

Chapter Five, “Appearances”

1

The convoy of wagons arrived in the little village near Creutzfeldt Castle on the same turbulent night as Paul Allbright and the mysterious Dr. Lejos. Thunder roared in the heavens above as the line of carts trundled through the valley to the outskirts of town. They circled wagons, pitched a few tents and made camp. After the rain died down, they built a fire, hunted for game and cooked dinner.

After some time, a group of men approached the camp. They were led by a tall, imposing town official. He introduced himself to Franz - the de facto leader of the caravan - as Inspector Klein. They spoke off to one side of the camp, out away from the fire.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Klein said, removing and cleaning his monocle as he spoke.

“Of course not,” Franz said. “We are merely passing through this part of the country and wish to bring some merriment to the townsfolk while we’re here.”

“Merriment,” Klein echoed. “That’s all very well, but what sort of merriment?”

“Games and the like.”

“Nothing unsavory I would hope.” Klein turned his gaze towards the roaring fire where Christina danced wildly to the amusement of her kin.

“No no,” Franz insisted. “We are a simple family here.”

“Family?” Klein said. “You’re telling me that you’re all related?”

“Found family, my good sir. That is what I meant.”

“I see. Well, see that you don’t cause any trouble. Stick to that and we won’t have any problems.”

“No trouble, of course.”

The inspector’s gaze had found Christina once again and, once again, he cleaned his monocle and put it back into place. Franz eyed him for a moment, smiled.

“Would you like to join us?” he asked. “There is still some food left, I believe.”

“No,” Klein said with some reluctance. “I have duties to attend to. You will excuse me.”

They said their goodbyes and the inspector and his people left camp. As Franz was heading back towards the fire he stopped at the stoop of a particular caravan. Pausing only a moment before looking up into the shadowed door, he spoke. “Did you hear all that?”

The listener - the Bride herself - stepped out of the shadows and nodded. A shawl was wrapped around her and she held it tight around her lithe form; guarded.

Franz also nodded. "We'll have to keep you out of sight."

Another nod from the Bride.

"You and that damned carnival barker!" He meant the Impresario, of course. "All of his trinkets and cursed objects. I've half a mind--"

He stopped himself, shook his head. It was no good talking with the strange woman. He didn't even know if she understood what he was saying, let alone if she comprehended the potentially grave situation that they may face when official eyes were upon them. With a dismissive wave, he left her on her stoop, alone.

"Has her own wagon," he muttered to himself with another shake of his head as he approached the fire.

He understood the reasoning behind the decision, which was made by Kezia - it was better to keep the stranger hidden from as many eyes as possible - but it didn't sit well with him, all the same. So many of them had to share wagons, or sleep in tents when they stopped, and this stranger - usurper! - commanded her own cabin. It wasn't natural.

He reached the fire and warmed himself beside it. A cold wind stirred and swept through the camp, making the flames dance and throw up sparks. As Franz batted one away, he happened to catch sight of two figures talking between two of the wagons off to the east. They were hidden in shadow but Franz could recognize anyone in the caravan by outline alone. Everyone had their own way of moving, of carrying themselves. And he recognized one of the figures as the Impresario.

The other - a tall, gangling monster of a man wearing a large cloak and hat- was unknown to him. Frowning, Franz started towards the pair. As he approached, the mysterious stranger nodded once to the Impresario and stalked off into the night, disappearing among the trees like a ghost.

When Franz reached him, the Impresario had a smile and a slight bow ready. "Good evening, Franz. Quite a night, isn't it?" That strange voice of his - that slight lisp that was somehow foreboding.

"Quite," Franz agreed. "Who was that you were talking with?"

"Merely a traveler. Curious about our camp. I, of course, assuaged him of any suspicion that he may have harbored."

Franz narrowed his eyes. "Thank you."

"It was the very least I could do for you fine folk that have allowed me to travel with you."

Franz's answer was curt. "Say nothing of it. You bring in your fair share of coin."

Another bow. "Once again, it is the very least that I can offer. My own humble contribution to this robust, extended family. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am exhausted from our days of travel and I believe that I will retire for the night."

"Of course," Franz said.

The Impresario made his exit and rounded the wagon nearest - his own - and mounted its stoop and disappeared inside. Franz watched him go then turned his gaze towards the woods where this traveler had disappeared. He shook his head, still suspicious, but the truth was that he was just as

exhausted as the Impresario claimed to be, and he retreated to his own accommodations for the night, which was one of the tents not too far from the fire.

2

Lily handed her husband a glass of brandy. At first, he seemed confused, as if he didn't know what it was, but he accepted it from her all the same and soon enough, he drank.

They were in the sitting room, which was large - almost vast - and dominated by a fireplace that was as tall as Dr. Lejos. He stood near the roaring fire, its light flickering in his penetrating eyes. When Lily offered him a drink, he demurred.

"I never drink... wine," he explained.

"Oh," Lily said, politeness stopping her from saying anything further. She and Paul settled into chairs positioned near the fireplace but Dr. Lejos remained standing, facing them, his back to the fire, his silhouette commanding the room. Now that Paul had taken his first drink, he seemed to be relying on the liquid as if his life depended upon it and, presently, Lily had to refill his glass.

When Lily decided that Paul was more interested in quenching his seemingly unearthly thirst than properly introducing her to his companion, she decided to speak up. "And where are you from, Dr. Lejos?"

"Budapest," he said.

"That's where we met," Paul said curtly. "On business," he added after Lily shot him an inquisitive look.

"I've never been to Budapest," Lily said, turning her attention once again to her fascinating visitor. "It must be a frightfully interesting place."

"It is very old," the man said. "Ancient, if you will."

"Is it romantic?"

He smiled wide. "Indeed. Ancient and romantic, like in the old stories."

She sighed, lost in her own thoughts for a moment before rejoining the conversation. "I love old stories. I was reading about ghosts when you came calling."

"Ah," Dr. Lejos said and took a few steps towards her, "ghosts. There is a subject that I know something about."

"Oh, yes?" Lily asked.

He nodded. "Ghosts are as old as recorded history. The very first specimen that we can call 'man' was afraid of the restless dead."

"How can you know such a thing?"

"My dear, the oldest writings of the oldest civilizations tell of ghosts. From Roman legends to Persian myths, the world is full of ghosts. Under flickering candlelight, I have seen cave paintings etched by the oldest man that depict fearful spectres."

Lily looked briefly at Paul, who was still interested more in his drink than with the conversation, before deciding to bring up what was on her mind. "This castle is haunted. I believe."

Dr. Lejos stepped closer to her - close enough to touch - and smiled wider. "All castles are haunted, though not always by ghosts."

"What else would haunt a castle?"

He wandered away from her, and Lily found herself actually missing his presence - wishing that he would put an arm around her and take her in his embrace. "Time," he said. "Memory. The weight of history."

He had retreated to the fireplace once again, this time on the opposite side of where he had previously been standing. Lily found herself lost in those penetrating eyes of his. It took her a moment to shake herself out of them.

"What are you a doctor of?" she finally asked.

"Many things."

Lily took another quick look at Paul before returning her attention to the visitor. "Are you... helping my husband?"

"In a sense, yes."

"How?"

Dr. Lejos seemed to consider his words. "I am providing him with a direction. A passion, you might say."

Lily frowned. She wanted to ask the man to elaborate but decided that this would have been impolite. The strange visitor walked towards Paul and, when he reached him, extended out his hand and placed it on the man's shoulder. Paul jumped at the touch and looked up at Dr. Lejos almost sheepishly. In that moment, Lily felt a tinge of jealousy rise within her. She wanted to be touched by this strange, fascinating, exciting man and yet here he was touching her husband instead. She sighed once again.

"I must ask permission to stay with you and your husband for some time," Dr. Lejos said.

"I have already invited you," Paul said a little too fast.

The strange visitor shot him a commanding look and Paul withered under its influence. Dr. Lejos then smiled and gestured to Lily. "It is always polite to ask the lady of the house."

"Of course," Lily said. "We would be delighted to have you."

He nodded to her. "I can promise you that my stay will provide much interest. And discovery, I believe."

His smile was both charming and more than a little alarming. Lily found it exciting and scary at the same time. Whatever was behind that smile was a mystery. One that she wanted to solve no matter the cost.

A large, hulking figure trudged through the marsh, hat slung low, collar turned up high. Above, the moon - not yet full, not quite - shone down in beams cutting through the thick foliage, periodically picking out the figure among the desolation. A cloud passed in front of the moon, blocking its light for a moment. When it cleared, the figure saw the destination ahead: the old, crumbling fortress near Creutzfeldt Castle.

Soon, the figure - Roderick - reached the fort. Taking a good look around to make sure that he hadn't been followed, the huge man produced a key from his coat pocket and unlocked the old door. With some considerable force, he swung the door wide. It made a horrible screech as it opened.

The front room of the old fort was barren, a squat, wide open space filled with shadows and darkness. Roderick locked the door behind him and proceeded deeper into the fort, passing through the barracks and the decrepit living quarters until he came to another door, a hidden door.

A secret door.

This he also had a key for, which he now used. Behind this door was a twisting, stone-lined hallway. Roderick entered the hallway and looked about. There was nothing. He was alone in the darkness.

Just as he was about to call out, a match was struck in the darkness. It came to light by the wall to Roderick's left. The sudden movement and light startled him but he managed to keep his face as still as stone.

The lit match, hanging in the air as if by magic, brought a nearby candle set into the wall to life and some of the darkness was dispelled. Roderick became aware of another object suspended in the air by itself - this one a cigarette. The match and cigarette came together in mid-air. The tip of the cigarette glowed alight and smoke was visible. Through the smoke, Roderick could see the transparent outline of a figure, a man.

An invisible man.

"Griffin," Roderick said.

A rich voice spoke out of the darkness. "Roderick. On time as always, I see."

Roderick nodded.

"Paul's fool of a wife is becoming a problem," Griffin said. "I was hoping that I could scare her out of her wits before now - make her more malleable to our purposes - but she's also stubborn. Though I think that I was getting to her. Paul and our mutual friend arrived tonight, though, so it doesn't matter anymore. What did the Impresario have to say?"

"He's ready for us," Roderick said.

"Both specimens?"

Roderick nodded again.

"Excellent," Griffin said. He shivered, his teeth chattering. "It's cold here when you have to run around naked. I was in the castle, getting ready to scare that small-brained woman again when our two friends showed up. Didn't have time to put anything on before our little meeting here."

Roderick didn't know what to say to this so he remained silent. He found his gaze drifting past the invisible, smoking figure. Further down the twisting hallway, his curiosity piqued.

"Oh, yes," Griffin said, apparently catching the look. "You haven't seen it yet, have you? I suppose you'll want a tour, won't you?"

Roderick nodded once again.

The cigarette was tossed to the floor. "Follow my voice."

Roderick did as he was instructed and followed the figure deeper into the secret tunnels of the fort. There were soon lit torches lining the stone hallway and he could see better. He found his anticipation mounting, wanting to discover what was at the end of the hallway.

Secrets have a way of affecting even the most stone-faced of men.

4

"Come inside, Chey."

The Bride had wandered through the shadows among the camp in the middle of the night and found herself near Kezia's wagon. The old woman had taken to calling the Bride "Chey". She had no idea what it meant, but she responded to it, approaching the stoop of Kezia's wagon. A welcoming light drifted out from the partially open door of the wagon. The Bride wondered how the old woman had known that she, the Bride, was out here in the darkness. It was one of the many mysteries of the old woman.

The Bride mounted the steps of the wagon and entered. Kezia was inside, sitting at her table. She was dealing out cards. They weren't the tarot, however, but simple playing cards. Patience, it looked like. The Bride sat down at the table across from the old woman.

Kezia didn't look up at the Bride when she spoke. Her attention was on the cards in front of her. "You have been with us for some time now."

The Bride nodded.

"Answer me," Kezia said, putting down a Queen of Spades.

"Yes," the Bride said.

"How are you finding our family?"

The Bride struggled with her voice. "Good."

Kezia nodded and completed a line of cards. It was an encouraging nod, one which invited elaboration.

"Friendly," the Bride continued. "They are friends."

"I am glad to hear that," Kezia said. "You are very welcome among us. Eva has taken to you, I think."

The Bride nodded. "Eva." She smiled.

"Andreas likes you, as well," Kezia smiled. "He's a good boy."

The Bride nodded but did not smile. She liked Andreas well enough, but not in the way that he seemed to like her.

Kezia drew another card - the Ace of Spades - and finally met the Bride's gaze. "And Christina?"

The Bride thought about it for a moment. Finally she nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Christina is... a friend."

Kezia tossed down the card she was holding, now seemingly disinterested in her game, reached across the table and took hold of the Bride's hands. She rubbed life and warmth into them. Her gaze was intense.

"Listen to me," she said. "That girl is dangerous. I love her dearly but she can be trouble. Grave trouble."

The Bride frowned, confused. She struggled to get her question out. "How long... have you known Christina?"

"Long time," Kezia said.

This did not make sense to the Bride. According to Eva - and confirmed later by Franz - Christina had joined the caravan only a few months before the Bride herself; half a year at the most. That didn't seem like a long time to her, though she was no expert in such matters, so she let it go.

"Promise me that you won't get too close to Christina," Kezia said. When the Bride hesitated, the old woman spoke again, more urgently this time. "Promise me!"

Finally the Bride nodded. "I promise."

A weight seemed to lift from the old woman's shoulders. She smiled warmly. Sighed. "It is late. You should be in your cabin, asleep."

The Bride nodded slowly. She savored the old woman's touch for another moment before leaving the wagon and heading for her own. Her mind was full of strange thoughts and ideas. Had she been lied to? Had Christina been with the caravan for much longer than she had been led to believe? Or had Kezia known Christina from a previous time, before the formation of the caravan?

But that didn't make any sense, either. As far as she knew, the caravan had lasted longer than Andreas had been alive, and he was surely older than Christina. None of it made any sense. It took the Bride some time to get to sleep that night. She tossed and turned, unable to switch off her sorcery-conjured mind.

5

Griffin had a set of clothes stashed near the entrance to the chamber and took a moment to put them on - the cold was getting to him. He wore a plain, sturdy suit under a large cloak. His head was wrapped in bandages and dark glasses under a hat.

Keeping an eye on Rodrick as they entered the chamber, Griffin couldn't help but smile to himself. The look of awe on the man's face was a delight. It seems that the size and spectacle of

the chamber was enough to inspire wonder even in a man the press had dubbed “The Hoxton Creeper.”

At the end of the long, twisting corridor - far into the mountainside now - was a massive cave that reached all the way up to an opening somewhere in the mountain. Griffin could see that moon obscured by clouds. A storm was brewing up there. Reaching like an antenna towards this opening was a jagged rock that looked like a dagger. It was immense. Carved around it, twisting up to the apex of the rock was a set of stairs.

Surrounding this huge dagger of a rock was a stream. It gave off the impression of a moat around a castle in a fairy tale. The sound of the rushing water was intense in the chamber. God only knew where the water ran down there. Perhaps to a series of natural caverns even further below the surface.

Griffin looked back up at the apex of the huge rock, which seemed to pierce the opening to the night sky above. As lightning crashed above and thunder roared, the machine that sat on the point of the knife was illuminated for a moment. Griffin chuckled to himself. God may have known where the stream ran but He had nothing to do with that machine up there. Only the hands of men - or perhaps devils - knew the touch of that infernal engine.

As he looked, a bat flew into the chamber from the opening above. In midair, the bat began to shift. To transform. Soon, it was discernible as the shape of a man. A man, standing at the apex of the rock, just in front of the machine, looking down at them, arms raised in a formal gesture.

It was Dr. Lejos.

Or, as Griffin knew him, Count Dracula.

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