

Austria

April 1648

1

The road was wide open as it passed through a patch of wild forest. The river Rhine rushed by just beyond the trees, running a meandering course alongside it. The sound of the ice breaking apart on its frozen surface was like gunshots in the cold still air, and twice the spooked horses shied and worried at their bits. But they calmed again at the sound of Alexander's patient and compelling voice.

Alexander Corvina was heavily dressed, as was Lucien, since the chill of the long winter had not yet gone from the spring air. Alexander felt the cold less than others, but recalled that there had been times in Vienna when he could have done with a thicker coat and boots. He could not hear the birds yet, and he saw icicles dripping among the fresh green shoots on the bare branches.

There were few travelers along the way. A hay wagon passed by going in the opposite direction, and the driver was more occupied with nursing a flask than paying attention to the road. Women walked along the weed covered shoulder of the road toting baskets, headed toward another village. As they passed the two riders, they looked up, and their startled faces reflected some nameless dread. Alexander was forced to do something to assuage them. He opted to tilt his hat toward them and smile. It seemed all he needed to make them relax their guard. After another moment, the women nodded their heads in return, then shyly giggled as they walked a little faster.

All through the morning Lucien had said nothing, and spent some of the time reading from his little book. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, he put the book away and sat sleeping in his saddle, his hat drawn down over his eyes while his horse walked on unguided. Lucien looked tired, something almost unheard of in the two long years they had traveled together.

Alexander had never seen him do that before and wondered if his encounter with van Helsing had taken more out of Lucien than he wanted to reveal. He also seemed somewhat morose. Alexander fervently wished it was more about leaving Parvati behind in Vienna than anything that passed between him and the vampire hunter.

At one point Lucien's horse wandered off the road into the thickets and began to crop winterberries from the bushes. Alexander had to turn back, seize the reins and pull her back onto the road. Even as the horse offered a moment of resistance, Lucien never stirred from his repose but never threatened to fall off either, as if he was glued to his saddle. A breeze started to tip his hat off, and Alexander was obliged to replace and tie it under the waterfall of white hair. Even that did not disturb the tranquility of that sleeping form. Alexander finally tugged at the reins and led horse and rider on behind him.

After a time, the way down the hill revealed a pleasant valley, greener than the one they had passed through before, and the air was warmer here. Alexander occupied his thoughts with observation of the forest surrounding the road.

Birds twittered and fluttered among the thickets, and the sound of water rushing among the rocks along the course of the river was scented with flowers. Spring was gentler here in the Austrian countryside than in the grim and silent darkness of Transylvania's wooded plain. The urge to write it all down led him to draw some parchment from his pack and record the impressions before they evaporated like the mist rising from the ground. Yet Alexander maintained his caution and stayed on guard for any attack.

The word in Vienna was that the war between Austria and the Turks had heated somewhat in the form of a Hungarian rogue named Miklós Zrinyi, a poet and local hero, who led raids against Turkish garrisons in the firm belief that the Ottoman Empire was weakened financially and not able to enforce its reach, and who also claimed that God was on his side.

Alexander recalled that Lucien had once said, "those who claim to speak for God were not chosen by God." But the claim alone was enough to make him cringe with distaste. He had already seen enough of false prophets when he learned of the Spanish Inquisition, which he had barely escaped but a century before. But Zrinyi's only wish was to expel the Turks and restore his country to the freedom it deserved. Alexander could not fault him for that.

Zrinyi's followers were known to set up vigilante outposts in the territory to "protect" travelers, but with that there came the risk that highwaymen pretending to be the same vigilantes took advantage of travelers on the road and

“liberated” their valuables almost with impugny. Zrinyi was also said to visit Vienna frequently, trying to rally the emperor Ferdinand III to action, but most of his entreaties fell on deaf ears. The country’s resources were already stretched beyond their limit and the people were tired of the war, which was now thirty years long. The emperor was probably mindful of that and did not want to be drawn into funding another fruitless expedition into a prolonged and expensive conflict.

Alexander recalled discussions among the local merchants that “puritanism” ruled the lands to the west, and that the protestants infected everyone with their austere requirement that men should not wear lace or bright colors and other decorative restraints. Having always been frugal with his own appearance, he found those somewhat rigorous but acceptable. But what other religious rules would they then impose? Would he have to attend church or in other ways capitulate to custom in order to keep the peace?

He suppressed a brief shudder of dread and egged his horse on with a gentle nudge in the ribs.

A short time later, Lucien finally shifted, sighed and raised his head. He glanced around and said to Alexander, “I must have dozed off. How long was I asleep?”

“Not long,” Alexander replied. “It thought it prudent not to disturb you. You seemed...”

“Tired? I do not deny it,” he said. “I can never forget that evening, and the blood of that half mad creature still flows through my veins. It will take time for me to rid myself completely of the sensations, of mad, vain righteousness and murderous intent also.”

“You said nothing of it in Vienna,” Alexander said. “Why did you not tell me? I ...”

“There was nothing you could have done,” Lucien declared with a faint smile across his lips. “I did not want to disrupt the peace there. It is my concern, and mine alone.” Then, to end the conversation he urged his horse onward and took the lead. Alexander kept his peace and followed him.

At midday the pair of travelers retired to the shade of a small copse close to a crossroad and on the bank of the river, where Lucien quickly dismounted and laid his blanket out on the grass next to the water. He laid down down on it and covered himself with his riding cape, then his head with his hat. He seemed to wink out entirely, which alarmed Alexander; but he was helpless to understand these changes in Lucien. The bouts of fatigue and alacrity were alien to Lucien’s character, he of the swift, certain sword and ready wit. The word “depression” had not been invented yet, but Alexander refused to believe that Lucien was prone to melancholy.

After a few moments Alexander regained his composure, laid his own blanket down and after brushing out his long hair with his fingers, restored his hat and sat brooding for a long time; lulled by the gentle breeze which stirred the branches above his head. For a short time he warred with himself whether he should write or nap, but instead he began to doze off. He allowed his limbs to take the lead and drag him onto his back, where he finally relaxed into a deep and dreamless sleep.

For a long interval of peace, the only sounds to be heard was the tattoo of a woodpecker somewhere in the dappled shade while shafts of golden sunlight pierced the clouds and the trees.

2

Alexander’s darkness violently wrenched him awake as the tranquility of the afternoon was shattered suddenly by the sounds of gunshots and men shouting, collisions of wood and iron, horses neighing their distress, the noise echoing chaos among the trees. He stood up quickly and scanned the forest for some sight of the conflict, thinking that the sounds were far too close for comfort if he could hear them at all.

He turned to Lucien, and found his father sitting up. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

“I did,” Lucien replied. “We must do something to help those travelers, or they will all die.” In a instant he was on his feet and leaped onto his horse’s saddle with a single bound, startling the beast. He gazed expectantly down at his son and asked, “are you coming, Alexander?”

Amazed at his father’s sudden flare of energy, Alexander followed suit with “I am right behind you!”

He charged his horse into the thicket after Lucien as he pursued a straight line through the trees toward the sounds of battle. By the time he caught up he and Lucien emerged from the wood onto another part of the road, which had curved around the bend like a hairpin.

A band of men had secured themselves in a thick grove of oak trees, occupied with loading their muskets and shooting at three men of means who used a nearby boulder as a shield. Their coach was pitched off the road into a narrow ditch, and there was a tumbled mess of cases and boxes scattered in the mud behind it. Their driver was already dead, his body sprawled haphazardly in the middle of the road like a lost piece of luggage. Another two servants were wounded and trying desperately to crawl away from danger, but were pinned down by small explosions erupting in the mud around them. The coach horses were caught in the crossfire, bucked about and strained at their yokes to free themselves. Another horse laid on her side in the mud along the road, kicking and struggling on the ground as she whickered and groaned with pain.

A man inside the coach reached out and fired a pistol at the enemy but missed, and ducked quickly as return fire shattered the coat of arms on the door. Alexander saw him push his way out the other side and go down out of sight behind its bulk as a volley of hot lead tore open the curtains.

Lucien took point, charged his horse forward and approached one of the assailants, struck the gun from the man's arm and in the same swing coshed him on the head with a solid fist before he could even react. The man went down in an instant. Without pause Lucien went on toward another two and scattered them apart using his horse as a battering ram. He pulled a third from an overhead branch and flung him roughly away into the woods. Through all the action, he never gave the men a moment to recover or react, and his horse nearly stumbled twice trying to keep up with his mental commands.

Alexander followed his lead, drew his cutlass and began mowing the gunmen down, aiming his blows for their hands and arms so that they could not hold their guns or shoot. That left only three in defensible positions among the branches of the trees, where they continued to fire on the coach as if their lives depended on it. He leaned over in his saddle in mid gallop, plucked a musket up from the ground and used it to shoot another sniper before he had a chance to finish reloading.

Lucien then turned and pursued the other assassins as they abandoned their posts and fled on foot into the sheltering wood. "Hold the line, Alexander!" he called back. "Defend those men!"

Alexander quickly turned his horse around and rode into the shade behind the coach, dismounted with a bound and went to the carriage horses to cut their traces, allowing them to bolt for the trees behind him and out of firing range. Then he ducked down with the besieged travelers behind the boulder.

Lucien returned, reached toward the last man and caught him before he could fire, rendering him unconscious with a single squeeze at the neck. Without stopping, he turned his horse and went into the wood after another fleeing bandit. Soon after that, silence reigned over the forest.

Noting that the coast was now clear, Alexander turned toward the strangers and asked in English, "are you well? Are there any injured among you?"

The man crouched next to him turned to Alexander, his eyes wide with amazement. He looked to be about thirty years of age, clad in a plain waistcoat, weskit and a muslin shirt with lace at the collar and cuffs. His long curly hair and eyes were dark brown, and he sported a small thin moustache under a straight thin nose. He said in French, "mon Dieu! Qui c'est vous?"

Alexander replied with a small nod of his head, "je m'appelle Alexandre Vincent Corvina, viscomte d'Arkanon, a votre service, monsieur."

The man crouched next to the questioner was dark blond, and his curly locks were ragged with sweat as he leaned over. "Mais un hero, monsieur," he said. "You and your man have saved our master from those brigands. I am sure he will reward you handsomely."

Alexander smiled modestly. "That man is my father, monsieur, but no reward is necessary."

The second man seemed to blanch. "Your father? But, he looks no older than you are."

The first man nudged him in the rib and crossed himself. "Do not question the aid God sent to us today, Armand." Then he addressed Alexander. "I am Jean-Louis Sevigny, Baron de Neuville, and this is my cousin Armand Richard Bourgoyne, deputy parlementaire of Beaugeraux."

"Oh, yes? and your master's name is...?"

"Eh... the baron is our master," Armand replied with a sheepish expression. "The other man in the coach is our footman. He was our decoy for today."

Alexander was taken aback as he addressed the baron. "Today? How many times has this happened? Who are you, that so many men desire your death?"

The baron smiled. "I am appointed Ambassador to Bohemia by His Majesty Louis quatorze. Rather than drag a long train of soldiers with me, I chose to travel incognito, though now I must live to regret it."

Alexander grew conscious of Lucien's presence in the shadows among the trees, but he had not come out to greet them. It was almost as if Lucien had been struck by doubt. He stood and called across the road, "father, come join us."

What felt like a long few seconds later the tall dark figure emerged from the shadows like a ghost and walked toward them as he calmly brushed leaves and dust from his riding cape. He replied, "there was no need to shout, Alexander. I could hear you very well."