

1 THE GLOBE

WE LIVED IN Frankenstein, which is ironic, I guess. When I say this, I don't mean that we lived in the village—we wouldn't have lasted long. We lived in the castle atop the hill, a small mossy ruin without a roof. Its arched windows framed enough empty, egg-white sky to convince everyone that the castle was deserted, a crumbling vestige of old times, where only colonies of bats dwelt, and the occasional ghost.

That was true enough.

The village itself was not much, just a road cutting through a narrow valley, with small clumps of cream-coloured houses on either side of it, climbing the slopes of the hills with the obduracy of goats. Their slanted roofs nestled together against the woods, which in that part of the Rhine region are deep and dark and patient.

There was a repair shop by a bend in the road, and a train station with two trains passing through each day, one that went to Mannheim, and the other which ran in the opposite direction,

towards Kaiserslautern. A *gasthaus* stood by the tracks, with a black knight painted on its side wall. A shallow brook snaked behind it. A little further off, past the brook, an austere, angular church loomed over the eastern part of the village. Purple briars flanked the stone steps climbing to the portal, where graceful black letters carved above the entrance announced, “How lovely is thy dwelling, O Lord,” and gave the year of the church’s foundation: 1871. On the left, a gravel pathway led to the graveyard, which for most of the year was more densely populated than the town it served.

In Frankenstein it didn’t take long to know the faces of everyone, and I had become an expert at recognising the traits of distant relatives coming to visit for Easter, a nose in the shape of a gargoyle, a pair of legs curving outward at the knee, a beard the colour of foamy stout. It was my responsibility. As we owed our continued existence to the secrecy of it, streets had to be patrolled, town borders policed, the train station surveilled. Since my vision was keen, and my nose for trouble honed by a lifelong inclination to suspect the worst, watch duty always fell to me. In fact, I volunteered for it.

I had a reason; and the reason was the last house in Frankenstein.

It was—perhaps it still is—painted bright blue, with a steep gable roof from which a single dormer window poked out. It sat away from the rest of the village, closer to the forest than to the nearest neighbour. It had no fence, but two lanky pencil pines growing in front of the entrance gave it a modicum of privacy. At the back, where the dormer window was, the forest’s larches—black in the summer but golden now that October had yellowed each needle with a seamstress’s patience—scratched at the wall.

No one knew I visited this house every night when I was

out keeping watch. Not Regina back at the castle, who'd have thrown me out had she suspected; nor my dear friend Agata, to whom I confessed everything—except this.

I climbed the tree closest to the dormer window, my black Chesterfield melting away into the shadows. My nails dug in the wet bark until I reached a bough polished with long nights of waiting. The wood knew my spine well.

The light was on in the study, though the room was empty. Upon the large oak desk, ancient of build and oriental of fashion, a half-drunk glass of wine stood beside an old Adler typewriter. It had no paper in it, but a large, leather-bound book was propped against the keys. I recognised it. *A Treatise on the Diseases of the Nervous System*, by James Ross, M.D., LL.D., Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, London.

I liked the woodcuts in it, the precise lithographs, and often-times—when I was sure the family was away in Ingolstadt—I had snuck inside to look at its pictures of brains in various states of malfunctioning, wondering just where it was, that mine was wrong. I never found an answer.

The October air was mellow, damp with the possibility of rain, and the window had been cracked open, which is how I heard him before I saw him. His footsteps along the corridor were slow; sleepy perhaps, yet still purposeful. He was not an idle man. Finally, he appeared.

Martin Hunger.

Husband of a wan Frenchwoman with the endangered sophistication of a Sumatran cochoa, father of a ten-year-old son who liked to read mystery novels, and a seven-year-old daughter who liked to pick mushrooms in the woods, Martin Hunger was professor of physiology at the University of Ingolstadt, a surgeon of the brain with a reputation for flawless execution,

and a world-renowned expert on congenital diseases of the mind. The blue house at the end of Frankenstein had belonged to his great-grandfather on his mother's side, and the family always came back in the summer, sometimes in the winter too, if small restorations were in order. This time he had come alone.

He was wearing a checkered dressing gown. It was too small for his square chest, greying but still lined with muscles—too small, and too short. His wife's. I could picture him soaking in the immaculate bathtub, a ghostly steam rising from the warm water, his weary eyes closed, until an urgent idea had pierced through his dozing like a ray of moonshine from a shuttered blind. He'd risen from the tub, water splashing everywhere from his sudden jolt, grabbed the first thing he could find, wrapped it around himself. The dressing gown clung to his wet shoulders, and I could see wet footprints shining on the wooden boards.

Martin's hair was already thinning on the peak of his wholly German hair, but around the ears it still shone with filaments of red gold. He was in his forties, though the wrinkles around his eyes, always squinting, made him look older. He put on his glasses, sat down, and craned forwards upon Ross's *Treatise*.

A slight hump of the back, accentuated by years spent with his nose inside medical atlases, pulled the dressing gown away, and from the shadows outside I saw his neck, the taut skin pulsing, the bluish bas-relief of the vein running close to the surface before it disappeared below the collarbone. The cross he always wore was dull with use and age, save for Christ's angular knees, which shone like glassy doorknobs.

My arms ached with want.

There would be a creak as they'd push open the window frame, but Martin wouldn't hear it. His concentration braved children's crying, telephones ringing, radios blaring—what was

a creak in a night such as this, when a sharp wind blew from the west, rattling the old house? Fused with the shadows of the trees whispering outside, my own shadow would slink in unnoticed, creep towards his back, raise up to meet the soft dip between shoulder and neck.

It would have been easy; too easy, almost. My arms and shadow knew better. They knew what I had to ask Martin, and that was not the way to get his attention.

How, then? I couldn't rap at the windowpane, or scratch at the wood until he saw me. He'd think a hungry soul had risen from the grave to torment him, my sight would stop his heart. I looked like a revenant.

No rouge could disguise my sallow cheeks. No powder could attenuate my bony features, or do something for the black hollows under my eyes. No brush had bristles strong enough to untangle the prickly blackthorn of my hair. I would have to wear a mask not to scare Martin to death, and while I often thought about asking the Baron for one—he had hundreds of them—the truth is that I was frightened to put my question to Martin. As long as it lived only in my mind, I could fashion the answer I wanted. Asking it would make it real, which meant I'd have to live with the real answer.

So I kept to the dark, and watched on, spying Martin's face for something I had no name for, and the fine layer of skin above his carotid for something I knew all the names of—in all languages. It was an agony, but a hopeful one.

Martin read from the *Treatise* for a while, then he jumped up, rushed to the bookshelf on the opposite side of the study. He was closer now. Through the open window, he smelled of fresh cotton, of soap. He got on the tips of his toes and dragged down a large volume bound in maroon cloth, which looked like

it weighed more than his daughter. He dropped it on top of the *Treatise*, started browsing it. The belt of his dressing gown had given, and now it hung loose around his waist. Thick blond hairs curled below his navel. A drop of water crawled down his ankle.

Again, I felt the urge to slip inside, to sneak from shadow to shadow, find his neck, kiss it, bite it. But he would never answer me then.

I let myself fall to the ground. A weasel rummaging through the leaves yelped and scuttered away from me, darting towards the forest. I ran after it. The gaunt elms on that side of the valley rose from the mist like so many desolate phantoms lingering on a battlefield. A pale eagle-owl flew in front of me, the tip of its wing brushing against my cheek.

I only slowed down when I reached the trail leading up to our castle, because the path was steep, my breath short with more than the run. It was just as well. I didn't want Regina to see me flushed, didn't want her asking questions. I pulled on the roots of a fallen horse chestnut half-sunk in the muddy side of the hill to hoist myself up the final curve.

Somehow tall and squat at the same time, all red rock dripping with dark creepers, Castle Frankenstein leaned against a large stone shoulder, itself red in colour. The stone was so bulky that the road to the castle had to draw a wide bow around it, and what lay beyond was blocked from view. When I approached the gate from this side, I always feared an ambush. That night I walked into one.

There was a snow globe sitting in front of the gate.

The glass was cracked, the snow swirled no more.

Inside, a miniature white castle shone pink at the light of the moon.

THE GARRET

THERE IS A castle on the moon.

This is what Regina taught me, after she found me in a draughty garret near the church of St Nicholas in Deptford, where I had been living—hiding, rather—after I left home, in the south of Europe. I looked up from my misery, and there she was.

Long red hair that framed her face as a bride's veil, the right eye pointing outward as if looking out for threats, Regina had the arresting presence of a fiery *sirin* on an old Russian print. The night she found me, though, her face was soft, like a mother's. She crouched down in front of me, her black frock rustling about her feet as if a flutter of moths was trapped between its folds.

She told me she had been watching me for days. Watching, as I made my way through the streets of the city, shimmering with rain, the halos around the lamp-posts as distant as other suns, far-away and forsaken. Watching, as I prowled the dimly lit alleyways of Southwark, stalking the public houses for the intoxicated sailors, stonecutters and actors who stumbled out of them.

Watching, as I dragged them giggling in the dark; and later on, as they crawled back into the light, while I stayed behind, praying for an oblivion that did not end with the crowing cock.

I was praying to the wrong god, she told me, and punctured her upturned palm with a hatpin.

The blood dripping down her fingers was more akin to water than blood, even though what it resembled the most, in the way it behaved, was liquid mercury.

It was not red.

It was silvery pink, the colour of a waning moon.

The same colour as mine.

“When did you know?” she asked, getting back up and looking around the small room. Her lips pursed. The smell was foul.

I was seven. I was hiding in a cupboard with a school friend, in the pitch black of our youthful eagerness, playing at touching each other, until I tried to kiss him like I had seen them doing in the movies, and he punched me on the nose and ran away and left me there, bleeding that strange thin blood which was not like the blood I had seen on his knees when he scraped them.

Then I knew I was different. And soon I discovered my brain worked differently, too.

I liked graves, not playgrounds. Merry-go-rounds made me sick, I had no taste for heroism. I feared my happiness was poisonous, it could spoil everything I felt happy for, and everyone I felt happy with. Balance was precarious, the world a book of signs I was good at reading—they all spelt doom.

If you’ve ever seen a spider trying to trap a hornet in its web, you know what it’s like to inhabit my mind. I’m the hornet, *and* the spider trapping it.

Soon after the realisation that I was different, there came another one: I could not stay home. Home was a place of rolling

grass dappled by a perpetual summer sun that made it impossible to hide; a place of sidelong glances following you down the streets like flies, the buzz of tongues just as persistent. Tongues talking, tongues tittle-tattling, tongues tipping off my mother about my every move. Sometimes, I caught her looking at me as one looks at tea leaves at the bottom of a cup, telling the fortune written in them. She tried to predict my future in the way I moved my arms, cocked my head, rose on my toes. What she saw must have filled her with shame, because her soothsaying always left her shaking her head, her eyes veiled over. I started to think she'd have preferred me dead, because that way she could control what would become of me—worms, and the lustre of bones.

So I left, and never returned; my heart broken, but still mine.

I sobbed and Regina was on her knees again. She told me she could save me.

I didn't know I wanted to be saved, but I did, and I followed her aboard the Night Ferry to Paris. From there, we made our way to Frankfurt and then Mannheim, until we reached Frankenstein. As we travelled, she told me the story of the castle on the moon, and the King who lived in it.

The King had a name. Ludwig II of the House of Wittelsbach, King of Bavaria.

Some called him the Swan King because Lohengrin—whom he loved—was the Swan Knight. For Regina, though, he was the King on the Moon, or simply the King.

He was born on the same day as his grandfather, the old king, at the very same hour, a momentous occurrence. The year: 1845, year of crows and violins, ships adrift amidst the ice.

The King grew up to be a quiet, thoughtful child, prone to morosity, who liked listening to his mother as she read parables from the Bible, building models of the Holy Sepulchre, and

dressing up as a nun.

He also liked to sleep during the day and stay awake at night, because once he had found a dying cygnet in a bush, and he had pierced his skin on a rose's thorn trying to save him. Then he had seen that his blood was pink with white-bluish flecks in it, just like ours, and had grown convinced that the moon had mothered him, that at birth she had placed a stone from her heart inside his tiny ribcage.

She whispered to him at night, when he got up from his bed and tiptoed to the window to look at her, high upon the blue mountains. There would come a time, she'd say, when she would call to him, and he would come home—the home of emperors and builders of wonders, knights of the Cross and the Cup. Of Lohengrin, son of Parzival. Home was Montsalvat, where the Grail was hidden. Take a sip, and you will be saved forever.

As the Night Ferry crossed the Strait of Dover, Regina told me that the King hated the wretched age he was forced to live in. A bloodless age, without mystery and magic, without honour. When everything else failed him—family, love, state—he turned to building castles, just as, when still a little child, he had built models of the Sepulchre.

In a way, his castles were graves. Linderhof, Herrenchiemsee, Neuschwanstein—all crypts he haunted, forlorn, fleeing the pomp and circumstance of the capital, searching for a moment of grace on mountain lakes and misty forests. He liked to race with his coach through the trees at night. He was mad, everyone said.

He wasn't, and no one knew that, unbeknownst even to his most trusted advisors, he was building his final castle. The castle on the moon.

"I can take you there," Regina had said as we entered Frankenstein.