied our master to the village chapel. I myself did not, rather obviously, bother to go with them, but, I must admit that I wish I did, for it is clear to me that whatever dementia possessed Lord Fischer can be traced to the happenings of that festival. The others never speak of it, but then I doubt that they are at all aware of what really happened.”

“Anyway, on that day,” Albrecht continued, his speech methodically slow, “he emerged from the chamber, and from the apartments, right as the cleaning was reaching its heights. There was a...*strange*, I suppose, expression that was painted on his face. Painted I say because it was utterly static, with only his eyes even revealing any sign of life. And those eyes, those eyes I shall remember until the cold touch of death drags my soul away. The fear that Lord Erwin exuded from just his *gaze* would have been enough to drive even the strongest of men into despair.”

“There was an odd glow about him, too. A pulsating light that was evident in his being, radiating from his hands in particular. He stepped up to this balcony, placing his hands on the rails, and simply stood there for a moment, his expression never changing, his eyes flitting around as though his soul was trying to escape his earthly form. Most of the servants and myself simply stopped, almost mesmerized by the captivating light that emanated from our master.”

“And then it happened. I can’t quite remember the precise details, Count Wilhelm, but I can indeed say that the villagers are right when they speak of Erwin Fischer’s *bizarre* death. This was not the type of death that even the bleakest or most horrible of stories could at all describe. If indeed this was some sort of magic, it was not any type of magic that belongs in the hands of mortal men, for it was not of this world. Lord Erwin was lifted up from the balcony by some invisible force, and torn apart, limb by limb, as though some beast was making short work of him. I dared not look at the sight, but the screams were enough for me to know that what was happening was no mere nightmare, no mere illusion. There wasn’t even any blood; that was the worst part. There was nothing left of the poor man. And we cannot remember the best of him.”

“You see, Count Wilhelm,” Albrecht was sweating now, turning away slightly, as if out of shame, “that is the hardest and most maddening part, for both me, and the others in this castle. Even the memory of Lord Fischer is fading from our minds, replaced by obscure mental images and faint recollections. And that damned room, that study of his, where you fell upon your head; we dare not even tread there, for if indeed there is *any* remnant of that man, it can be found within that place, and I fear that what remains cannot be of any good to anyone.”

And with that, Albrecht was done, descending the stairs without so much as another word. Wilhelm was not sure what to make of the elderly butler’s story. It did not reveal much at all; the circumstances in which Erwin Fischer had died were certainly interesting, but the count was more interested in the events that had led up to that. He was not sure why he felt the need to look into it, as it was clear to him that there was no real relation between the happenings of his delusions and some inbred northerner noble, but he could perhaps chalk it down to simple boredom.

At the very least though, Albrecht had given the count some information on the local cult. That was not exactly a topic the count was at all familiar with. He had known, prior to his arrival at the village, that the northern provinces in general often acted as hosts to a variety of strange religious offshoots and local cults, but he did not necessarily know what that in itself *involved*.

After all, even in his more idealistic days, Wilhelm had never been a man of any real faith in some higher divinity.

He had to wonder whether or not any of those cults, including the one in Schattenwald, delved into certain magic and rituals that they had no business in. Wilhelm strongly doubted it; the villagers were hardly either intelligent or inquisitive enough to study the arcane arts, and if they had then surely the Empire would have put a stop to it immediately. But, it might be worth looking into at the very least. Certainly, if indeed he was to be the Count of Nebelthal, it would do him little harm to *try* and understand the local culture, even if he irrevocably despised it.

Wilhelm sighed a little, and resolved to venture outside. Stepping down the first of the stairs, he reached for his watch, clumsily pulling it out of his pocket by the chain. He popped it open, and glanced at the time; quarter past one. It would be nighttime soon, then. If indeed he wanted to head out into the village, it would certainly be in his best interest to do so hurriedly.

Passing through the servants, eyeing him with surprised expressions, Wilhelm made every attempt he could to try and make his leaving the keep look as normal as possible. It was certainly difficult, seeing as how, over the last month, he had hardly ventured out into the castle courtyard more than thrice, let alone the actual village. He grumbled to himself, the servants taking a hint and continuing with their duties without so much as a curious raise of the eyebrow. *Better.*

Wilhelm grabbed at his overcoat from the empty rack, and made for the door. As he edged the colossal, brass thing open, he was immediately met with a bitter gust, sinking deep into his bones. He gritted his teeth, but pushed on forward, shutting the door behind him as he was met with the courtyard of the castle proper, in its all of its ruinous, decrepit *glory*. That was the word that the Magistracy had used to describe the stronghold, to try and play up its appeal to Wilhelm. Glory indeed, if glory was a thing measured by moss on stones.

It was your standard courtyard, square, the now opened gate of the castle aligned with the entrance to the keep, the servants' quarters found within the walls themselves. There were many castles like this to be seen across the Empire; ancient, crumbling things, the last testaments of primitive kingdoms that had long come to ruin. It was rather ironic to Wilhelm. These strongholds had been built not only to house the local rulers, but to defend them against their enemies. And yet, so great was that defense that, long after the destruction of those very rulers and the entirety of their progeny, the walls still stood, almost mocking their former masters' grandeur and paranoia. Now, the Imperial Palace was truly a work of art. To use marble, not stone, ivory, not brass, and to have no real defense beyond a few gates; that was the mark of rulers that had nothing to fear, rulers that gave some thought to their images.

Wilhelm supposed, though, that there was some archaic, primordial sort of beauty to be found in the castle. As he walked along, protected from the terrible snow by the mossy stone that he so disliked, he could admit that there was a certain solace that could be derived from the crudeness of the dwelling. That was hardly enough to satisfy his distaste for the entire place, but it was something to think on, at the very least.

Near the gate, he finally saw his automobile; he had not managed to spot the machine when he had first emerged from the keep, and it was certainly clear as to why. The damn thing had been all but *submerged* by the cruel snow, its smooth, metallic black hardly visible amongst the piles of frosty white. Wilhelm hoped that the contraption had not been damaged by the weather. It had been a gift from the Imperial Family, of all things; it was one of the few such creations in the entirety of the Empire, newly invented by Otto Heuberger. Wilhelm found himself shaking, both from the cold and his own rage, brought on by his ill fortune and the very recollection of that man.

It seemed, then, that he would not be making his way into the village, at least not today. He could very well take the horse and buggy, but he imagined that it might be more than a little tiresome on both the beast and driver to navigate the rocky crags of the mountain path. After having experienced his automobile, Wilhelm could hardly see the use for horses; too stupid, too slow, and too difficult to control.

He sighed a little, looking back at the keep, before turning back towards the castle's gate, the tempest howling with a furious intensity. The count felt like standing for a little while, though he felt the cold ever worsening. The moss of the stone seemed to suddenly look far more appealing than the drabness of his private apartments, and certainly, he had to admit that Albrecht's chilling tale had made him rather wary of the study. That damn painting hardly helped his disposition, either.

Wilhelm's hands started to become numb, the scarlet gloves proving to be worthless at actually keeping them warm. The frost bit at his face, his small beard seemingly compiling its own personal collection of the snow. Grunting a little, the count reached out to the magic of the gloves' runes, just about grasping the smallest extent of its power, its warmth immediately pleasing his soul. The Magistracy itself did not know where the magic stemmed from, or how the runes helped produce it, as that was a well-guarded secret of the inner circles of the Imperial Family, but Wilhelm knew that it was from something sweet and pure beyond his most ecstatic imaginations.

Sparks erupted from his fingers, cackling as the power of the runes fed them more and more, before the warmth in the count's soul passed into his hands. A familiar orange glow started to ooze forth, the runes' silent chant becoming ever more excessively vibrant, Wilhelm's hands shaking madly. The glow started to undergo its intended metamorphosis, the count barely able to keep it under control. He had grown weak over the last few months, and that was intolerable; his talent with magic was lesser than others as it was, he would not have what little aptitude he possessed simply fade into pure and utter *mediocrity*.

Flames started to flicker from between his fingers, the sparks their fuel and lifeline, hovering gently above the scarlet gloves, emanating warmth that was far beyond that of any mortal fire. Both of his hands had now secured complete and utter control over the fires, and he brought them closer to his face, the once fearsome frost suddenly cowering at the presence of such a blaze. Wilhelm was breathing heavily, but maintained his focus, before simply loosening up. It was important not to let stress control his behavior when harnessing such a power. He was not the master of these flames, he had to remember that much; they had simply been gifted to him for a fleeting moment, by some glorious power that he dared not attempt to fathom.

The warmth immersed him entirely, momentarily taking him away from the cold harshness of reality. The mossy stones looked ghastly under the scrutiny of the fires, as though their ancient nature had suddenly become far more exaggerated. The entirety of the courtyard, indeed, suddenly seemed even more solemn than it had before, the saturnine cold all the more evident. Wilhelm barely paid it all any heed, his eyes tracing the ever-changing outlines of the flames floating above his open palms, bouncing about with a wild and erratic frenzy. It had been weeks since the count had gazed upon such power, and longer still since he himself had *actually wielded it*.

"Sir?" he heard Albrecht's voice, the faint hint of worry just *barely* noticeable. "Perhaps you should come back inside? I'll have your automobile cleaned out for tomorrow, if indeed you are planning to visit the village."

Wilhelm said nothing, the mesmerizing flames suddenly growing in intensity, as though seeking to drown out the old butler entirely. They moved with a life that the count did not seem to

recall having possessed them before, in any of their appearances, both by his hand and the hands of those far more talented than he could ever hope to be. Some untold radiance was being told through their silent song, the pulsating runes echoing this with their increasingly visceral display of unimaginable colors.

Albrecht said something else, but Wilhelm could not hear him. The count was not entirely sure as to whether or not that was because he simply did not want to, or because he no longer *could*. Indeed, it seemed as though all of reality was distorting around the ever hungering inferno, the air shimmering and rippling with an oddly rhythmic series of disturbances. Those were no longer flames; they were the light of *stars*, their intensity destroying the very fabric of creation.

Wilhelm could feel himself losing control entirely, his hands slowly being crushed by the pressure exerted upon his scarlet gloves, tears slowly spreading along the leather. His spectacles cracked, and he could feel the heat of the ungodly light becoming unfathomably overpowering, as though they were threatening to reduce him to a smolder within but an instant. The count saw runes dancing within those hellish fires, taunting him with their great, burdensome power. The leash that he held was all but destroyed; he was now at the mercy of that which he had sought to harness.

Blood dripped down from the count's nose, and his vision blurred, the illumination overpowering him entirely. He saw Albrecht approach him, and he tried to call out to him, to warn him of the oncoming oblivion. But it was too late. The wizened butler had to but edge closer to the count, and, within an instant, he was no more, only a crisp, shadowy silhouette marking the stone walls of the castle where he had perished. All threatened to be consumed by the dark of the ever-growing void, oozing out of the light in an impossible dualism.

Hands, if one could even call such abominable appendages hands, reached out from that blackness, gently grabbing at Wilhelm's face. The blue dress appeared again, and he was shaking, maddeningly shaking, trying to call out for help, only to find that his vocal cords had betrayed him, refusing to obey their master. Those eyes of oblivion gazed at him once more, and he felt true and utter horror, the sort that he wished could just kill him so that he might escape its wrath.

The silent chanting of the runes shook the very walls of the castle, and Wilhelm felt the stones, and indeed the hill upon which they sat, simply crumble away, the blackness spreading far into the sky, pulling Konstance back within. It took some horrible, if humanoid, shape of its own; the creature that lurked only within the horrors of the most prolific of artists manifested before the count, and he knew that he had inadvertently brought an end to the mortal realm.

A sting was suddenly felt on the count's cheek, just as the hideous thing was about to reveal itself in full, disappearing as though it was some foggy cloud struck by a strong wind. Reality suddenly came back into the fray, the oblivion of the darkness becoming nothing more than a horrific dream, as Wilhelm found that he was lying on the floor, crouched up against the wall, his head pounding as badly as ever. Albrecht stood beside him, his gaze one of worry, fear, and anguish.

The butler offered him his hand, and Wilhelm simply sat there, staring at him dumbly as he rubbed at his reddened cheek. The old man had perished; he had seen it with his own two eyes, for the void had been relentlessly destructive. It was evident, though, that not only was Albrecht was alive, but he had struck out against the count as well, bringing him out of what could only have been another delusion.

Yet, this one had hit Wilhelm far more than he could contemplate, for behind Albrecht he saw the haunting, grinning specter of his Konstance, blue dress and all, staring at him with her demonic face, her eyes swallowed up by the black wells that had spawned forth the evil of the

darkness that he had just witnessed. The count screamed maniacally, embracing the safety of his own unconsciousness.

Chapter 3

Wilhelm's eyes fluttered open, only to be met with the soft cotton of his blanket. He felt around with his hands, smoothing over the silken sheet; he was back in the safety of his chamber, embraced by the balminess of his bed. He turned a little, feeling content, as though his bed somehow provided some divine sanctuary. It was warm here, *so warm*, sheltered from the deathly cold outside, as though the keep resided in some unearthly bubble.

Stretching out his arms, the count slowly found the will to escape the embrace of his bed, resolving to properly wake so that he might do something of *some* productivity. Throwing the blanket off of him, he realized that he was not wearing his spectacles, the sight of his room completely blurred and muddled, as though it was the canvas of some untalented oil painter. He fumbled around a little, grasping at the bedside table to see if they were at all nearby.

And that was when Wilhelm realized something; he did not quite remember *how* he actually got back to his chamber, let alone how he found himself so encompassed by his bed of all things. Bits and pieces of his memory were all that remained from his departure from the keep into the castle courtyard. He remembered, very vaguely at best, that he had been summoning fire from his palms, simply to keep warm, and that something horrendous had gone wrong with the spell. But he could not quite understand just *what* had happened beyond that, more than it was more than likely his psychosis acting up again.

Yet, that would hardly make much sense in context. Wilhelm had taken all of his medications, and he had even smoked some opium to calm the nerves. He suddenly remembered the void, the terrible oblivion that had *oozed* out of his flames, and the final, horrifying glimpse of the specter of his wife. Albrecht too had been involved in it all. No doubt he had been the one to put the count to rest in his chambers.

Wilhelm's head suddenly ached tremendously, and he remembered that he had suffered yet another fall, though this had been through Albrecht's strike. He rubbed at the back of his head, while his other hand finally found his spectacles, clumsily bringing them up his face. Finally, his sight was restored, and the count could at last gaze upon the eerie nature of his room, for the chamber was not at all as he had left it just hours before.

The count had to admit that he had never been the cleanliest of people, and, considering his noble bloodline, that was something to be ashamed of indeed. He remembered rather fondly at how his mother would berate him, even as he grew into a young man, and how he missed that shrill, jokingly irate voice once he had left for university. He never heard that voice again.

Usually, this chamber of his could boast all the qualities that had made his mother constantly shudder and tut. Wilhelm never allowed his servants to enter the apartments, save for a few exceptions, and as such, they would never clean the area. Dust was generally aplenty in his bedchamber in particular, strewn along in cloud like spheres that twirled along the walls and sides of the room; there were no longer any, the stone floor giving off an entirely unfamiliar shine, neither dirt nor grime present amongst the cracks.

Wilhelm's clothes were all put away in his closets, opened and neatly arranged for once, his window and curtains were shut, and all of the previous candles in his room had all been replaced by splendid things worthy of a keep like this, as opposed to the rustic lumps of wax that he had not bothered to touch for the entire tenure of his stay. The count could hardly say he

minded that someone had went through all this trouble to correct the rather shameful state of his room, but at the same time, who had given the authority to dare lay their hands on what was *his*?

The count lifted himself off of the bed, and noticed that he was not even wearing the same clothes any longer. He was dressed in his nightgown, his shirt, pants and overcoat all neatly lain across a chair by the side of the closets. Now, that *truly* infuriated Wilhelm. Albrecht should have known better than to transgress on his privacy in such an audacious manner. The old butler had, perhaps, saved his life from the foul, indescribably monstrous thing that the count had conjured by some misfortune, if indeed the thing had not been a delusion, but even so, that did not give him the right to act beyond his rank.

Wilhelm would deal with the entire thing later, though. He felt tired, drained in fact, and the back of his head was suffering an aching pain; he had no strength to even discuss what had happened in the courtyard, let alone chastise the only friend he could find in the accursed village. Besides, he had far more *important* things to worry about now.

The count stared at the single window in the chamber for a while, not entirely sure what he was looking for. He had seen, within the space of but a few seconds, something flickering outside, he was certain, and it did not seem to resemble any earthly bird or creature that he knew of. The keep was too high for it to be anything, or anyone, else, that was certain. It could very well have been the light of the candle simply wavering a little, distorting the shadows, but he doubted it.

Wilhelm approached the window slowly and with a sense of fear coursing through his veins, certain as to what instilled such dread in him, and so suddenly. The terrible memory of his premonitions, those haunting, if delusionary, visions plagued him every step now, his memory no longer disjointed. Even with all that in mind, though, he still had to admit that he bore a peculiarly *morbid* curiosity as to what that giant, heinous blob of perpetual night was. That he had somehow managed to have allowed it to spawn so monstrously only made matters worse. He could very clearly sense an all too familiar paranoia propping up within the abyss of his mind.

Wilhelm opened up the curtain, and found that night had fallen, just as he had suspected. He must have been out for a few hours, at the very least, for though dusk often fell early in this region, the world was not ushered into such a pristine darkness immediately afterwards. He scanned the forest below, ominous yet possessing some strange, gothic beauty, looking for anything that seemed off. But, it was to no use; the veil of night was far too thick for any mortal eyes to pierce, let alone the count's failing sight.

He continued to scan the lush countryside, and his fears subsided a little. Then, he looked to the skies, and the sight that greeted him so obviously made him both shake with fear and curse his lack of previous observation. The night sky did not look *right*, for it exhibited no bright spectacle of the moon's gracious light, let alone the dozens of stars that men always dreamt of ascending, or the moody clouds that might have blocked both. There was simply nothing, a void, and it stared directly into Wilhelm's *soul*.

The sight mirrored the horrible, unspeakable painting that lurked within the study. Indeed, as Wilhelm looked on, trepidation mounting, the more obvious the connection became. Everything that was wrong with the sky was exactly the same as what made that artwork so distortedly memorable, as though some divine power had judged it just to punish the world with that artist's same, cruel madness. The count's eyes scanned the forests again, looking for the unknown creature that haunted the canvas, but he could not see it, nor did the mountains call out to him in the same manner that the painting had portrayed them. It was just the sky, that vast, endless sky.

Wilhelm turned away, not wanting to torture himself any longer. He felt as though his heart could simply collapse upon itself any moment, his chest sore, the fear that possessed him

going so far as to cause physical pain as well. His senses calmed, though, as he smelt something aromatic suddenly emanating from the far corner of his chamber, inviting and sublime.

It was his pipe; it was lit, sitting gently upon the far corner table, its puffy smoke having pervaded every extent of the room. Wilhelm was drawn to it, clutching at his chest as he hurriedly walked towards the table. Picking up the hot pipe, he placed the end of it in his mouth, the purity of opiate pleasure absolutely overwhelming to his crumbling mind. A solace immediately embraced his weariness, and he sat contently upon the floor, shutting out the memories of the day and replacing them with better times.

It seemed so easy to Wilhelm; this sort of life was one that had tempted him even in his most arrogant years of his youth, when his drive, his idealistic obsession, with ambitions that he could no longer even hope to dream of now, was at the center of his persona. If the call, the great, seductive urge of sloth had been present in those days, then what hope could this estranged, fragile incarnation of the count possibly have to actually *resist*?

Inhale, and exhale. The count looked on at the floating rings of smoke with a certain bitter smile. That was what his life could very consist of in its entirety, if he simply gave up. His duties to the Imperial Family, his duty to his country, his duty to himself, his pride, his curious nature; if his existence should be deprived of all of that, the life that he could lead would be a happy one. Wilhelm realized that joy was something that had been almost foreign to him in the last few months, with the wine and tobacco being the only things that could entertain him. Even his collection of books seemed dull in comparison. Perhaps, then, it would be worth simply giving in to desire for once, and abandoning all inhibition. The count was already half way there; certainly his drinking at least was far more excessive than most could ever claim. It would not take much more to make the transition.

The fragrance of the smoke grew stronger and stronger, and Wilhelm felt better days bring bliss to his mind: his wedding day, the birth of his daughter, his progression through Schönau University, and more. They all flashed before his eyes, and as much as he wanted, as much he so desperately wanted to throw away such memories in the name of a sardonic pragmatism, he was unable to, especially now, in the stupor that he had found himself in.

The vibrancy of the memories almost seemed real to him, the vivid recollections giving him no small measure of comfort. They turned to his childhood, his upbringing at the hands of his single mother, a lesser noble herself. Those years in particular had been full of such love, of such bountiful joy that Wilhelm almost found himself overwhelmed by a joyous sorrow, tears welling up in his eyes. To run amongst his mother's gardens, to have no desire greater than to simply make her proud; he longed for those days, he *burnt* for them.

He could feel, in the corner of his mind, the alluring nature of the pipe's smoke taking its effect. Within moments, he could have what he desired: sanctuary. He could be lost in those visions and dreams forever. Wilhelm felt a voice calling out to him, whispering such awful temptations to his inner consciousness, and he did not feel as though he needed to resist. The voice promised solace eternal; who could deny that, especially in the count's state?

And yet, there was another voice too, *the count's own*, that battled on. Wilhelm snapped open his eyes, his psyche overcome by the raging conflict. His old self returned, triumphing reason, triumphing his cynicism and disillusionment, but also triumphing *reality*. He felt the bubble of his memories evaporate before him, and the seductive voice receded back into the abyss from which it emerged. The count threw away his pipe in horror, grasping at his head. Something was wrong, something was actively seeking to *destroy* him, and he had nearly let it do it as well.

He wiped away what foolish tears that had made their way out of his eyes, and brought himself to his feet. He was still weak, that was certain enough, but clarity now graced his mind more than ever. Wilhelm would not be overcome by the dark sorcery of this place. It was not a fate that he was willing to submit to, not without some sort of resistance. His pride would not allow that he, a count of the Empire, a man that had triumphed against every adversity in his life, even *madness*, be destroyed by the heinous work of what he could only assume to either be some obscure magic or his lunacy.

He walked out the chamber door, only to be met with some distortion of the hallway that he would normally be welcomed by. Where it once stood dull and ghastly, it now presented itself with a foreign brightness, a strange sharpness to its color. Wilhelm was not surprised, though. Reality had distorted, yet again, and he knew that things were not as they really seemed. Whether this was the work of his madness or the keep itself he did not care to even contemplate. What mattered was that it was *happening* and he had to somehow pull himself out of it all.

A red carpet graced the floor, extending to each end, its sanguine out of place amongst the grey of the stone. The chandeliers overhead were now dazzling, jewels of every color embellishing their radiant beauty, matching even those that could be found amongst the Imperial Family's own residence. If indeed this was a product of Wilhelm's imaginations, he had to admit that it certainly seemed as though he had some talent for the conjuration of beauty. Perhaps there was a career in writing to be sought, after all of this was done with.

What was perhaps the most startling difference in this version of the hallway was that the art had been completely changed. Erwin Fischer, in all of his mysterious ways, had but a few family busts in the hallway, as well as the generic armaments that could be found in the residence of any lesser noble. Now, though, there were just paintings, dozens of them, covering every inch of space. Their colors were unreal, otherworldly in both hue and tone, and the brilliance of the chandeliers only served to make that vivacity all the more clear. Wilhelm dared not stare too deeply into their canvas, out of fear that he would meet the same terrible oblivion that waited within the study.

The count found himself near the door, but he did not know how to proceed. It was worrying to him that this delusion had maintained itself so clearly and without fail, and for so long at that. Wilhelm could not even imagine how the keep in itself had been changed by the insanity of this particular interpretation of reality, and he was not entirely sure that he wanted to find out, either.

A shout suddenly emerged from within the study to his right, sending a chill down his spine. Wilhelm turned immediately, breathing heavily and slow, so as to try and retain some semblance of serenity. This place would not break him; he had to but utter that reassuring lie again and again, and with any luck it could remain true, if only for a short while. Whether it was the shattering of whatever sanity he still had left or some newfound audacity, the count did not know, but he moved forwards, towards the menacing, oaken door of his study.

He pressed his ear against the infernal thing, but there was nothing to be heard. It could very well be that anything was awaiting him on the other side of the door, but he would never know for sure unless he took a gamble. Silently cursing, Wilhelm edged his hand around the doorknob, before slowly clutching it, the brass cold and unwelcoming.

An eternity passed, and Wilhelm just stood there, his eyes closed as beads of sweat formed upon his brow. The door would not move itself, and whatever horror within would not emerge unless he dared to venture in, if indeed there was a horror *at all*. Gritting his teeth, he slowly

turned the knob, a click echoing throughout the hallway as he did so, and shoved the door open, its violent creak sure to have even awoken the dead.

A man sat upon Wilhelm's regular chair, the fireplace warm with pleasant, orange flames, a glass of wine in the stranger's hand as he held a tome in the other. The count stood still, unsure as to what the man would do, but he remained motionless, his eyes going over the pages of the book with a furious concentration. The count walked closer, expecting the man to glance at him, at the very least, but he did nothing. Frustration welled up within Wilhelm, and feeling tricked out of well-deserved answers he spoke out.

"Who are you!" the count shouted, raising his fists. "Tell me who you are, and what you are doing here, or I shall unleash upon you the most miserable torment that I am capable of!" The man did nothing to respond, only exasperating the count further, and he grasped at the stranger's wine glass, so as to throw it in a rage.

Wilhelm's hand phased through the glass entirely, as though he had been made completely of air, whereas the stranger simply picked it up and sipped at the red wine. Any color in the count's face was suddenly absent, and he desperately tried to strike at the man instead, only to be met with the same result. The man could not hear him, nor could he see or feel him, and Wilhelm was overcome with a great anxiety as he came to the only conclusion that he could reach; in this reality, he was the specter, and the man sitting upon that chair was the resident of the keep.

The man in himself seemed *very vaguely* familiar. Wilhelm tried to keep his senses in check, and moved behind the man's chair, so as to spy upon his reading. He was immediately met with horror. The dark tome, the cause of the nightmarish fate that the count had stumbled into, the source of the evil that he had dismissed as entirely illusory; it was in that man's hands, its terrible runes giving out that familiarly silent chant, radiating mysterious power. Wilhelm scratched at his gloves, feeling as though they longed for the touch of those symbols.

The man was just as obsessed with the text as Wilhelm was when he first laid hands on it, his fingers tracing the outlines of every rune. Occasionally, the man would shout out with some odd fervor, explaining why Wilhelm had heard him at all. The count turned to the bookshelf in the back, seeing a familiar collection, and noticed that the tome had been taken from the same spot, the spot that the count had himself seen only for it to disappear, on the top shelf. The collection was exactly the same as well, boasting works on local wildlife.

Wilhelm could only conclude, then, that the man obsessed with the book now was none other than Erwin Fischer, and by some strange miracle the count had been gifted with the chance to gaze into the past. Indeed, whereas the bookshelf of the study was as it had always been, everything else about the room was completely different; no odd paintings, and certainly no horrifying work of terror lurking above the fireplace. The place was full of the same colorful joy that the rest of the apartments boasted.

Was this, then, when Fischer too had just begun to be afflicted by what now haunted the count? Had the décor that the count despised so much previously simply been part of the previous owner's descent into the madness and isolation that Albrecht had spoken of? The questions floated within every corner of Wilhelm's mind. This all left him more confused than he had been to begin with.

"I have it," Fischer said suddenly, startling the count. It seemed, though, that he was talking to himself. "I have it *at last*. These runes, these singing abominations have been mocking me for an entire *fortnight*, but I have conquered them. I knew that my research was not for naught; I knew that Schattenwald held the answers I sought. This tome, this infernal tome, has unlocked *everything*. I HAVE DONE IT!"

The man jumped to his feet in a grand display of pride and sincere joy, dropping the book upon the chair behind him. Wilhelm looked on with a sense of bewilderment. It seemed that Fischer was not nearly as dull as it would have first appeared. This was not a man that had somehow stumbled upon insanity and was subsequently driven to darkness by it. This was a man that went looking for it, and evidently, it was a man that was all too familiar with what was involved.

That he had managed to understand the horrible runes that plagued that tome was in itself something of a great feat. Erwin Fischer had been no count, no student of the Magistry. The arcane arts should be entirely foreign to a man as paltry as him, and yet, here he was, deciphering the secrets that even Wilhelm had been unable to, and had concluded were utterly obfuscated by some unfathomable complexity. It was slightly wounding to his pride, if anything.

Fischer rushed out of the room with a hurry, forgetting the tome entirely, and Wilhelm heard the slam of the door leading into the keep proper. The count, against his better judgment, stared at the book with caution. The call of that silent chant was hard to resist, especially when he knew that the book was destroyed in his own time. The count no longer gave much thought to his own predicament, the miracle that had somehow managed to warp time itself, and inched forward, to give the pages of that book a quick glance.

A rumble shook the entirety of the keep, the entirety of the *mountain*, before Wilhelm could get close enough. The count's head suddenly burned with pain immeasurable, and he fell to his knees in a frenzy. His vision blurred and distorted, the colors of the room all mixing together in a sinister array of brilliant yet horrifying lights. The stone around him crumbled entirely, leaving him exposed to the devouring sky, infinite and terrible.

The sky itself manifested, the oblivion pouring down from space itself, until it resembled the same monstrous shape that had tormented Wilhelm before. The count sheltered his gaze from the thing's presence, but a defiant spirit stirred up within him. No longer would he cower in the face of this evil. He had to face it, and now.

Yellow eyes, if indeed one could name such immense globules *eyes*, formed in the dark mass, staring directly at Wilhelm. The count shouted, continuing his defiance, as his sanity all but crumbled at the face of such an unearthly thing. The thing took its shape in full, but the count could not comprehend it, for there was nothing that existed that was at all comparable. The beast, that sinister god of all of perdition and despair, lunged down towards the count, in a tempest of furious malice.

Pain could not describe what the count felt next, as his very existence faded within an instant, only for his mind, his *soul*, to remain, formless and left to the mercy of the now grinning, monumental demon that had claimed him for eternity.

The count awoke shaking and sobbing, seated on a chair in the ballroom, Albrecht worriedly approaching him. Wilhelm could still feel the searing pain of his own annihilation, his mind in utter turmoil as the elderly butler shook him a little. His eyes were locked upon the ceiling, vision hazy and erratic. It was as though the count had been remade, and he was but an infant emerging from the womb of creation.

Sound returned to his ears, first in the form of a violent screeching, before slowly normalizing to something more fitting for reality. Albrecht's deep voice filled the air, booming with frustration and fear. "Count Wilhelm, Count Wilhelm!" The count mouthed gibberish, his mind returning to him as the shock of his nightmarish demise slowly subsided. His sight returned to what he once expected, and he felt as though he could finally speak.

"Wh-where?" That was all that he could force out, sounding akin to some frightened youngling. Wilhelm would feel a sense of shame if he was not so horrendously terrified. Albrecht looked at him with a dumb expression, utterly confused, but said nothing, simply wrapping a blanket around the trembling count. The count embraced it gladly, trying to reach out to whatever semblance of calmness that he could muster.

"You are safe, sir," the butler was stoic as ever, but it was clear that he was more than a little disturbed. "You are in the safety of your keep; you need not be so afraid."

Wilhelm looked around, and confirmed the old man's assertions. There was still daylight, too, streaming in through the large paneled windows of the ballroom, though the snowstorm raged as madly as ever. The count found a tremendous relief nearly driving him into tears, acknowledging that his existence was still very much real, and that he had not perished to the abyss that he had been forced to gaze into. That his sanity had made it out of that terrifying delusion was something of a miracle in itself, and that it even was a delusion was doubly so. The pain that he had felt was all too real, and those yellow eyes exuded with such great malice that he could hardly bear thinking about it.

"You had something of a...panic attack out in the courtyard, Count Wilhelm," Albrecht whispered, turning to the large, closed doors behind him. "I had to clear the ballroom immediately, so as to not cause a spectacle amongst the servants when I carried you back inside. I'm not sure if you remember what happened?"

Wilhelm shook his head, unwilling to speak of any of the delusions whatsoever. "Well," the butler continued with a furled brow, "you had your hands raised in an odd matter, as though you were uttering some bizarre prayer, and your eyes were madly looking around the entirety of the courtyard. Those gloves of yours were humming, true enough, but were doing nothing else. Your voice grew louder and louder, and eventually I approached you, only for my words to fall on deafened ears. You gazed into the sky, mumbling madly, and I was forced to strike you, to snap you out of it, causing you to scream with such a horrible fright that one of the servants nearly fainted, before slipping into a deep slumber."

Wilhelm was still silent, contemplating it all. The flames he had summoned did not truly exist, then, and he had truly had a nightmare, of sorts. That did not, though, necessarily mean that what he had seen of Fischer had been entirely fictional. That entire hallucination had been far too vivid, far too powerful to have simply been the product of just a hapless *dream*.

"Albrecht," Wilhelm asked rather quietly, his speech still hampered by the occasional shudder and stammer, "has the keep changed much in the last few years?"

The butler looked absolutely puzzled by that, but, remembering his duty, quickly regained his normal stoicism. "Not particularly, sir. The apartments in particular have had their furnishings for over a century, from what I am told, though the ballroom and staircase have both been renovated several times. Lord Fischer and his family were most adamant in their sense of decoration, I am afraid."

Wilhelm let forth a quiet sigh, smirking bitterly. If there was any truth to his nightmare, it was hidden and subtle, for clearly the true Erwin Fischer would have never have had halls of illustrious colors and paintings that sparkled with brilliance in a manner that few could imagine.

Hesitating a little, the count continued his questioning. “And, did Fischer ever speak of some long search of his, perhaps a lifelong endeavor?”

“The only interest that that man ever had was in the forests and the mountains, Count Wilhelm,” Albrecht’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure you are fine?”

“I am, I think,” the count replied with a constructed nonchalance. “It was just a silly nightmare, brought on by my forgetting my medication, as usual. Do not worry about it, Albrecht, and tell the others to cease their concerns as well. The lord of this keep is fine and well.”

“Very well sir,” the wizened man mumbled. “Would you like something to eat perhaps?”

“That would be lovely,” Wilhelm nodded, before turning away. As soon as he heard the door close behind the loyal butler, he felt a chill down his spine. There were questions to be asked, but Albrecht did not have the answers. The cult of the villagers might, but, more than anything, the count suspected that he would only find the truth amongst the depths of the forests that Fischer delved into. It is clear that he found something, and Wilhelm knew that at least part of his nightmare had to have had some truth to it. That or his injections had suddenly ceased to stop the advance of insanity. He preferred one of those possibilities to the other, certainly.

Reaching into his trouser pocket to grab at his watch, Wilhelm felt something rather bulky in his overcoat, reaching into that pocket instead. He felt the leathery binding of a book, and, knowing full well what awaited him, he pulled the thing out, only to be greeted by the blankness of the infernal, ruinous tome that was at the heart of it all. It had been destroyed, and yet here it was. Whatever was responsible for the happenings in the strange village of Schattenwald was clearly goading Wilhelm into trying to seek it out.

And the count would show no fear in the face of that oblivion.

Chapter 4

The rumbling sound emanating from the motor of the automobile seemed a little worrying at first, the ice and snow having been cleared out a few days again, but as the contraption started up without so much as a single issue, Wilhelm looked on with a sense of renewed confidence. The snow storm had passed, for the most part, and the sun shone high and proud, once again reconquering the blue sky that was its domain in all other realms of the world. Not even Schattenwald could deny the natural course of things, after all.

Albrecht was in the passenger seat, looking rather restless as Wilhelm slowly inched the machine out of the castle gates, the valley down below coming into view. The castle sat on a crag of sorts, looking down ominously at the lands below, full of lush trees and fields, as well as a winding stream, the offshoot of a major river. The village utterly depended on that stream; fishing and hunting were the only two ways they could really get by, and certainly fish was their main export.

In the distance, Wilhelm idly glanced at the violet hued mountain peaks, jagged and snowy, towering over everything in sight. The village down below looked so puny in comparison, and so too did his castle. The peaks seemed to delight in that reality, looking down at the rest of the world with a sense of contempt and superiority. Too often was the natural world cruel towards the mortal one, certainly.

He began on the narrow, rocky pass leading down from the isolated bubble of the castle, the ice having, for the most part at least, cleared. The vehicle's tires screeched a little, hardly used to the rough terrain of the place in comparison to the well paved streets of the capital city, but Wilhelm simply ignored it. He proceeded slowly, noticing that Albrecht was growing rather nervous. The old man had, rather obviously, never been in one of the machines. Wilhelm could understand that even the idea of such a contraption, a mechanical horse, a testament of man's ingenuity, and perhaps even *supremacy over the natural world*, could be seen as rather terrifying in itself.

Of course, the butler would have a different view if he had not lived in such a rustic village for the last decade. The rest of the Empire had changed greatly, and in a short span at that. Schönau University was at the heart of it, and Wilhelm had played his part in all of it. But that seemed like it had been a lifetime ago now. Otto Heuberger had seen to it that the count would never be given his just rewards, or the recognition that he once deserved. Yet, it was in *his* invention that the count delighted in owning; there was no greater paradigm of hypocrisy.

The count knew, though, that there was little point in dwelling on *what could have been*. Heuberger had been victorious in their meaningless squabbles, and that was the end of it. Besides, if Wilhelm had not been assigned to his current post, if he had not been the victim of political obscurity, he would have never stumbled upon the horrors that Nebelthal hid within its northernmost edges. The count was no longer certain that it was entirely unfortunate that he been cursed so. He was onto something now; he could feel it in his bones.

It had been but a week since he had rediscovered the sinister tome, restoring itself in his coat's pocket. He had battled it for the entirety of that time, though it had, in truth, felt more akin to years and centuries than just hours and days. That silent chanting had broken him again and

again, pounding against the gates of his sanity with a vicious relentlessness, but he had not given in, refusing to let his desires control him in such a way. By some miracle, Wilhelm had been the victor for once, and he had managed to dispel whatever hold the tome had upon him, at least for a short while.

It was odd, in that sense. The oblivion that the book revealed was no longer purely dreadful in its malice; it had this strange allure to it now, as though deep down Wilhelm consciously sought out his own *destruction*. Perhaps he did, at that. Eternal rest was more than a little appealing, for the bliss that it would bring would be absolute, and had the count not a tremendous pride that drove him ever onwards, he would gladly have sold his soul to the heinous void.

Wilhelm overcame it all though, and had slowly managed to delve deeper into the tome, its runes, ever so slightly anyway, becoming all the clearer in their insidious nature. The count had only *just* managed to make out what he could of the infernal manuscript. He had no intention of ever delving into it further than he had to. The horrors that lurked within were too great a danger to the world, and the count understood that meddling with the runes threatened to unleash an unfathomable force. To try and unlock the secrets of the tome *in its entirety* would bring ruin upon everything.

The rockiness of the terrain suddenly became cumbersome, the path forming into a sharp turn. Wilhelm carefully navigated through, his steering meticulous as the automobile clumsily stumbled forward, narrowly missing a few threatening looking stones. The count slowed down a little, the sight before him bearing no small degree of majesty, before stopping entirely.

The green of the forest was coated ever so lightly by the white of snow yet to melt, with other trees having lost their leaves altogether; it was as though the woods were a complex painting, melding all sorts of colors and sizes. Even the genus of the trees seemed to vary greatly, the gnarled birches clashing with the mighty oaks and intimidating pines. The mountains in the distance whispered of some splendor and brilliance that Wilhelm could barely comprehend, their violet as mysterious as ever.

"It is quite the sight, isn't it sir?" Albrecht noted, looking mesmerized himself. "Very rarely do we get such a perfect day so far up north. This is not the usual fare by any means. It seems that your planning for a trip to the village is well timed, to say the least."

"Yes," Wilhelm said quietly, his thoughts getting the better of him. He started up the engine again, before slowly continuing down the path. "Yes, it seems that it is the most auspicious of occasions. Didn't you mention that there was a festival of sorts coming up? Perhaps the villagers and their cult can boast some truth in their primeval nature."

Albrecht chuckled lightly at that, and Wilhelm just smirked rather bitterly. He wondered if the villagers even understood what it was they were harnessing in whatever dark rituals they performed in that twisted chapel of theirs. It all looked so innocent from an outsider's view, if perhaps foolishly quaint. That was the worst part, of course; anyone would be deceived. The Empire permitted the existence of local cults, for the sake of the happiness of those that would want to delude themselves in their primitive beliefs, but in doing so it endangered the world, and allowed the fiends of Schattenwald to continue in their great travesty.

At last, the automobile left the rocky, descending path behind it, finally on even ground. It smoothly sailed along, the shoddy dirt path of a road barely managing to carve a path through the trees. Strands of smoke warped in the air overhead, the village nearby. The leaves' shade just about obfuscated the pristine brightness of the yellow sun, their dark outlines passing over the

vehicle as Wilhelm sped up, wanting to make his presence known to the villagers. Their count had arrived, and he would discover their secrets in their entirety.

The count left the trees behind, arriving in the clearing upon which the village proper sat. It was a pretty sight, he had to admit, though it was not the sort of beauty that an artist could ever capture. It was a rustic prettiness, one that Wilhelm did not care for in comparison to the ivory and marble of the fantastic cities of the south, but it was still *something*. At the very least someone could make the claim that Schattenwald had a charm to it, and that was an achievement of sorts.

Houses of log, stone and thatched roofs sat in no order in particular, huddled within the safety of the clearing, the stream cutting right through the center. There were, at best, fifteen homes in the village, each holding a family or two. The village was truly puny in every definition of the word, with its only two notable buildings being the local tavern with which the villagers entertained themselves and the chapel within which they worshipped and gathered communally.

The chapel was directly in front of him, on the other side of the stream, and Wilhelm could feel a deep curiosity plunging through the depths of his reserved mindset. He knew now what the villagers worshipped in their crude descendant of some ancient religion that had once been common throughout the entire world, one of the last cults of its kind, but he did not know just what they *did* within that building. He would not find out by simply going inside, though, and he did not want to risk endangering Albrecht in particular. Besides, the chapel was generally empty, save for when dusk fell across the countryside. The count just needed to confront the cult's head.

"Who was it that you said was the leader of the flock here, Albrecht?" Wilhelm said as he opened the automobile's door, slamming it behind him as he stretched outside. "I doubt that I have met him before."

"No, I do not think you have, Count Wilhelm," the wizened butler shuddered from the cold, before stroking at his beard. "He is an elder gentleman by the name of Heinrich Schmidt. I'm not even sure that he is a local of Nebelthal, though, let alone Schattenwald, so he will be most accommodating of your presence, I think, in comparison to the rest of the village."

"I care not if the villagers are bothered by my being here. I am their count, and it would do well to remind them of that, I think."

Albrecht nodded, before pointing to a small house next to the chapel, beyond the clumsily built wooden bridge. "That is where we shall find Mr. Schmidt. It does not, though it is hardly unusual, seem as though the villagers are out and about. They must be preparing for next week's festival."

Wilhelm silently disagreed, noting that there were several brutes staring at him from within the comfort of their own homes, their faces barely visible beyond thick windows. He could feel their eyes exuding some strange mix of apprehension and distaste. His scarlet gloves glowed a little. He could not rely on his magic to save him should they decide to act with violence, that was sure enough, but he doubted that folk here were audacious enough to do anything by themselves. They seemed meek, frail in both psyche and physicality. It was hard to understand just how they were at the heart of the madness of this place; and that was why he needed to speak to the one that directed the flow of the insanity.

Still though, Wilhelm knew that it was better not to take many chances. He had instructed Albrecht to carry a revolver with him, the count's own, though the butler himself was clueless as to the count's true intentions. He scanned the skies; there seemed to be plenty of time until night fell.

He started to make his way over the bridge, the sound of creaking wood ruining the bliss of the gently bubbling stream beneath him. It was amusing to the count; whereas he had first arrived in this place little over a month ago he had moaned at the lack of modernity to be found in what he

perceived as the world's dullest abyss, he now praised that very embracing of nature. Industrialism in the south had given it wonders, true, and the count could never become a man that was *purely* infatuated with the natural world, but he could appreciate it for what it was.

As his affection for the place slowly grew, in spite of his reservations, the count realized that it was not just curiosity that drove him onwards, nor his pride nor even just self-preservation. There was some level of altruism to be found within his motives, as surprising as that was. Wilhelm would free this tranquil place of the evil that haunted it. He would make sure that what he had found, the horrors that he had discovered within the tome, would be destroyed by his hand. He was the Count of Nebelthal; in a way, the villagers in themselves were simply misguided, and it was his duty to correct their ignorance.

The pair arrived at the house, and Wilhelm paused a little, before turning towards Albrecht. "You said this man was friendly, and foreign at that, yes? I assume then that he will be civil?"

"You are, as you said sir, the *Count*," Albrecht frowned a little. "He will be compliant with any demands you make of him."

"Good, good," Wilhelm smoothed over his rugged moustache. "Albrecht, will you wait outside, then? The matters of which I must discuss with this Heinrich Schmidt are somewhat private, I'm afraid."

"Of course, sir," the butler nodded stoically, before turning his back to the door, looking at the village in a guarding manner. Wilhelm smiled a little, appreciating the wizened man's loyalty, before gently tapping at the house's thin door, his scarlet gloves' runes pulsating lightly. Every time he gazed into those things now he was reminded of the revelation that the sinister tome had presented to him. He gulped a little, before the door suddenly slid open.

The man that it revealed was rather stout, though his handsome features and greyish eyes were immediately striking. His hair was graying, but although it was clear that the years were slowly creeping up upon him, the man seemed to have a certain agelessness in his appearance at the same time; it was as though he was caught in some impossible lapse between youth and senectitude. This would no doubt be the enigmatic Heinrich Schmidt.

The man stared at him a while, looking confused, and Wilhelm met his gaze with his own, as though seeking to match whatever silent challenge was being issued to him. The two stayed there for what seemed to last through the painful ages, before Heinrich spoke: "Ah. So you are the Count, then."

He offered a reticent bow, and ushered Wilhelm inside. The count simply rose an eyebrow at him, the man's lack of traditional respect somewhat concerning. Albrecht had promised a certain civility.

"I assume you are Heinrich Schmidt, religious minister to this village?" Wilhelm asked, still refusing to enter the man's home until he had been given a more *proper* welcome.

"That I would be, yes," the man replied, rather drily in fact, before adding with something of a lighter tone. "Would you like to come in?" That would have to do; the count obliged, closing the fragile little door behind him.

The house seemed like nothing out of the ordinary, really; one could hardly have said that this was the residence of the most important man in the village, save for the count himself. There was a meager looking collection of books collecting dust off to the side, near a rather puny fireplace, and a bed on the opposite side of the house, with a makeshift kitchen of sorts situated squarely next to it. There were two chairs by the fireplace, and a few carpets; that was all there was to this small log house.

Or that was what it seemed like *initially*, anyway. Wilhelm did note a rather odd sort of smell, emanating from a small case of incense placed on a clumsily constructed shelf atop the man's bed. He had never quite experienced anything like it, as though someone had managed to create a fragrance so charmingly exotic and intoxicating that it was almost revolting in a way. The aroma certainly betrayed the fact that Heinrich was no mere villager; this was a man with some element of power, some taste that went beyond the Schattenwald parameters.

Heinrich took a seat upon a small rocking chair, motioning his hand towards the feeble looking chair on the opposite side of the room, both huddled around the warmth of the fire. Wilhelm abided, slowly taking his seat. He had an air of caution around him, knowing all too well as to what the man before him had involved himself with. All that the count needed now were the missing pieces. He needed to confirm what he had learned, and he needed to expand upon it; and he would do whatever it took to stop the doom that would be brought forth.

"So," Heinrich started, gazing into the nearby flames, "to what do I owe the honorable pleasure of a visit of the Count of Nebelthal? I would not have thought that you would have ever visited Schattenwald proper, let alone *me personally*; we have not, after all, seen or heard anything of you since your arrival."

The man was insulting him, if subtly, but Wilhelm let it go. It was an abuse that he, in a way, was deserving of. "Yes, my apologies for my short-term absence," he replied with a forced smile. "It took me a good while longer to actually get used to the surroundings than I had previously anticipated. But, I am here now, and I think that it may be worthwhile, and indeed *practical*, for me to establish some relations with the good folk of the village. Certainly, it will be a while yet until I leave." The count could almost chuckle at that. If fate was unkind, then he would certainly *never leave*, even when his mortality caught up to him.

"And, of course," the count added quickly, as Heinrich turned his gaze towards him, "what better way to acquaint myself with the village of Schattenwald than to speak with its minister, the beacon of hope for its people?"

"Well, it is good to see our count reaching down from his great heights to graze with the common folk, certainly," Heinrich said with something of a stern tone, before lowering his gaze. "But, in all seriousness, I do appreciate the *notion*, at least. What have you come to discuss, then? Ask your questions and I shall do what I can to answer them."

Wilhelm frowned; he did not even mention that he had any questions to *ask*. Then again, it could very well be that the minister had simply anticipated that the count would want to ask of the village, seeing as how he had given it very little of his attention to begin with. It made sense, in a way, but even so, the count had to admit that there was something about this entire scenario that made him fairly uneasy. The horrors that had been revealed to him had something to do with it, no doubt.

"I suppose I should first ask about how the village has been doing lately," Wilhelm said, wanting to start off slowly. "As far as I know, Schattenwald heavily depends upon its fishing trade, as well as some hunting. Has the game been good recently?"

"Game's been good as it always has, thanks to the Hidden Ones," Heinrich crossed his arms. "Though, the weather has been getting colder, every year; fishing is going to start getting difficult I'm afraid. Certainly the Empire's never been one to bother about the outlying provinces, let alone a small little village in the smallest of the northerly provinces."

"I heard that there were attempts to create an industrial factory in the area," Wilhelm countered. "The Empire sent several engineers and workmen to scout out a prime location for such

a facility, only for them to disappear, if I remember correctly. Such a thing would have been of great use to this place, I think. A factory certainly would have helped promote local industry."

"I for one am glad that the foul thing was never setup," the minister looked a little disgusted. "The infernal contraptions and soulless machines that rise in the south are of no use to the meek folk of the north. That those engineers you speak of never arrived in Schattenwald is something of a blessing in my eyes."

Wilhelm found himself torn on the topic. Certainly there was a certain *zest* that a factory could bring to a place like Schattenwald; he had seen cities in the south, when the Magistracy first started pushing for the full industrialization of the countryside, transform from rather fledgling little settlements into sprawling metropolises that attracted thousands of people to them with the promise of industry. It had been a startling, quick transition, and it had brought untold wealth to the Empire.

And yet, what had been lost in that great advance into the realm of magic and metal? Forests had been torn apart, where they had once been ancient and majestic, and rivers had turned to muck. Wilhelm would always support the effort to strive for modernity, for indeed the Imperial Family had always been one to promote such things, but perhaps there were places, Nebelthal included, that could benefit from *not* adopting the principles of modernity. On the other hand, certainly the presence of a factory in Nebelthal may have been detrimental to the local cult; Wilhelm knew that Heinrich must have had a part to play in the disappearance of the Imperial officials.

"Besides profit and industry, then, have the villagers been able to sustain themselves well?" Wilhelm asked. "I have to send a report to the Magistracy, you see. The previous Count of Nebelthal did little to inform them as to the state of things in the province as a whole, let alone this village. I want to try and establish a *healthier* sort of relationship than just that."

"I suppose that's admirable enough," Heinrich got up from his chair, reaching towards a small bottle of ale. "As I said, the game's been good. The village has always been able to support itself, even in darker and colder years than this one, so it is no surprise to me that they have been able to manage. Considering we have no crops to grow, and depend upon exports from the rest of the province, I would say Schattenwald is doing fine. With the blessing of the Hidden Ones, of course."

"How long has the village involved itself in that cult, actually?" Wilhelm pushed. "I know little of it, beyond some obscure research that I stumbled on back in Schönau University."

"That is surprising," Heinrich mumbled. "Especially considering that I long scoured the libraries at the University for some knowledge on the Hidden Ones, and I never found anything. Granted, that was a few decades ago at least, so I suppose things might have changed in the meantime." Wilhelm said nothing, simply shrugging. The minister was beginning to suspect something, certainly, but the count doubted that he would act on a hunch alone. So long as he tried to remain naive as to the details of the cult, so as to avoid betraying the knowledge that he had gleaned from the horrid tome, then it would be fine.

"Well, as you may know from your reading," Heinrich started, taking a deep gulp from his bottle, "the Cult of the Hidden Ones had long faded away, the Imperial religions having brought it to ruin millennia ago. However, it had never really *died*, a stubborn few managing to keep its traditions going throughout the years. I was from one such family, of the blood of lesser nobles, in the eastern provinces. It was my dream to bring my faith back to the forefront of the world, when I was younger at least, and as such I became a minister for the Empire that had destroyed my traditions. However, though they were kind to appoint me to such a position, the Imperial

bureaucrats sought it wiser to send me to a province of no real import to them, and to a village that was of no real import to the province; and so here I am, in Schattenwald of Nebelthal, only even remotely important for its castle."

"And how long ago was this?"

"It must have been at least twenty five, thirty years now, I think," Heinrich mused. He did not seem to look quite that old, at any rate. "Things have changed, though. The Cult has grown in power, for people of some import have taken notice of the changes that it brought to Schattenwald. The villagers certainly took to it almost immediately, captivated by the mythos and its promises. Do you know much of our beliefs, Count Wilhelm?"

The alcohol was loosening the minister's tongue; this was to Wilhelm's advantage, certainly. "I am afraid I know little of your ways. I admit, that I am somewhat curious though; I wish to bond with my people, in whatever way I can. Perhaps some enlightenment as to their religion would be of some use in that regard."

"Most certainly," the minister murmured. "Indeed, your predecessor had little love for our ways. It is good to see that you are learning from his mistakes, or, are at least trying to *avoid repeating his mistakes*. I shall give you the knowledge you seek, of course. Would you like a drink first, though? It will be quite the long sort of rambling, I'm afraid."

Wilhelm lowered his guard a little. The minister did not seem quite as hostile as he had before; drink had thawed his icy nature, as it was wont to do. It would not hurt to join him in that state, perhaps. The count, by the looks of it, could certainly hold his drink better than this man. He nodded, and the minister got up to grab another bottle, clumsily handing it to him. Wilhelm smiled, raised the bottle in salutation, and started to drink.

"Well, I suppose it would be easiest to start with our mythos," Heinrich rubbed at his chin a little. Wilhelm waited in anticipation; if the minister spoke of the same things that he had read of, then he would know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he and his ilk were participating in an evil so sinister that the count was reluctant to even give it another thought. "This world is not our own, let me just put it in those terms first. We, that is to say, man, have always thought the natural world to be our dominion, that we are the kings of creation, the masters of our own fate. We have always held that we sit atop the rest of the beasts and creatures of this realm. This is not true."

"The Hidden Ones are at the heart of creation, not us. I can hardly describe to you just exactly what they *are*. To say that they are gods does them no real credit, as the gods of other faiths are always distant, hiding amidst the voids and shadows of the universe. No, the Hidden Ones are more than just gods, more than just these invisible deities. They have a *presence* in this world. Indeed, there is a Hidden One that lurks within the very forests of Schattenwald, the violet mountains having developed their tint through his divine aura."

"You see, they were not native to this place, not as we are," he continued, his words spinning a tale of mesmerizing fascination. "We were born here, we rose to greatness here; that is true enough. But they, they came to the world when it was still in its infancy, when it was just being forged by the powers of the cosmos. We do not know from whence they came, of course, but they emerged from the depths of the primordial seas, as though they had been lying in wait, bringing with them the continents and the flesh of the earth itself. They shaped this place, they ruled this place, and with their terrible power they emitted such a radiance, such a majesty that the world flourished in a way that you and I can barely imagine."

"But, they grew tired, and just as mankind grew and boomed, they faded away. Not just from our mortal memories, but from the world itself, discarding their physical forms, their strength drained. But they did not die, for they *cannot die*; they are not of their mortal world, and so they

are not bound by the same mortality that the rest of life is cursed with. No, they simply wait now, lurking within the darkness of the void, aiding their servants when they came, giving forth their energies to help drive their creation, until the time where they have recovered what they lost. When that time comes, so we believe anyway, it shall usher in a golden age of prosperity for all of mankind, and the natural order of things will be restored."

Wilhelm nodded a little. That did not seem to *quite* match up with the horrors of the tome, certainly, but there were enough similarities to confirm some of its stories. Granted, the tone of those tales, the delivery of it all, was more morbid by far, as that infernal text had been created only to instill madness and destructive fear into those who were cursed with its sight. The count felt some degree of pride in the fact that he had managed to confront it, true enough, but he was more thankful that he had learned of its secrets, and could perhaps stop the oncoming doom, than anything else.

For the tome had not spoken of any golden age, or at least, not in the way that this Heinrich described it. Wilhelm had to wonder whether or not the minister truly *believed* that the Hidden Ones had any real benevolence behind them, or if it was all a ruse. It was hard to say for sure; some would say that alcohol could only ever bring the truth out of people, revealing them for what they are. If indeed that was true, then the count could only conclude that the minister was, if anything, horribly naive, oafish in fact, but not in any way truly *malignant*.

Wilhelm still remembered the runes, the horrible text that they sung of, the secrets they revealed. The monsters, those *Hidden Ones* that Heinrich so blindly praised, were creatures that had been born of the earth itself, emerging from the depths of its creation when it was still in its infancy. They fought amongst themselves for control, creating terrible dominions across the planet, raising the continents from the sea, tormenting all life with every step they took, the malice practically oozing out of them. They were nothing but hateful, bringers of death, and when man arose, they quickly destroyed and enslaved all that they could.

The text was not clear as to what had happened next, but they had faded away into obscurity. None of this was nearly as worse as to the awful nature of their current existence, though. The Hidden Ones, the abominable, nightmarish demons, fed upon all of creation even as they slumbered and lurked in silence. They fed upon all that was vile within man, all that was vile within the world. And they amassed their power, waiting until all world had fallen to their heinous cult entirely, so that they could emerge in full strength.

"Very interesting," Wilhelm replied after a moment of silence, taking another swig of his bottle. "I must admit that the book that I read did not quite describe what you have spoken of in such detail, or awe inspiring gleefulness. What of your rituals and festivals then? I would like to know of their significance, too, so that perhaps I might be able to contribute in some way to the oncoming celebrations and festivities."

"Mighty kind of you," Heinrich burped a little, his eyes revealing his dire intoxication. "I can only see your benevolence enriching our little village, and perhaps even the entire province too. We mostly deal with rituals of the hunt, offering up our game and our catches to the Hidden Ones, so as to perhaps do what we can to give them the strength they need to return, in some form or another. Some archaic chants often accompany these, their meanings unknown to even myself; all I know is that there is some power about them, that is all."

Wilhelm figured that, through the machinations of the local cult, such a creature, the oblivion that stared at him through the painting within his study, through his delusions and through his most terrifying visions, would be resurrected, brought into corporeal form. He doubted now that the cult itself even had any idea as to what they were really doing, though; small

sacrifices to do with animals, more than likely, all in the name of ushering in a golden age, through their view. The cult's teachings must have been distorted over the ages, so as to fool the naive into thinking they were doing the right thing when they were only bringing damnation upon all of their kin.

All Wilhelm had to do now was decide just how he wanted to proceed. This cult could no longer be allowed to flourish in any capacity, that alone was clear, but then it was also evident that the village was not nearly as involved in the sinister nature of the evil he had uncovered as he had once thought. Even Heinrich was innocent. It would hardly be fair for the count to call upon the Empire to purge the entire area of its populace. It would accomplish nothing more than to besmirch the Empire's name and to perhaps even further the cause of the cult as well.

He could, perhaps, send for other religious ministers to replace Heinrich, to establish other religions in order to satisfy the populace's need for some superstition. It would take time, certainly, but *eventually* the current cult would fade into obscurity in favor of the more mainstream beliefs. Wilhelm was just glad that Heinrich had only remained within Schattenwald; Nebelthal in itself was rather puny in comparison to other provinces, but it would have been rather troublesome if his cult had managed to infiltrate the entirety of its population, regardless.

"You know, the former resident of that keep of yours had a similar fascination with the cult," Heinrich started, speaking suddenly. "One Lord Erwin Fischer. Good man, well educated, though he never quite embraced my teachings like the rest of the locals."

"Oh, I've heard little of him, actually," Wilhelm lied. "He seemed like a rather dull fellow, judging by his book collection." Funnily enough, Fischer had been delving into the secrets of the Hidden Ones to an extent that was far greater than the count himself. He had been interested in the forests because he knew that the foul thing lurked within. The count did not quite know, though, just what Fischer had sought, and he was not certain that the cult had any real connection to his terrifying demise.

"Oh, he was quite fascinating actually," Heinrich continued. "Did a good deal of research on our little cult, and the Hidden Ones too. Something happened though; I think he went too far."

Wilhelm took another sip of his drink, smiling at the drunken minister rather uncomfortably. It was time to leave. He reached out to shake the man's hand. "I'm afraid that I must cut our little chat short, Mr. Schmidt; I have prior engagements that I must keep to. Thank you for your help. I truly appreciate your efforts here, and the Empire does as well, I am certain."

The minister looked rather dazed, completely out of it, before turning his gaze towards the count's scarlet gloved hand. The runes started to embolden a little, their pulsations becoming almost violent in their frequency. "Those gloves of yours," he murmured. "All counts are given such things, right? The harnesses over the most ancient of crafts, sorcery, the arcane arts. What a privilege that must be, to draw from the power of the world around you, to use the gift of the Hidden Ones."

The runes started to heat up a little, and Wilhelm suddenly felt a little drowsy, slinking into his chair. Pangs of panic erupted within the corners of his mind, as he saw Heinrich stand up, his frowning eyes expressing true sorrow. "You were given many gifts, Wilhelm Mahler, for the Hidden Ones took a particular liking to you. I am sorry that this is how it must be, but those that they seek shall always, at the end of it all, be *theirs*. Just be happy that you will not meet the same fate as others who were too curious for their own good."

The door to the home opened up, and the count saw a shadowy figure standing in the doorway, the minister giving whoever it was a silent nod of approval. The count tried to fight off

his drowsiness, but it was to no avail. It must have been the drink; how foolish he was to have gorged it down so naively!

The figure approached him, and he could offer no real resistance. A heaviness started to weigh on his soul, on his heart, for even under the spell of this delirium the count knew that he had utterly failed, and that broke his spirit in a way that he could hardly begin to describe. He had always failed, and when he needed to succeed the most, he had failed in a manner that put any other to shame.

Consciousness faded quickly, the drugged drink dragging Wilhelm away from the horrors yet to come, his last thoughts focused on his little Klara, for he knew that he would never again awake.

Chapter 5

The smell of the damp forest was immediately distinguishable, even to one such as Wilhelm. It had been long since his childhood, long since the days when he ran amuck amongst fields and forests as a spirited youth, and in the gap between he had remained within gargantuan metropolises of stone and metal, locked away from nature's grasp. Yet, he could still remember the smell of pines. The air always seemed different in such a place; it seemed *richer*.

The count opened his eyes, only to be met with a sight no different than that met by that of his *closed* eyes: complete and utter darkness. It was a blurry sort of blackness as well, muddling the count's senses. He felt his head ache with tremendous pain, and he could not help but let out a quiet moan. Wilhelm resolved to squint a little and, with some time, his eyes adjusted to the light, or the lack thereof, and he was able to make out the lush foliage around him. The forest was full of malice, the pines and oaks terrible to behold, their silhouettes incomprehensibly menacing.

Wilhelm's struggled to move, a certain numbness having poisoned not only his mind but his body as well. The pounding in his head only worsened, the smell and sight of the forest doing little to calm his wits. His mind was in utter turmoil, caught within an odd mixture of exhaustion, bewilderment and uncertainty. Panic had not yet set in, for in truth the count did not quite understand his predicament.

It was only after a few minutes that Wilhelm realized that he was not lying upon anything; he was standing upright, and yet he *still* could not move. He struggled a little, only to realize that both his hands and feet had been bound, restrained by some rope, tied to what he could only conclude was a tree. His bewilderment and uncertainty died down within but an instant, and his mind returned, if only for a moment, to a sense of awareness and solemnity. But then, his last memories suddenly resurged, and where there was once an acute sense of calm there was now sheer and utter *panic*. He had been taken to the woods by Heinrich and that shadowy figure, and he had been bound to this tree for some sinister purpose.

Wilhelm struggled with his bonds with a sense of fervent violence, trying to break free with every bit of energy he could muster, but it was to no avail; the rope was too tightly bound, the knots too intricate to simply tear through with brute force. His breath was ragged and panting, and in truth he simply felt too fatigued to struggle with any more ferocity. Wilhelm knew that he had been defeated, and so foolishly at that.

He wished that he had never awoken from that drugged slumber, and that his captors had decided to do away with him in whatever manner they wished, *as he slept*. Now, he would have to face his fate, the torment that he did not even want to imagine, and he knew that it would not be merciful. The count did not want to die some miniscule offering to a demon that would bring ruin to the world. He was meant to be the one that was to stop it all, to destroy the cult. The tome had revealed itself to him for a *reason*! He had to be the savior of the Empire; he had to be *something*.

Wilhelm scanned his surroundings. Heinrich would be near, and he would have noticed the count's consciousness. If indeed the man was as heinous as his actions would imply, then no doubt he had *waited* for this moment to arrive, for the count to regain his consciousness. The minister

wanted to inflict a horrible pain, and he wanted his victim to be more than aware of that. The count could not let such malevolence be his undoing. It was not befitting of him.

The count's head snapped to the left, noticing movement within the shadows. From a pair of bushes, Heinrich appeared, an odd sort of conflict all but obvious in his expression. The shadow of panic lifted from Wilhelm's mind. This was not the man that was at the heart of all this. This was a man that knew what he was doing was utterly horrendous, unspeakably *wrong*; he was being manipulated.

A second figure emerged from the bushes, and his was a face that Wilhelm knew all too well. Upon seeing him, the count was overcome by a rage, for all the pieces that had been missing suddenly appeared to him. Everything that had happened to him, the delirium, even perhaps the tome itself; it was all but evident now. The figure spoke to him, his tone and expression as stoic and remorseless as they had always been.

"It is good to see you, Count Wilhelm," Albrecht stared at him with a profound, monstrous iciness. "I imagine that that sentiment is not mutual, which is rather unfortunate, but then, I cannot say I blame you. *It is all* rather unfortunate, really. But, this was the way that it always had to be, I'm afraid."

Wilhelm remained silent for a moment, taking everything in. The wizened old butler, the man that had showed him a kindness that he had long been bereft of; it was all but an illusion, another trick that fate was to play upon his tortured soul. But that was not a reason that could justify the pain that he now felt. That was not a reason that he was willing to accept. There was more to all of this; there had to be, for what little remained of his pride.

"Why?" the count asked rather simply. He did not feel the need to elaborate further, certainly. That single question would provide him with all the answers he required, and it would confirm the suspicions that spiraled through his every thought. If he was indeed to die, then he would want to, at the very least, die full well knowing what happened, as opposed to perishing to oblivion without any sense of enlightenment. Knowledge was what he sought, and indeed that was a constant element to his very existence; that would be true in the manner of his death too, if he were to have his way.

The butler stared at him rather quizzically for a moment. Heinrich eyed him with a sense of wariness, as though the secrets that the two of them held could very well endanger them, though they knew full well that the count was powerless. Albrecht sighed a little, and grew closer to Wilhelm, smirking rather evilly. It was all the count could do to restrain himself from spitting at the vile creature.

"It wouldn't hurt to give you some of the answers you seek," the butler mused, facing away from the count, his every step radiating malice. "I think it should be more than apparent now that I am indeed the true head of the local cult, the vassal of the Hidden Ones. The story Heinrich told you is my own. And you, dear count, you are to be my grand sacrifice, the key to the final lock, the beacon that shall let forth a sundering light; you will be what shall restore the true lords of the world to their former position of glory. You will be what Erwin Fischer nearly had been, before he had displeased my masters with his overly curious nature. I suppose, though, that you think that I have been manipulating you, leading you onwards akin to a lamb to the slaughter. This is not untrue, certainly, and I must admit that I viewed you as a pawn and nothing more; but this stretches far deeper than you think."

"It was not just a matter of leading you towards the cult; you are *special*, Wilhelm. If it was any other man, then the Hidden Ones would not have been so enthralled by your presence. I tried with Fischer, and they rejected him, violently in fact. They are drawn to you, for your madness,

your horrible and dire affliction, is what they thrive upon. So, I had to make sure that that great potential, that curse of yours, was harnessed. The medicine that you take, *gifted* to you by the Imperial Family; it is not medicine at all. It does not hold back the tide of your psychosis, of your insanity. It agitates it, *engenders it*."

Wilhelm stared at Albrecht with a blank expression. No one had access to his medicine, he was sure of it; yes, he had trusted the old butler, but he had never placed so much faith in him as to even allow him into his private quarters, and the medicine was locked within his closet at that. How then could it be a poison, deteriorating his mind? Wilhelm did not even need to ask; his mind quickly jumped to the logical conclusion, and the horrifying nature of it nearly broke him there and then.

"Ah," the butler turned to him. "You are starting to catch on, then. The Imperial Family that *loves* you, that shielded you from the machinations and destructive nature of your great rival, Otto Heuberger, the great royalty of the Empire that helped nurture you after your madness took control, is not really on your side whatsoever. You were not sent here temporarily, nor were you sent here because Heuberger interfered. The Family sent you here, sent you *to me*, to die."

"More than that still, they are loyal only to the Hidden Ones. Who do you think it was that bestowed upon them such great power, such renown? Their capital city is nothing but a complex temple, built upon the ruins of the cult. They have always looked upon you as nothing more than a pawn, to be prepared for your only true purpose: sacrifice. You were always worthless, the spawn of some lesser noble family that never mattered in the grand scheme of things. Your madness is nothing more than their creation, and they have meddled with your mind for your entire life."

Albrecht stopped speaking for a moment, as to let the distraught count take everything in. Wilhelm had showed the Empire nothing but loyalty, and even in his youth he had only ever wanted to serve, to help create. He had gone to Schönau University to enrich himself, and then to teach, and he had aspired to join the Ministry, to help spread that knowledge even further. That had been his purpose, and the benevolence of such a mission was disgusting to those that sought only to bolster their own repute.

Many had stood in his way, and his closest friends all left him, but the Family, the Family had *remained*. Konstance had left him when he was at his weakest, when he had been ousted from his positions of power by Heuberger, and had taken his little Klara with her, but the Imperial Family had taken him in. They had shown him a kindness that he had not felt since he had left his mother behind, the mother that had died right after he left for university.

It was all for nothing. He had played the fool, a puppet in the hands of the darkest of powers. And now, it would end here with his purpose, the purpose that had evidently been dictated to him his entire life, finally being realized. All hope left Wilhelm with an audible sigh, and he stared on at Albrecht without any sense of resistance.

There was a certain scent in the air, rising up, emitting a dreadful sort of decadence. Albrecht and Heinrich both seemed to notice it as well, immediately staring at each other with a fanatical eagerness. Wilhelm knew what it meant. The Hidden One that was present in this was lurking about, ready to emerge from the depths of its ethereal slumber, to feast upon the sacrifice that had been brought to it. The physical world decayed whenever it grew near; the count could only imagine what its malice would do should it were to return to its former power.

Wilhelm's hands ached, a familiar warmth making itself all too clear to him. His gloves; being the fools that his captors were, they had forgotten to strip himself of his greatest weapon. But he wondered as to whether there was any point in even resisting now. His fate had been determined. He had been steered to this course by those with unfathomable power; was there any

point, then, in trying to oppose the end of the journey? His life had been dictated for him, wasted in fact. Why even bother?

Albrecht turned to him, revealing the revolver that Wilhelm had given to him. "Funny that your life should be torn away from you by your own weapon. Only one bullet, too; were you thinking of suicide? That would have been quite the pity, though I'm sure we could have brought you back from the brink." The butler's words tore at Wilhelm further and further.

Heinrich started to mumble something, the very uttering of those dark words causing a flaring pain to rise up in Wilhelm's hands, the runes of his gloves evidently burning against his skin. He recognized the tongue that the minister spoke in; it was the language of the runes, of the sinister tome. The count wondered just how that infernal book tied into all of this. That Albrecht had failed to mention it, when he had made sure to point out every other *excruciating detail* of the entire ordeal, seemed rather telling.

"Can you feel the power in the air!" Albrecht shouted, before point the revolver directly at the count's temple. "It is tremendous. One of the Hidden Ones approaches with such ferocity! Our magic, the magic that we owe to his kin's most gracious of gifts, draws him towards you. Your madness is like a feast for his soul, and it shall be enough to restore to him what had long since faded."

"Know that you do not die in vain!" Heinrich started to chant louder, Albrecht shouting over him, a crackle in the air becoming all but apparent to the count. He stared on at the butler with a true sense of sadness, resigned to his fate. "Know too that the suffering you have gone through to reach this point, to break your mind, was all for a purpose! Your family, your mother; they died for *this moment!*"

All was still, and the count retreated into his mind, as though pulled into some forbidden sanctuary by the inner depths of his own consciousness. Images flashed throughout his head, memories that he had never witnessed, or *remembered witnessing*. Memories of things so sinister that he found an anger surging within him, out of pure disgust.

The illusion of his wife, his Konstance, taking Klara and leaving in a carriage, dressed in the blue dress that he had presented to her as a wedding gift; it was a lie. He remembered it clearly now; it was on the day of his final hearing with the Magistracy, their judgment damning, Heuberger having prevailed in their little political struggle. Wilhelm had returned home in the evening, as he always did, expecting his daughter's embrace to numb the pain of his crushing defeat. She never came to hug him that day, and he knew immediately something was wrong.

The images that he saw now were obscenely clear, as though the count had been swept away from reality and placed within the past. Blood painted the walls of his bedroom, neither his wife nor daughter anywhere to be seen. He reached for the door of the closet, his heart pounding, and the sight that he saw within was too painful for any words to describe.

Another memory surged. He received word, the day he first arrived at Schöna University, that his mother's estate had been destroyed in some sudden inferno. None survived the flames. Wilhelm's entire childhood had been destroyed that day, and he never really recovered from such a blow. But he knew, even then he *knew* that there was something more to his mother's sudden demise, something more than just coincidence. He had not been able to place it there and then, and the memory of that awful feeling lurking within his thoughts had long since faded.

It was not just his life that had been twisted by the cult and their foul gods. It had been the lives of everyone around him, too. His convenient entry to the Magistracy, his rise in power, his fall; the Imperial Family had been behind it all. Albrecht was tied to it too. The anger within him

turned into rage, and suddenly Wilhelm found himself staring the armed butler before him with a horrible, fiery sense of retribution burning in his eyes.

That fire of his erupted within his gloves, the pain of the runes increasing tenfold, and the rope that held his hands in place disintegrated immediately. Wilhelm's wrathful yells overpowered the sound of Heinrich's chanting, and Albrecht's gaze widened with fear. The count lunged towards the traitorous butler, the gloves immediately setting fire to the old man's garments. Within but an instant, the entirety of his body was clothed in flames, Albrecht's tormented screams echoing throughout the forest as he fled into the darkness.

Wilhelm turned his wrath towards Heinrich, the flames leaping out of his scarlet gloves like hounds chasing a hare, as the minister tried to flee. He too was devoured by the dancing orange and yellow, but he managed to kneel down, retaining some sense of composure as the flames brought an end to his life. At least the man died with some dignity. Albrecht still screamed in the distance, but the count could find no sympathy for such a hateful creature.

The count freed the bonds holding his feet in place as well, escaping the tree's clutches. His anger faded away, surprisingly enough, and the flames disappeared from his touch. His head ached, almost unbearably, but he did not care. His two captives were dead, having met their just rewards, and the ritual had been broken. More importantly, the truth that had evaded him for so long had finally been revealed.

But there was still something in the air, an all too familiar chanting. Anger turned into dread as the sound of it grew ever louder, as though some devilish choir had risen to bring ruin upon him. The villagers; how could he have forgotten the villagers! They must have been hiding within the forest, watching as their leaders initiated the rituals. The cult was not dead, and he had not yet succeeded!

The count fell to his knees, the chanting growing louder and louder. He closed his eyes, and reached out for his magic again, the flames once again coming to life. But, this time, he could not control it; they raged on, burning through the gloves, evidently radiating from his very *skin*. The pain was unimaginable, the fire greedily feasting upon the count's flesh, before suddenly cooling, the chanting dying down as well.

Wilhelm looked up to the sky. The stars were disappearing, their light fading away one by one, as though a painter had suddenly taken to the skies. Fear overcame the pain, and the count found himself shuddering uncontrollably as the last of the stars was devoured by the glowing blackness. The moon resisted for a while, but it too disappeared, leaving him at the mercy of the vast, eternal sky.

Konstance appeared before him, looking as she always had; a radiant beauty, the love that had made the loss of his mother somewhat bearable. He had hated her, but now that everything was clear, that her abandonment of him was not of her own doing, he could only feel the utmost regret. But he knew immediately that this was not his Konstance, though she mockingly wore that same blue dress. Her eyes gave way to that terribly familiar blackness, the void staring into his soul. He stared at her too, and though fear corrupted his thoughts, he did all he could to meet her with some courage.

She approached Wilhelm, and he soon managed to discern that she was holding the tome, the last missing piece of the puzzle. His desecrated hands began to emit the same terrible darkness that afflicted the sky, as the ghastly visage placed the book within them, before disappearing. The psychosis was not an illusion, the count knew this. That was why he had been chosen, after all.

Albrecht's revelation echoed through his head. The Hidden Ones craved insanity, they fed off of it. The tome that the count held in his grasp now was not truly real, and yet it was all the

same; the delusions that he were having were only meant to further deepen his madness, to bring him ever closer to the foul deities' grasp. It did not matter whether or not the tome was real. The Hidden Ones had managed to succeed in their great machinations.

The scent of the air became fouler with every moment, and the darkness within Wilhelm's palms intensified, exploding into the sky as though it was some heinous beacon. Something took form from that pillar of oblivion, the dark figure of the painting, the figure of the count's delusional visions, the figure that all around him had been waiting for. It all came together now.

The thing formed yellow eyes, and stared at Wilhelm, as it had once before. The count tried to face the creature with the same courage that he had faced Konstance's specter, but it was to no avail. Any valor he had melted away immediately at the sight of the thing. This was not like the delusion; this was *real*, and the terror that oozed from its existence was malevolent in a way that none should ever witness.

Despair set into the count's heart as the Hidden One gazed into him, its eyes revealing the nature of its malice. Destruction; that was the only thing this monstrosity would bring. Wilhelm tried to run, as though fleeing was even an option at this point, but dread had made him into a statue, and it was as though all the life had seeped from him. Reality distorted all around, the oblivion of that awful darkness spreading to the trees. The villagers screamed around him; the cult would receive no thanks from its deity, it would seem.

Its gaze, though, was still affixed upon the count. Wilhelm's sight failed him, his mind breaking away into madness. This thing did not just feed on insanity; it emitted it, it *encompassed it*. Those yellow eyes drew ever nearer, and as the Hidden One revealed the extent of its true form, the count felt as though the world itself trembled out of some great horror.

It descended upon the count, and within his last moments, he turned again to the embrace of his childhood memories, the memory of his poor Klara, of his life. The despair alone would destroy him in time, if the Hidden One would not. It was, perhaps, better this way; the void would bring peace. The count smiled rather sadly, and closed his eyes, resigning himself entirely to the crushing hammer of fate, knowing full well that the ruin of the world had been unleashed at last.

Within an instant, Wilhelm Mahler was no more, his final thoughts on that frightful darkness; the stygian oblivion that, with its lustrous temptation, could devour hope itself.

The End