

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend

The Castle of Tergnée

The Shadows of Tergnée Castle

*"In the darkness of the Carpathians, blood calls to blood,
and the shadows never forget."*

Chapters I - III

Translated from French to British English

Chapter I

Eastern Europe in the Fifteenth Century

In the year of grace 1450, Eastern Europe was in the grip of violent political and military upheavals that would redefine the borders and destinies of entire nations. The Ottoman Empire, led by ambitious and ruthless sultans, was in full territorial expansion, relentlessly threatening the frontiers of the Christian kingdoms. Each year, Ottoman armies penetrated ever deeper into European territory, leaving in their wake villages reduced to ashes and decimated populations.

The kingdoms of Hungary, Poland, and Wallachia formed the last line of defence against this conquering tide. The nobles of these regions lived in constant tension, knowing that each battle lost brought the enemy closer to their ancestral lands. In this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, some lords sought conventional means of resistance political alliances, mercenary armies, reinforced fortifications. Others, desperate or simply more audacious, turned to less orthodox practices.

At the heart of this turmoil stood a figure who would become legendary for his unparalleled cruelty: Vlad III of Wallachia, whom history would remember by the sinister name of Vlad the Impaler. Born in 1431 in the fortress of Sighișoara, in Transylvania, Vlad was the son of Vlad II Dracul, a member of the Order of the Dragon, a military fraternity created to defend Christendom against Ottoman invasions. The sobriquet "Dracul," meaning "the Dragon" in Romanian, was passed to his son in the form "Drăculea" the son of the Dragon.

Yet this honorific title would take on a far darker significance over the years. Indeed, "dracul" could also be translated as "the Devil," and many were those who, having witnessed the atrocities of Vlad III, believed that this second meaning was far more appropriate. For Vlad's acts went far beyond what even the most brutal wars of the era could justify.

The atrocities of Vlad III were such that detailed accounts have reached us across the centuries, reported by horrified witnesses, Saxon merchants, foreign ambassadors, and even diplomatic correspondence. These testimonies speak of appalling practices that defied comprehension: Vlad did not content himself with massacring his enemies by the thousands, which was already common currency at the time, but transformed death into a macabre spectacle and ritual of terror.

Impalement, his favoured method of execution, was not simply a form of putting to death, but a cruel art that he had perfected down to the minutest detail. Victims were impaled upon wooden stakes carefully rounded to prevent too swift a death, the agony could last up to three full days. Vlad personally supervised these executions, ensuring that the angle of

penetration and the length of the stake were calculated with precision to maximise suffering. It is said that in 1462, during his campaign against Ottoman forces, more than 20,000 prisoners of war were thus tortured around the town of Târgoviște, creating a veritable forest of stakes that stretched for nearly three kilometres.

Yet what truly distinguished Vlad from other tyrants of his age, what gave rise to the darkest legends about him, were his practices involving blood. Eyewitnesses, including several monks and a Venetian ambassador, affirm having seen him, during banquets organised amidst his agonising victims, dip bread into the fresh blood of his enemies before consuming it with evident pleasure. This practice was not the fruit of mere sadistic madness, but stemmed from a profound belief: Vlad was convinced that human blood, particularly that of his vanquished enemies, possessed vital properties that could strengthen his own power and longevity.

This obsession with blood became ever more pronounced with the years. Vlad began to surround himself with counsellors versed in the occult arts, men who claimed to know the ancient secrets of blood transmutation, the extraction of vital essence, and even immortality. He had one of the towers of his Carpathian castle transformed into an alchemical laboratory, where secret experiments were conducted upon prisoners. Rumours spoke of nocturnal rituals, chants in unknown tongues, and nauseating odours of sulphur and burnt flesh that escaped from the windows of that accursed tower.

Obsessed with death and haunted by the prospect of his own mortality, Vlad engaged in ever more elaborate occult rituals. He was firmly persuaded that the blood of young virgins, preferably aged between fifteen and twenty years, possessed exceptional rejuvenating properties. This belief was not his alone, it was shared by numerous practitioners of the dark arts throughout Europe, but Vlad pursued it to extremes that even the most corrupt dared not contemplate.

Fragmentary testimonies, discovered in monastic archives and personal journals of nobles of the era, suggest that Vlad had developed a complex system for identifying and capturing young women corresponding to very specific criteria. These victims were brought to the depths of his castle, where they underwent rituals whose exact nature remains largely mysterious, but whose results were always the same: their blood was entirely drained according to precise ritual procedures, involving incantations in ancient tongues and the use of specially consecrated instruments.

The blood thus collected was not simply drunk or used as such. Vlad had elaborated, with the aid of his occult counsellors, a process of alchemical transformation in several stages. The blood was first filtered through cloths of black silk, then mixed with rare herbs, belladonna of the Carpathians, wild mandrake, monkshood, and exposed to the rays of the full moon for seven consecutive nights. The resulting liquid, of a deep

purple colour almost black, was believed to contain the very essence of youth and vitality.

These practices nourished the legend of an immortal vampire, a creature of the night wandering in the darkness in perpetual search of new victims to sustain its unnatural existence. Although Vlad was a man of flesh and blood, and not the supernatural creature that popular fiction would depict centuries later, his actions created the fertile soil upon which germinated the most terrifying myths of Romanian and European folklore.

Vlad, that emblematic figure of terror who reigned for six tumultuous years over Wallachia, profoundly marked history not only through his military conquests and fierce resistance against the Ottomans, but above all through the dark legacy he left behind. His sanguinary methods and obsessive quest for immortality left an indelible imprint upon the folklore and myths of the Carpathian region tales that continue to haunt the collective imagination to this very day.

Chapter II

The Mysterious Lineage of the Batthyány

In this context of violence and occult practices, another noble family appears in the chronicles: the Batthyány. This ancient and powerful Hungarian family possessed a history as rich as it was mysterious. Established in Hungary since the thirteenth century, the Batthyány had accumulated over the generations not only considerable lands and riches, but also an ambiguous reputation that oscillated between fearful respect and veiled suspicion.

The family archives of the Batthyány, preserved in their ancestral castle of Némethújvár, bear witness to a lineage that had always maintained complex relations with religious authority. Several members of the family had been accused, at different periods, of practising pagan rites or possessing forbidden knowledge. These accusations never resulted in formal condemnations, the family was too powerful and too well connected, but the rumours persisted, passing from generation to generation like an invisible yet indelible inheritance.

In 1452, whilst Vlad III was consolidating his power in Wallachia through terror and blood, a union was arranged that would seal the destiny of several generations. At the age of twenty-one, Vlad secretly married Erzsébet Batthyány, a Hungarian noblewoman of remarkable beauty and intelligence, then aged eighteen springs. This union was not publicly announced, gave rise to no official celebration, and was kept secret for several months, a fact in itself unusual for nobles of such rank.

Erzsébet was not a conventional wife. Raised according to the particular traditions of her family, she had received an education quite different from that of other young noblewomen of her era. Instead of learning only embroidery, music, and the accomplishments of refinement, she had been initiated into more obscure knowledge: the study of medicinal and poisonous plants, the understanding of lunar cycles and their influence upon nature, the interpretation of omens and dreams, and even, according to certain sources, the rudiments of practices that the Church would certainly have deemed heretical.

Their union, beyond any romantic consideration, consolidated a strategic alliance of capital importance. Erzsébet's dowry was sumptuous: three fertile domains extending over more than 15,000 hectares of the richest lands in Hungary, a personal army of 500 perfectly trained and equipped men-at-arms, as well as a fortune in gold and jewels estimated at more than 200,000 ducats — a colossal sum for the era. All this was precious to Vlad, who undertook in exchange to protect the political and territorial interests of the Batthyány family against their numerous enemies.

After their nuptials, celebrated in the greatest secrecy in a private chapel of the Batthyány castle with only a handful of carefully selected witnesses, Vlad and Erzsébet departed Hungary to undertake the journey towards the Carpathians. This perilous twelve-day journey took them through 300 kilometres of dense forests, steep mountains, and isolated valleys where highway bandits roamed as freely as wild beasts.

The nuptial convoy was impressive: forty heavily laden wagons transported Erzsébet's dowry, her personal effects, and above all, mysterious chests whose contents were kept secret. Two hundred armed men escorted the convoy, forming a mobile rampart against the dangers of the journey. Amongst these soldiers were also seven men clad in black who bore no visible weapons and who remained always near the most precious wagons: counsellors of Erzsébet, it was said, versed in sciences that the Church condemned.

The vast forests of the Carpathians, those obscure and silent territories that seemed to exist outside of time, welcomed them like old friends. The centuries-old trees with gnarled trunks formed a dense canopy that plunged the travellers into permanent twilight, even in broad daylight. Shadows stretched unnaturally beneath the pale and diffuse light of the moon that barely pierced the thick foliage. The villagers of the rare hamlets they traversed observed the passage of the convoy with superstitious fear, furtively crossing themselves and murmuring protective prayers.

Strange incidents marked the journey. On the third night, all the horses of the convoy began to whinny simultaneously in the depths of darkness, as though frightened by an invisible presence. The sentinels swore they had seen dark forms moving amongst the trees, larger than ordinary wolves, with eyes gleaming with a reddish glow. On the fifth day, three horses were discovered dead during the night without any visible wound, their bodies rigid and cold, their eyes wide open, frozen in an expression of absolute terror.

Yet the most troubling occurrence came on the ninth day, when the convoy traversed a particularly isolated valley. The silence there was total, not a birdsong, not a rustling of leaves, not even the buzzing of an insect. A dead silence, oppressive, that weighed upon the travellers like a leaden shroud. It was in this valley that Erzsébet had the convoy halt and requested that one of the mysterious chests be brought to her. For an hour, alone in a circle traced upon the very ground, she performed a ritual whose nature remained unknown to most witnesses, but which left in the air a persistent odour of sulphur and incense.

At last, on the twelfth day, Vlad's ancestral castle rose before them, perched upon a rocky peak at more than a thousand metres altitude. The fortress was sinister and imposing, a construction that seemed to defy the laws of nature and architecture. Its four black towers of 40 metres in height pierced the sky like accusing fingers pointed towards the heavens,

and its walls, nearly three metres thick, formed a veritable fortress of secrets and accumulated terrors.

The castle had been constructed in several phases, the oldest part dating back to the thirteenth century, but it was Vlad who had transformed this simple military fortress into something far darker. It was here that he had perfected his terrifying practices during seven long years of intermittent reign, using the deep dungeons and secret chambers for his most macabre experiments. The black stone walls seemed to have absorbed the sufferings of thousands of victims, and even the most hardened soldiers felt an inexplicable unease upon passing through the massive gates of iron and reinforced wood.

The first night in the castle was that of Erzsébet's initiation into the darkest secrets of her husband. Vlad led her into the depths of the fortress, descending 50 steps of stone worn by the centuries, damp and slippery, that led to oubliettes where the light of day never penetrated and where the shadows seemed to possess a life of their own, moving independently of the meagre flames of the torches.

He showed her a dozen secret chambers, each more sinister than the last, and forgotten passages that serpented through the very bowels of the mountain. Every recess of these accursed places resonated with the echoes of past sufferings, one could almost hear the moans and supplications of the victims who had perished here over the years. The walls bore the marks of desperate clawing, rusted chains still hung from rings sealed into the stone, and dark stains, blood long since dried, mottled the floor and walls.

Vlad recounted to Erzsébet the stories of the ancient rituals that had been performed in these places, forbidden invocations uttered in the dead tongues of forgotten civilisations, and the necessary sacrifices to obtain supreme power. He spoke to her of the ancient grimoires he had acquired at great cost, some stolen from monasteries, others purchased from renegade black mages, and of the dangerous knowledge they contained. He revealed to her his ultimate ambitions: not simply to reign over Wallachia, but to pierce the secrets of immortality and become a force that would transcend mortal limitations.

Chapter III

Days of Blood and Darkness

The days that followed this nocturnal initiation were a whirlwind of blood and terror that descended upon the region like a divine curse. During the first three months of their installation in the Carpathian castle, twenty-seven villagers from the surrounding area mysteriously disappeared. These disappearances were not random, each victim was carefully selected according to precise criteria that only Vlad and Erzsébet fully understood.

Fear settled like a suffocating mist over the entire region. The villagers ceased to venture out after dusk, barricading their doors and windows with planks and blessed crosses. Parents kept their children indoors, and young women no longer moved about alone. Collective prayers were organised each evening in the churches, the priests imploring divine protection against the evil that seemed to emanate from the castle perched upon its mountain.

Vlad, with Erzsébet at his side, herself now initiated into the darkest practices, sowed terror amongst nobles and peasants alike within a radius of 80 kilometres around the castle. Their cruelty knew no social boundaries: arrogant lords who had dared to defy them, overly curious merchants, isolated beggars, unprotected young women, all became potential prey to feed their macabre rituals.

Blood flowed like a red and inexorable river in the dungeons of the castle. The two spouses revelled in these horrible acts, their souls bound by an insatiable thirst for domination and cruelty that seemed to grow with each victim. Erzsébet, in particular, demonstrated a natural talent for the dark arts that surprised even Vlad. She developed her own techniques, her own rituals, some so effective that Vlad himself adopted them.

After six months of intensive apprenticeship beside Vlad, thus completing the knowledge she had already received from her own family, Erzsébet was now fully initiated and stood proudly at her husband's side, no longer as a pupil, but as an equal partner in their dark enterprises. Her glacial beauty concealed a heart as black as Vlad's, and her keen intelligence found terrifying applications in their experiments.

Together, they reigned over the Carpathians for fifteen years with an iron grip of pitiless cruelty. Their name became synonymous with terror and death throughout the region. The legends of Vlad and Erzsébet spread like wildfire across seven neighbouring kingdoms, carried by the rare travellers who still dared to take the roads of the Carpathians and by refugees fleeing their native lands. Each tale added a new layer of horror to their dark legacy, and whilst certain details were doubtless exaggerated by fear, the heart of these stories rested upon a terrifying reality.

From their accursed union was born a son in the year 1455, under circumstances as unusual as everything that surrounded this couple. The child received the name István, the Hungarian form of Stephen. His birth was kept secret no public announcement was made, no celebration organised. This discretion was not mere precaution; it was absolute necessity to protect the child from the numerous enemies that Vlad had accumulated over the years, enemies who would not have hesitated to harm a defenceless heir in order to avenge themselves upon the father.

Erzsébet, despite all the darkness that inhabited her soul, felt upon holding her son for the first time a sentiment she believed she had definitively stifled: maternal love. This emotion disconcerted her, troubled her profoundly, for it revealed a weakness she could not afford. Yet the more she gazed upon this innocent child, the more she became aware of a terrible truth: if István grew up in the Carpathian castle, surrounded by their macabre practices and initiated from his earliest years into the darkest arts, he would perhaps become more powerful than they, but he would lose whatever humanity remained to him.

Conscious of the danger that hung over their child danger coming as much from their external enemies as from the corruption inherent in their own way of life, Erzsébet made the most heart-rending decision of her existence. When István reached the age of three, an age when he would normally begin to form lasting memories, she decided to remove him from the Carpathians and their dark kingdom.

Thus it was that in 1458, in the greatest secrecy and during a moonless night propitious to clandestine undertakings, István was entrusted to the Batthyány family, loyal allies residing 400 kilometres away in their ancestral castle of Némétújvár. A small escort of hand-picked men, composed of seven warriors of absolute loyalty, accomplished this perilous transfer, travelling only by night and avoiding all main roads. The child was placed under the guardianship of András Batthyány, Erzsébet's younger brother, a man who had deliberately chosen not to follow the obscure ways of his family.

András and his wife raised István as their own son, far from the depredations of his biological parents. They gave him a conventional noble education: horsemanship, swordsmanship, hunting, reading and writing, mathematics, military strategy. Nothing that might recall the darkness from which he came. The Batthyány scrupulously ensured that he was spared the true nature of his parents during the first twenty years of his life.

However, though far from the Carpathians and protected from the truth, István sometimes felt a mysterious call that he could not explain. In his dreams, he saw black towers rising against a stormy sky, heard voices whispering in tongues he did not know, felt a cold shadow in his heart that seemed to summon him towards a place he had never seen but which

seemed strangely familiar. These sensations troubled him deeply, but he spoke of them to no one, keeping them as a shameful secret.

Stories of the bloody exploits of Vlad and Erzsébet reached him sometimes, distorted by rumours, amplified by collective fear, but András and his family took care to minimise these tales, presenting them as exaggerations of political propaganda. István thus grew up in relative ignorance of his accursed heritage, becoming an accomplished young man, respected and apparently normal — ignorant of the darkness that flowed in his veins and which, one day perhaps, might awaken.

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Chapters IV - VI

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Chapter IV

Two Centuries Later: The Call of Blood

We find ourselves transported two centuries later, to the year of grace 1637. Time had passed, generations had succeeded one another, yet the blood of the Batthyány still flowed, bearing within it invisible but indelible traces of its dark heritage. Kaedy Jozsef Batthyány, direct descendant of István in the sixth generation, was a man of thirty-five years of remarkable bearing, measuring six feet and three inches exceptional for the era.

Like his ancestor István before him, Kaedy sometimes felt this inexplicable call, this attraction towards places and knowledge that reason commanded him to avoid. This call drove him to do something seemingly inexplicable: in 1636, he acquired the ruins of Tergnée Castle, a place laden with history and mysteries situated in the lands of the Bishopric of Tournai, in what is today Belgium.

Tergnée Castle had its own tragic history. Originally constructed in the thirteenth century, it had served as a military fortress for several centuries before being severely damaged during the conflicts that had ravaged the region. In ruins for seven decades, abandoned and considered cursed by the superstitious locals, the castle still bore the scars of ancient battles from the Eighty Years' War and the inexorable passage of time. Its collapsed walls, crumbled towers, and halls invaded by vegetation offered a desolate spectacle of decay.

Yet when Kaedy first laid eyes upon these ruins, he felt something indefinable, a sense of destiny, of recognition, as though this place had been awaiting him since time immemorial. Without being able to explain it rationally, he knew that he must rebuild this castle, that he must make it his family seat. With a fierce determination that bordered upon obsession, Kaedy undertook to reconstruct it in the Mosan style, a regional architecture that he admired for its robustness and austere beauty.

The reconstruction works were estimated to last five full years and required the participation of more than 200 skilled workers: masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, stonemasons. Preparations commenced during the winter of 1636-1637, and the actual works began in the spring of 1637, as soon as the earth had sufficiently thawed and weather conditions permitted.

This Hungarian nobleman, an imposing man with a piercing gaze that seemed to see beyond appearances, often stood upon the collapsed ramparts, contemplating the landscape that stretched before him for leagues around. The vast undulating plains and dark forests that bordered the domain were strangely reminiscent of the tales and legends of his

ancestors, those stories that his family transmitted from generation to generation but spoke of only in hushed tones, amongst the initiated.

"This castle," he murmured one day to his wife Isabella and their three children, whilst they observed together the workers bustling about the building site, "shall become a symbol of power and mystery, just as those who bore our name before me. We shall rebuild not only its walls, but also its grandeur, and our lineage shall prosper here for generations."

Isabella von Sternberg, his wife, was a woman of bewitching beauty aged thirty-two years. Her face with its delicate features contrasted with the strength of character and keen intelligence that shone in her dark eyes. She fully shared her husband's ambitious vision and possessed herself a spirit equally determined, if not more so. Their meeting, seven years prior, had not been the fruit of chance but of an almost magnetic attraction that had drawn them towards one another.

Isabella was no ordinary woman. Born of an ancient noble family of Prague, she had been initiated from the age of fifteen into knowledge that conventional society would have deemed dangerous, even heretical. Passionate about the occult arts, she had spent seventeen years studying under discreet masters who were nonetheless recognised in certain closed circles: astrology and its predictive powers, vegetable and mineral alchemy, divination in its multiple forms, and above all, what was euphemistically called "the ancient philosophies", in reality, the magical practices transmitted since Antiquity.

Her esoteric knowledge proved invaluable for Kaedy's ambitions, although the exact nature of these ambitions remained as yet unclear, even to themselves. Together, they formed a formidable couple, united not only by love and physical attraction, but above all by their shared quest for power, knowledge, and transcendence of the ordinary limitations of human existence.

Kaedy and Isabella had three children, each remarkable in their own way and already bearing the distinctive marks of their particular heritage. Ilona, the eldest aged fourteen, was a young woman of troubling precociousness. Her burning gaze seemed to pierce appearances and read into souls. From her earliest years, she had shown evident signs of talents in the mystical arts that went far beyond mere intuitions or coincidences.

Isabella had taken her under her wing from the age of eight, methodically transmitting her knowledge to her. At fourteen, Ilona already mastered three ancient languages classical Latin, ancient Greek, and biblical Hebrew indispensable for deciphering the grimoires and sacred texts of various traditions. She had also learnt two complex rituals of protection and invocation, which she could accomplish with a precision that would have been the envy of practitioners far older than she.

Yet more impressive still was her natural gift: Ilona could sometimes perceive what others could not see. She discerned shadows where others saw nothing, heard whispers in absolute silence, and had on several occasions predicted minor but verifiable events with disconcerting accuracy. These manifestations troubled even Isabella, who recognised in her daughter a potential that perhaps surpassed her own.

Katalina, the younger daughter aged eleven, presented a radically different temperament. More reserved and introverted, she spoke little but observed everything with meticulous attention. Her devouring passion for the sciences and strategy distinctly set her apart from her elder sister. Whilst Ilona explored the realms of intuition and the mystical, Katalina excelled in the domains of logic and reason.

At eleven years of age, she had already read and studied more than fifty works on alchemy, mathematics, astronomy, and military strategy. She understood concepts that scholars twenty years her senior struggled to grasp. Her memory was prodigious, she could recite word for word entire passages from books read months before. More remarkable still, she perceived patterns and connections where others saw only random chaos.

Kaedy frequently consulted Katalina on the technical aspects of the castle's reconstruction. It was she who had calculated the optimal angles of the walls for structural stability, who had determined the exact placement of the foundations to maximise the solidity of the whole, and who had even contributed to the planning of the complex underground drainage system. The master masons and architects listened with a mixture of scepticism and admiration to this young girl who gave them instructions using technical terms they barely mastered themselves.

Yet it was Jozsef, the youngest child aged five, who most worried his parents whilst arousing their greatest hope. The young boy already seemed surrounded by an aura of mystery that even the most seasoned servants noticed and found troubling. He was of an almost supernatural beauty, with delicate features and eyes of a deep blue that sometimes seemed to shine with an inner light in the gloom.

Jozsef spoke little, preferring to observe in silence, but when he opened his mouth, his words were often strangely pertinent or troubling. At barely three years old, he had made remarks about events he should not have known of. At four, he had drawn with disconcerting precision symbols that neither Kaedy nor Isabella had ever shown him symbols that Isabella later recognised in a particularly obscure grimoire from her collection.

Most troubling of all were Jozsef's dreams. He would sometimes wake in the middle of the night murmuring phrases in languages that no one in the household understood. Isabella, who had studied numerous ancient and modern languages, could not identify these dialects. When she gently questioned her son about his dreams in the morning, he described strange scenes: immense towers touching the clouds, persons clad in black robes

performing rituals around green fires, and always, that presence he called "the lady who waits."

Chapter V

The Materials of Mystery

The reconstruction site was in full swing during the months that followed the spring of 1637. What made this project particularly remarkable, beyond its scale, was the extraordinary provenance of the materials that Kaedy had chosen to use. Contrary to the custom of procuring necessary resources locally, Kaedy had the majority of materials brought from distant and specific sources.

Thirty tonnes of dressed stone were transported from his native country, Hungary, a journey of more than a thousand kilometres that took three full months and required more than a hundred ox-drawn carts. These stones did not come from just any quarry, but from a specific site in the Hungarian mountains, a place that Kaedy had personally selected after consulting ancient maps belonging to his family. The workers who extracted these stones reported strange phenomena: tools that broke inexplicably, muffled sounds emanating from the depths of the earth, an oppressive sensation that made the work arduous.

Other materials were brought from the Carpathians themselves, the cradle of his accursed ancestors, though Kaedy did not know all the details. Fifteen tonnes of centuries-old oak wood timber so hard and dense that it resisted the finest axes of the woodcutters, was felled in specific forests. Oak wood had always been considered to possess particular properties in ancient traditions: resistance, longevity, but also the capacity to retain and channel certain energies that modern science does not recognise but that practitioners of the ancient arts knew well.

Each material had, in the eyes of Kaedy and Isabella, a particular and vital significance for reasons they shared only between themselves. Isabella regularly consulted astrological tables and grimoires to determine the propitious moments for laying certain cornerstones, for erecting certain main beams. She insisted that certain architectural elements be put in place at precise moments, during the new moon, at sunrise, at the zenith, details that the workers found eccentric but nonetheless respected, for they were generously paid for their work and their discretion.

The villagers of the surrounding area, numbering approximately 800 souls spread across several hamlets within a radius of twenty kilometres, observed the works from afar with mixed feelings. This Hungarian family with its mysterious past intrigued and frightened them in equal measure. The Batthyány paid well and on time, which was rare for the era, and they did not mistreat their employees, which was rarer still. Yet rumours circulated.

Certain workers swore they had seen Isabella performing strange ritual gestures on the building site at nightfall. Others reported that Kaedy sometimes disappeared into the underground sections under construction and did not emerge until several hours later, his face grave and his clothes dusty, refusing to say what he did down there. A few whispered of having heard strange chanting emanating from the castle late at night, multiple voices psalmodising in unknown tongues.

Despite the somewhat lugubrious atmosphere that surrounded the project and the superstitions of the local populations, the Batthyány family led an apparently prosperous and respectable life. They attended religious services regularly at the local church, contributed generously to charitable works, and maintained courteous relations with the surrounding nobility within a radius of 50 leagues. Their public behaviour was irreproachable, which made the rumours all the more difficult to believe for rational observers.

After five years of intense and meticulous work, punctuated by secret ceremonies known only to the family, Tergnée Castle was finally completed in the autumn of 1642. The final structure comprised 42 principal rooms distributed across four visible levels, a number that had not been chosen at random, for 42 was a multiple of 7, a number possessing mystical significance in numerous esoteric traditions.

The restored castle impressed with its austere beauty and its apparently indestructible solidity. The rebuilt towers rose proudly towards the sky, the thick walls promised security and durability, and the specially commissioned stained glass windows projected coloured lights into the principal halls. It was a remarkable architectural achievement that should have been a source of pride for its creators.

Tergnée Castle rapidly became a place surrounded by legends and whispers throughout the region. The Batthyány family, now recognised as a feared lineage having accumulated six generations of ancestral knowledge, though the exact nature of this knowledge remained veiled in mystery, plunged its visible roots into the Hungarian noble traditions, but its invisible roots sank into far darker depths.

Yet this period of relative stability and apparent prosperity was to meet a brutal and inexplicable end. One day in the autumn of 1642, after only five years of residence in their newly rebuilt castle, something occurred. The exact details remain unclear, for no reliable external witness was present, but the undeniable facts remain: the Batthyány family vanished without a trace.

One October morning, the servants who presented themselves at the castle for their daily duties found it completely deserted. No bodies, no signs of struggle or violence, no message of explanation. Simply emptiness. The beds had not been slept in, food remained upon the tables, half-consumed

candles bore witness to recent nocturnal activities. But of Kaedy, Isabella, Ilona, Katalina, and Jozsef not a trace.

The local authorities were alerted and conducted a thorough investigation. The castle was searched from top to bottom, all servants and workers were interrogated, the surroundings were patrolled. Nothing. The disappearance remained total and incomprehensible. Certain servants reported having seen strange lights the night preceding the disappearance, others having heard chanting or distant cries, but these testimonies were fragmentary and contradictory.

The mystery of their disappearance gave way to frightening rumours that spread like wildfire throughout the entire region and beyond. Some whispered that the family had been abducted by demonic forces that they themselves had invoked and which had escaped their control. Others suggested that they had accomplished a final ritual that had transported them to another plane of existence. The most pragmatic thought they had simply fled in the night to escape unknown enemies, but this did not explain why they would have abandoned all their possessions, including objects of great value.

Chapter VI

The Silence of the Shadows

Deprived of its inhabitants, the castle was officially placed under seal by the authorities pending the appearance of legitimate heirs or clarification of the situation. But no heir ever came forward. Searches conducted in Hungary to find other members of the Batthyány family yielded no results, the Hungarian branch of the family seemed unaware of Kaedy's installation at Tergnée, or claimed not to be.

The years passed, and the castle, no longer being maintained, slowly began to deteriorate. Vegetation, with that capacity nature has to reclaim its rights, progressively invaded the domain. Within the space of merely three decades, trees had grown through the collapsed roofs, climbing vines covered the exterior walls, and impenetrable brambles obstructed the main entrances.

Tergnée Castle became the symbol of a silent terror in the local popular imagination. The inhabitants of the surrounding villages developed a multitude of superstitions concerning it. It was said that ghostly lights sometimes appeared at the windows on moonless nights. Travellers claimed to have heard voices, laughter, or weeping emanating from the ruins when they passed nearby after dusk. Some swore they had glimpsed dark silhouettes moving through the ruined halls.

Animals naturally avoided the castle. Birds did not nest in its towers, foxes and deer systematically circumvented the domain, and even insects seemed less numerous in the immediate vicinity. This absence of natural life in and around a structure otherwise ideal as habitat for the local fauna only increased the general unease.

The local priests firmly advised against approaching the castle, going so far as to suggest that the place was haunted by the spirits of those who had reigned within its walls, though no bodies had ever been found there. A few exorcisms were timidly attempted over the decades by courageous or foolhardy priests, but without apparent result. The castle kept its secrets.

Generations of children grew up hearing terrifying stories about the cursed castle of Tergnée, stories that served both as entertainment during long winter evenings and as warnings to discourage imprudent explorations. Young people, of course, were tempted to defy these prohibitions, and several groups of reckless adolescents attempted over the years to spend a night in the ruins. Most emerged before dawn, pale and trembling, refusing to speak of what they had seen or heard.

Thus ends this chronicle of the shadows that have haunted Tergnée Castle or at least, thus ends what the archives and testimonies can reveal to us

with any certainty. From Vlad the Impaler and Erzsébet Batthyány in the Carpathians to Kaedy and Isabella at Tergnée, a crimson thread of mystery and occult practices seems to connect these stories separated by two centuries.

The blood of the Batthyány, bearer of a heritage as noble as it was accursed, flowed through six generations, each generation seemingly carrying within it this inexplicable attraction towards places of power, this fascination for forbidden knowledge, this quest for transcendence that invariably led towards the shadows.

What truly befell the Batthyány family on that autumn night of 1642? Were they victims of a force they had themselves invoked and which escaped them? Did they accomplish an ultimate ritual that transported them elsewhere, to a dimension or plane of existence that our rational minds cannot conceive? Or did they simply vanish into the night for more prosaic reasons, flight, abduction, murder without trace?

Tergnée Castle, standing for nearly four centuries now, guards its secrets. Its stone walls, silent witnesses to so much history and mystery, reveal nothing to the curious who still dare to venture into its vegetation-choked ruins. Perhaps certain truths are destined to remain hidden, buried beneath the rubble of time and oblivion.

And yet, for those who know how to listen, for those whose senses are open to dimensions that modern science denies, the castle still whispers. In the sigh of the wind through its shattered windows, in the creaking of its ancient beams, in the shadows that dance upon its walls when the moon shines, for such as these, the castle tells a story that is perhaps not yet finished.

*"The shadows never forget,
blood calls to blood,
and what once was may yet return..."*

~

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend
The Castle of Tergnée

Chapters VII - VIII

Translated from French to British English

Chapter VII

The Curse of the Batthyány

Sofia, in the midst of her research for their next urban exploration, stumbled upon a captivating article in a national newspaper. This article recounted a legend as obscure as it was terrifying surrounding Tergnée Castle, once the property of the Batthyány family. According to the account, workmen demolishing the chapel adjoining the castle had discovered five coffins. Inside each lay skeletons in chains, a stake driven through the heart, and the head turned towards the east. These macabre details lent credence to the rumours of vampirism associated with this family, thus reinforcing the sinister reputation of the castle.

Fascinated by this discovery, Sofia hastened to share the information with her friends, Théo and Mia. Théo, ever eager for new urban exploration adventures, was immediately excited by the prospect of visiting this place laden with mysteries. For him, Tergnée Castle represented a unique opportunity, a plunge into the heart of history and legend. However, despite his enthusiasm, he felt a slight apprehension at the frightening descriptions of the coffins and bloody rituals. The thrill of the unknown fascinated him, yet the idea of confronting tangible evidence of such sinister rituals troubled him somewhat.

Mia, the medium of the group, reacted quite differently. As soon as she heard about the castle, a wave of ill vibrations overwhelmed her. Back at home, she fell asleep quickly, but was assailed by a premonitory dream of troubling intensity. In this nightmare, she saw herself wandering through the dark corridors of the castle, surrounded by shifting shadows, whilst chains resounded with a sinister clinking. Murmurs of pain and suffering filled the air, and vampiric silhouettes glided through the darkness, their piercing gazes fixed upon her with terrifying intensity. Mia awoke with a start, her heart pounding wildly, with the certainty that this dream was not merely a product of her imagination.

The following day, Mia shared her disturbing visions with Sofia and Théo. "This place is dangerous," she told them, an unusual gravity in her voice. "I sense a malevolent presence linked to the Batthyány family and their acts of vampirism. If you go there, I fear something terrible will occur."

Sofia and Théo, however, were resolute. "Mia, we understand your concerns, but it is precisely this mystery that makes this exploration even more fascinating," declared Théo, a gleam of excitement in his eyes. Sofia, more thoughtful but equally curious, nodded in agreement. "We shall take precautions, Mia, but we cannot let such an opportunity pass."

Despite Mia's warnings, Sofia, pragmatic and sceptical by nature, remained incredulous at the idea of the existence of vampires. For her,

these creatures were merely myths, frightening tales that added spice to their exploration. Théo, though somewhat troubled by Mia's account, was prepared to discover the buried secrets of Tergnée Castle, even if it meant confronting the dark legends that surrounded the Batthyány family.

The Eve of the Exploration

The days passed, and on the eve of the exploration, Mia seemed increasingly preoccupied. Over drinks, she attempted one last time to dissuade her friends from going, but their determination was unshakeable. "You do not understand," she insisted, her voice trembling. "I have conducted more thorough research on the Batthyány family, and what I have discovered is far worse than we imagined."

Théo, intrigued, leaned towards her. "What have you found, Mia?"

"The Batthyány are not merely a noble family with strange practices. Their lineage traces directly back to Vlad the Impaler, the man known for his boundless cruelty. It is from him that they derive their penchant for blood and macabre rituals."

Sofia, frowning, listened with renewed attention. "Vlad the Impaler? Like Dracula?"

"Exactly," replied Mia. "Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia, was renowned for impaling his enemies and drinking their blood. The Batthyány perpetuated these practices through the centuries. Kaedy Batthyány, the last lord of Tergnée, was himself known for his acts of vampirism. The legends recount that he drank the blood of his victims to prolong his life and invoke dark forces."

Théo shivered, but his interest remained keen. "And the coffins discovered recently?"

"Those coffins contained human remains, but no one knows whether they belonged to the Batthyány family or to sacrificed victims. The villagers, terrified by their reputation, supposedly chained these bodies and drove a stake through their hearts to ensure they would not return to life. It is both terrifying and fascinating."

Silence fell upon the group, charged with tension. Sofia took a deep breath, feeling a shiver of apprehension run down her spine. "Mia, do you truly believe these rituals have left a mark upon the castle?"

"I know it," replied Mia with conviction. "The spirits of the victims still haunt these places. This is not merely a castle in ruins, it is a portal to something far more sinister. The shadows I saw in my dream... they were real."

Théo nervously swallowed a mouthful from his glass. "Mia, if it is truly so dangerous, why do you wish to come with us?"

"Because I cannot leave you alone to face this," replied Mia, determined. "You do not understand the forces at work here. If you go, I must be there to protect you, to attempt to counter this evil."

A heavy silence settled, the weight of Mia's words permeating the atmosphere. Sofia and Théo, though shaken by these revelations, remained firm in their decision, their curiosity burning as brightly as ever.

"Very well," said Sofia at last. "We shall go together, but at the slightest alarm, we leave immediately."

Mia nodded, her eyes filled with gravity. "Agreed. But remember, Tergnée Castle is not merely an abandoned place. It is a cursed site, and what we discover there may well be beyond anything we have imagined."

They parted that evening, their minds weighed down by uncertainty and apprehension. Tergnée Castle, dark and silent, waited patiently to reveal its buried secrets, ready to confront these intrepid hunters of mysteries with their worst nightmares.

Chapter VIII

The Darkness of Tergnée

The Departure

Dawn broke upon a dreary day, enveloping the village in a veil of thick, almost suffocating fog. Mia, Sofia, and Théo met at their usual rendezvous point, their backpacks stuffed with exploration equipment. A palpable tension hung between them, fed by an unspoken fear, yet their resolve remained intact.

"Are you ready?" asked Théo, poorly concealing a growing nervousness beneath a mask of forced bravery.

Sofia tightened the straps of her bag with determination. "Yes, we haven't come all this way to turn back now."

Mia, however, appeared paler than the day before. "I do not know what we shall find there, but this castle... it emanates something dark, incomprehensible."

The Journey to Tergnée

The car journey towards Tergnée Castle unfolded in oppressive silence, their anxiety intensifying as the landscape grew wilder, more oppressive. The trees, twisted and skeletal, seemed to close in upon them, forming a morbid and menacing corridor.

"Look," murmured Sofia, pointing to an old wooden sign, eaten away by time. "Tergnée Castle, 2 km."

Théo slowed as they entered an even denser portion of the forest. The branches of the trees met above the road, forming a natural tunnel that plunged them into an unsettling gloom.

"It feels as though we are entering another world," murmured Théo.

Mia, her gaze fixed, her hands clenched upon her knees, whispered: "It is not merely an impression."

Suddenly, the car radio began to crackle, though no station was switched on. A strange sound emerged from the speakers, like slow, halting breathing, interspersed with incomprehensible whispers. Théo quickly turned off the radio, but the noise persisted for a few seconds before fading completely.

"What was that?" stammered Sofia, her face suddenly pale.

"Interference, surely," replied Théo, unconvinced by his own explanation.

Mia shook her head slowly. "No. It was a warning."

Arrival at the Castle

The rusted gates of the castle appeared at last, tall and menacing, as though jealously guarding the secrets of the past. The edifice itself rose, dark and imposing, its blackened stones seeming to absorb the light of day. The dilapidated towers and chipped walls bore the stigmata of a tumultuous past, an aura of desolation hovering over the place.

"We have arrived," said Théo, cutting the engine. "Tergnée Castle."

They alighted from the car, an icy shiver running down their spines. Mia scrutinised the surroundings, her senses on alert. "Do not forget what I told you. This place is cursed. Be careful."

As they approached the gates, Théo stopped abruptly. "Wait... did you see that?" He pointed towards the windows on the second floor. "I could have sworn I saw something moving up there. Like... like eyes watching us."

Sofia raised her eyes, scrutinising the shattered windows. "There is nothing there, Théo. It was probably just a bird or a play of shadows."

But Mia had seen it too. Her hands trembled slightly. "No. He is right. There is something up there. Several things. And they know we are here."

The Abandoned Gardens

Sofia and Théo exchanged a glance, a gleam of worry mingled with their determination. They pushed open the heavy rusted gates, which opened with a sinister creaking. The castle seemed to swallow them, enclosing them in a world of darkness where the secrets of the past remained buried.

Outside, the once sumptuous gardens were overrun by anarchic vegetation. The trees, with their twisted branches, cast disquieting shadows upon the ground. The silence, oppressive, was broken only by the rustling of dead leaves beneath their feet.

"Look at these statues," murmured Sofia, pointing to stone sculptures worn by the years. The once majestic faces were barely recognisable, adding to the atmosphere of mystery and unease.

Théo approached one of the statues to photograph it. The moment he raised his camera, he thought he saw from the corner of his eye the stone head pivot slightly in their direction. He spun around, his heart pounding, but the statue was perfectly motionless, frozen in the same position.

"What is it?" asked Sofia.

"Nothing... I think I am becoming paranoid," muttered Théo, but he carefully avoided looking at the statues again.

The Discovery of the Crypt

Théo approached a thick copse, with the presentiment that something lay hidden within. "This way," he said, parting the branches. Behind the ferns and ivy, they discovered the vestiges of a chapel or crypt, the walls collapsed and the stones covered with moss.

"What is this?" asked Sofia, her voice resonating in the air charged with malevolence.

Mia advanced cautiously, sensing an ancient and troubling energy. "This must have been a chapel... or a crypt. Perhaps even both. The Batthyány often mingled places of worship with occult practices."

Théo examined an overturned tombstone, the inscriptions barely legible. "Look, there are names, but they are almost effaced."

"The Batthyány," murmured Mia with a shiver. "They may have used this place for their macabre rituals."

Sofia knelt near an opening half-obstructed by debris. "It looks like a passage to something deeper."

With caution, Théo cleared the entrance. "If this is a crypt, there may be clues about what happened to this family."

Heart pounding, Mia stepped back slightly. "Be careful. This place... it is steeped in darkness."

The Descent into the Depths

The torches revealed a stone staircase descending into the depths. The air was glacial there, laden with the smell of earth and decay. The silence was total, broken only by the cracking of their footsteps upon the damp steps.

"Shall we go?" asked Théo, attempting to master his nervousness.

Sofia nodded, determination in her gaze. "Yes, we must know what lies hidden here."

They descended cautiously, each step bringing them closer to the forgotten secrets. The ancient engravings and occult symbols upon the walls seemed to dance in the flickering light of their torches, the shadows moving with a life of their own.

Halfway down the descent, the temperature dropped brutally. Their breath became visible in the frozen air, and a thin layer of frost appeared upon the stone walls. Mia stopped, seized by a violent shiver.

"Do you feel that?" she murmured. "This cold... it is not natural. It is as though something were draining all the warmth."

The Forgotten Crypt

Below, a vaulted chamber welcomed them, the niches in the walls harbouring half-disintegrated wooden coffins. Rusted chains hung, and stakes driven into the ground told the story of an ancient and profound fear.

"Look at this," whispered Sofia, pointing to a chained coffin. "They were truly terrified at the idea that something might return to life."

Mia approached an altar of black stone, her trembling hands brushing against the carved symbols. "The Batthyány performed rituals here. This place is saturated with their energy."

Théo lit a candle to better illuminate the inscriptions upon the altar. Its flame wavered in the stagnant air, then went out abruptly without any perceptible draught. He relit it. It went out again. And again. On the fourth attempt, the candle remained lit, but its flame burnt with a strangely bluish colour.

"This is not normal," whispered Théo. "Candles do not burn blue like that."

"We must document everything, but let us remain on our guard," he added in an unsteady voice.

The Cursed Tunnel

The silence in the crypt was heavy, laden with the presence of tormented souls. Suddenly, a dark tunnel, half-concealed behind debris, drew their attention. The darkness within was so profound that it seemed to absorb the light.

"Look at this," murmured Théo, his voice resonating strangely. "This tunnel must lead to the castle."

Sofia approached cautiously, illuminating the interior of the tunnel. "Castles of this era often had secret passages."

Mia, frozen with terror, murmured: "I do not like this. We could discover horrors greater still."

Théo placed a reassuring hand upon her shoulder. "I understand, but we must discover the truth."

Mia nodded, though reluctantly. "Let us stay together. I sense a terrifying presence here."

They advanced into the tunnel, their footsteps echoing in the darkness. The air was colder still and heavier, laden with the smell of mould and decomposition. Suddenly, they heard whispers. Faint at first, then increasingly distinct. Voices murmuring in a language they did not understand, seeming to emanate from the walls themselves.

"Do you hear that?" breathed Sofia, stopping abruptly.

"Voices..." confirmed Théo. "But where are they coming from?"

Mia closed her eyes, concentrating. "These are the souls imprisoned here. They are trying to warn us. Or to summon us. I do not know."

The tunnel, narrow and winding, seemed to stretch to infinity. Roots pierced the walls, casting grotesque shadows in the flickering light. At last, they reached a wider opening, a massive wooden door adorned with occult symbols stood before them.

The Ritual Chamber

"This door... it seems to contain something terrible," murmured Sofia, placing a hand upon it.

Théo took a deep breath and pushed the door, revealing a great vaulted chamber. The extinguished torches upon the walls and the grotesque statues added to the atmosphere of terror. At the centre, an altar of black stone, covered with runes and symbols, bore the traces of bloody rituals.

"We should not be here," murmured Mia, her eyes wide with fear. "This place is cursed."

Suddenly, a scratching sound was heard, followed by a glacial breath that extinguished their torches in one blow. They found themselves plunged into total darkness, a malevolent presence surrounding them. Sofia felt an intense coldness invade her, an invisible force seeming to cling to her.

"What was that?" exclaimed Théo, desperately trying to relight his torch.

"I do not know," replied Sofia, her voice trembling. "But we must leave."

Mia, her eyes brimming with tears, clung desperately to Sofia and Théo. "This is what I dreaded... We have awakened something. We must flee before it is too late."

Sofia, usually so sceptical and pragmatic, suddenly felt an invisible threat weighing upon her. A dark force, lurking in the shadows, seemed to have chosen her as its target, brushing against her consciousness in an

oppressive manner. An icy sensation insinuated itself into her chest, as though ghostly hands were seeking to seize her heart.

"I... I perceive something," she stammered, her voice broken by terror. "Something is trying to reach me. Fingers... frozen... closing upon me."

The Desperate Flight

Théo, desperately trying to relight his torch, succeeded only in provoking an icy breath that extinguished each nascent flame. "We must leave, now!"

Groping blindly, they sought to find the tunnel entrance again, their hearts pounding wildly. The glacial breath followed them, elusive as a shadow tracking them through the darkness. Sofia felt once more that malevolent presence brush against her, nearly making her cry out in terror.

In the gloom of the tunnel, as their torches had finally relit, they glimpsed behind them dark forms that seemed to glide upon the ground without touching it. Humanoid silhouettes, but deformed, following them at a few metres' distance.

"Run!" screamed Mia. "Do not look back! Run!"

The tunnel walls seemed to close in around them, each footstep resonating like an amplified echo of their own anguish.

"Sofia, hold on!" cried Théo, gripping her hand. "We shall get through this!"

"I feel... hands... claws," gasped Sofia, fighting against the irrepressible urge to turn and confront the horror pursuing her.

The Escape

At last, they managed to emerge from the tunnel, rushing outside where the light of day enveloped them in a gentle, redemptive warmth. Tergnée Castle, still dark and menacing, rose behind them, but they knew now that the darkness it harboured was far more terrifying than anything they had dared to imagine.

Breathless and trembling, they exchanged a glance, conscious that their exploration had taken a far more dangerous turn. The secrets of Tergnée Castle were far from being entirely revealed, and the shadows of the Batthyány seemed resolved to protect their mysteries at any cost.

Sofia, particularly targeted by this malevolent presence, understood that her scepticism and determination had made her vulnerable. The vampiric spirits of the castle had found in her an ideal prey, and she sensed that they would not let her escape so easily.

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend
The Castle of Tergnée

Chapters IX - X

Translated from French to British English

Chapter IX

The Call of the Shadows

The Refusal to Leave

Fear, though tenacious, did not succeed in extinguishing the flame of determination that burnt within Sofia. The terror that had seized her heart quickly faded, replaced by her habitual scepticism. She refused to accept the idea that vampires could truly exist. For her, all of this was merely a tissue of superstitions, a tale that the castle used to conceal a far more rational truth.

"We cannot leave now," she declared with a firmness that disconcerted her companions. Her eyes, bright with defiance, seemed to ignore the darkness that surrounded them. "I refuse to believe in these vampire stories. There must be a logical explanation behind all of this."

Mia, her face pale and her anguish visible, shook her head with concern. "Sofia, I beg you, listen to us. What we felt in there was not normal. There is something profoundly malevolent in this place. Something that has followed us here."

"It was merely a gust of wind or the effect of damp upon these old stones," retorted Sofia impatiently. "We must enter the castle and discover the truth for ourselves."

Théo, though less certain, sought to reason with her. "Sofia, I am willing to continue the exploration, but we must be extremely cautious. What Mia senses is not to be taken lightly. You saw what happened in the crypt."

Sofia shrugged, her tone brooking no contradiction. "I understand your concerns, but I cannot abandon now. This castle is hiding something, and we must discover it."

Mia approached Sofia, her eyes brimming with tears. "Please, Sofia, I sense that we are in great danger. This is not merely an intuition, it is a certainty. That presence which touched you in the crypt... it has not released you. It is still there."

Sofia softened her tone slightly, a glimmer of compassion crossing her gaze. "I promise you that if things become too strange, we shall leave immediately. But I must see with my own eyes what lies within."

Théo took a deep breath, exchanging a worried glance with Mia. "Very well, Sofia, but we stay together. Not a second of separation. If anything goes wrong, we turn back immediately."

Entry into the Castle

The trio made their way towards the main entrance of the castle, its dark and imposing walls towering above them. The iron gate, rusted by time, creaked sinisterly as they pushed it open, revealing an inner courtyard overrun by wild vegetation. The shattered windows of the castle resembled empty eye sockets, silently observing the intruders who dared to disturb their rest.

"Is everyone ready?" asked Sofia, striving to mask her own unease beneath a façade of courage.

Mia, trembling, squeezed Théo's hand. "I feel eyes upon us, as though something were watching us. No... several things. Many."

Théo nodded, keeping a protective hand upon Mia's shoulder. "We go in, explore quickly, and get out. Let us be vigilant."

They crossed the threshold of the castle. The moment the last of them, Sofia, passed through the door, it slammed violently shut behind them with a deafening crash that resonated throughout the entire edifice. Théo rushed to reopen it, but the heavy oak door refused to budge, as though something were holding it closed from outside.

"It is blocked," he gasped, pushing with all his strength. "It will not move a millimetre."

"There must be another exit," said Sofia, attempting to remain calm. "All castles have several."

Mia murmured, her voice broken: "The castle does not wish to let us leave. Not yet."

The Frozen Interior

Their torches struggled to pierce the oppressive darkness. The air inside was glacial, motionless, as though frozen in time. The corridors, stretching endlessly, were populated with disquieting shadows, where each form seemed to contain a story of terror and blood.

Sofia, at the head of the group, struggled to maintain her scepticism in the face of mounting fear. "Look around you," she said, trying to convince herself. "These are merely old stones and draughts. Nothing supernatural here."

Yet with each step, the castle seemed to whisper its dark secrets. Their voices echoed strangely, as though repeated by dozens of invisible mouths. Théo uttered a word, "Careful", and the echo that returned was distorted, almost mocking, whispered by what seemed to be several voices at once.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered, gooseflesh rising upon his arms.

"It is merely an echo," replied Sofia, but her voice lacked conviction.

Mia, still clinging to Théo, whispered, her eyes fixed upon the shifting shadows: "We are not welcome here. I can feel it. The Batthyány do not want us to discover their secrets."

Sofia turned towards her friends, determined. "Then let us discover what they are hiding and put an end to these legends once and for all."

The Great Hall

They advanced together through the thick darkness of the castle, prepared to confront the mysteries and terrors that awaited them. The shadows seemed to stir actively around them, as though the spirits of the Batthyány were following them, resolved to protect their dark secrets from the intrepid explorers.

Despite the fear that held them in suspense, they could not help but admire the structure and majestic architecture of this lugubrious place. Tergnée Castle, though partially in ruins, still revealed vestiges of its past grandeur. The walls, once richly decorated, were adorned with faded frescoes depicting mythological scenes and ancient battles. Broken marble columns lay here and there, whilst vast stone staircases rose towards upper floors plunged in menacing darkness.

"Look at these details," murmured Sofia, her torch illuminating the eroded frescoes. "One can almost feel the history of this place."

Théo, though fascinated, could not ignore the oppressive sensation that surrounded them. "It is incredible, but let us not forget why we are here. Let us remain on our guard."

Mia, nervous, scrutinised each shadow with apprehension. "These walls have witnessed unimaginable horrors. I can feel it. The Batthyány have impregnated this place with their cruelty."

They advanced cautiously into a great hall, where the vaulted ceiling, still intact, was adorned with complex motifs and crystal chandeliers covered in dust. Torn tapestries hung upon the walls, their once vivid colours now dulled by the centuries.

"There is a sinister beauty here," admitted Théo, his eyes scanning the artistic details. Suddenly, he froze. "Wait... look at the central chandelier."

The massive crystal chandelier was swaying slowly, as though pushed by a non-existent breeze. The movement was regular, hypnotic, and in the absolute silence, they could hear the slight tinkling of the crystals striking one another.

"There is no wind here," whispered Sofia, feeling her scepticism waver. "No draught at all."

"Something touched it," murmured Mia. "Or someone."

The Cursed Fireplace

Sofia stopped before an immense stone fireplace, where occult symbols were carved deep into the rock. "Look at this. These marks... they resemble those we saw in the crypt."

Mia approached, her trembling fingers brushing against the engravings. "These are runes of protection and invocation. The Batthyány used this hall for their rituals."

The moment she touched the stone, a flash of orange light briefly illuminated the fireplace. For a fraction of a second, they saw flames, tall, dancing, real burning in the hearth. Then darkness fell once more.

"My God," breathed Théo. "Did you see that?"

"A fire..." stammered Sofia. "But there is nothing. No wood, no recent ashes."

Mia quickly withdrew her hand. "It was an echo of the past. The rituals that took place here... they have left an imprint so strong that the place still replays them."

A shiver ran through Théo upon hearing this. "Perhaps we should truly avoid this place..."

"We must understand what happened here," insisted Sofia, her scepticism still giving her the strength to defy the oppressive atmosphere. "These are merely symbols, nothing more. Illusions caused by... by stress and fatigue."

The Banqueting Hall

Continuing their exploration, they entered a vast banqueting hall. Long wooden tables, covered in a thick layer of dust, stood in rows beneath shattered windows. Overturned chairs and tarnished silver goblets lay scattered upon the floor.

"It looks as though this hall has not been used for centuries," remarked Théo, picking up a goblet engraved with floral motifs.

The moment his fingers touched the metal, a metallic and acrid smell suddenly filled the room. The smell of fresh blood, thick, nauseating. Sofia instinctively raised her hand to her nose.

"Do you smell that?" she asked, nausea rising.

"Blood," confirmed Mia, her face turning green. "But there is none. Not physically. It is like... like an olfactory memory of the place."

Théo quickly set down the goblet. The smell persisted for a few seconds before vanishing as suddenly as it had appeared.

Mia murmured, her words imbued with gravity: "The Batthyány held sumptuous banquets here, but these were no ordinary feasts. Sacrifices, bloody rituals... Every corner of this castle bears the indelible mark of their cruelty."

The Noise in the Corridor

Suddenly, a dull noise resonated in the adjacent corridor, making the three explorers start. All turned around, hearts pounding wildly, scrutinising the source of the sound.

"What was that?" whispered Théo, his voice trembling.

Sofia, clutching her torch as though to draw courage from it, replied with determination: "Let us go and see. It could be an animal... or just the wind."

Mia, hesitant, clung more tightly to Théo, her instinct screaming at her to flee. "What if it were something else... something unnatural? You remember what happened in the crypt. That presence which touched Sofia."

"We shall only know if we go," replied Sofia, advancing cautiously towards the corridor.

They followed the sound, their steps echoing against the cold stone walls. The corridor led to a series of smaller rooms, probably chambers once luxurious, now dilapidated and invaded by cobwebs. The noise was heard again, louder this time, like a disquieting scratching.

Théo illuminated the dusty floor of the corridor and stopped abruptly. "Look... footprints."

In the thick layer of dust, footprints were clearly visible. Bare footprints, of adult size, leading towards a chamber whose door stood ajar.

"These prints are recent," murmured Sofia, feeling her throat tighten. "The dust has not had time to cover them."

"We are the only ones to have entered here today," said Théo. "Are we not?"

Mia shook her head slowly. "No. We are not alone. We never have been."

The Haunted Chamber

Sofia pushed open the ajar door, revealing a room strewn with overturned furniture and debris.

"Stay behind me," she said, entering slowly.

Mia and Théo followed close behind, their torches illuminating every corner. They discovered an ancient desk of solid wood, papers scattered upon the floor, and an overturned candlestick.

"Nothing here," declared Sofia, both disappointed and relieved.

But as they turned to leave, Sofia glimpsed a large cracked mirror hanging upon the wall. In its reflection, she saw herself, as well as Théo and Mia. But there was something else. Behind them, in the reflection, stood a dark silhouette. Tall, motionless, watching them.

She spun around. No one. The room was empty behind them.

"What is it?" asked Théo, alarmed by Sofia's sudden pallor.

"The mirror... there was someone in the reflection. Just behind us."

Théo illuminated the mirror. Their three reflections gazed back at them, but nothing else was visible. "I see nothing."

"I do," whispered Mia. "It is still there. In the mirror. It is watching us."

A faint murmur, almost inaudible, then filled the room. Mia felt her blood run cold.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes," replied Théo, his voice barely a breath. "It is coming from over there."

They made their way towards a massive wardrobe set against the wall, its wood blackened by time. The murmur grew clearer, like voices whispering incomprehensible words.

Then, distinctly, a voice rose from the murmur. A grave, masculine voice, which pronounced a name: "Sofia..."

She froze. "Did you hear? It... it said my name."

"Sofia..." repeated the voice, more insistent this time. "Daughter of blood... you have returned..."

"We leave," said Théo firmly. "We leave now."

But Sofia, as though hypnotised, reached out her hand towards the wardrobe. "I must know..."

"No!" Mia seized her arm. "That is exactly what it wants!"

Sofia came to her senses, stepping back sharply. "Ready?" asked Théo, prepared to intervene.

She nodded, and together, they abruptly opened the wardrobe door.

The interior of the wardrobe was empty, but the murmur persisted, louder now, resonating in their heads. Mia stepped back, terrified.

"This is what I feared. The spirits of the Batthyány are still here. And they know your name, Sofia. They know you. We must leave."

The Terrifying Vision

As they hastily left the room, Mia suddenly stopped, frozen in place. Her eyes closed involuntarily and she fell to her knees, her hands pressed against her temples.

"Mia, are you all right?" cried Théo, rushing towards her.

Sofia turned around, alarmed. "Mia, what is wrong?"

Mia remained silent for a moment, then a torrent of images invaded her mind with brutal violence. She saw the Batthyány, dressed in period clothing, performing bloody rituals in the castle's main hall. The face of Kaedy Batthyány, cruel and determined, stood out amongst them, his eyes gleaming with malevolence. The cries of victims resonated in the air, and the walls seemed to bleed, impregnated with their suffering.

Then, an even more terrifying vision appeared. She saw Sofia, alone in a dark room of the castle, surrounded by shifting shadows. Kaedy Batthyány himself stood behind her, an expression of pure evil upon his face. He extended a pale, clawed hand towards Sofia, ready to seize her. And this time, in the vision, his fingers touched Sofia's shoulder.

Mia opened her eyes, gasping, her face contorted with fear.

"Sofia, no!"

"Sofia, get away from there! You are in danger!" cried Mia, rising with difficulty. "He wants you. He is calling you. That is why he spoke your name!"

Sofia, shocked by the intensity of Mia's reaction, stepped back instinctively.

"What are you talking about, Mia?"

"I have just had a vision," explained Mia, her voice trembling. "I saw the Batthyány, and Kaedy was there. He was trying to seize you. No... he succeeded in touching you. In my vision, he placed his hand upon your shoulder. We must leave at once! If we stay, the vision will come true!"

Théo, eyes wide, attempted to remain calm.

"Mia, are you certain of what you saw?"

"Yes," she replied firmly. "It was clear as day. Clearer than all my other visions. Kaedy wants to seize Sofia. He sees her as easy prey because of her scepticism. Her disbelief makes her vulnerable. She has no spiritual protection."

Sofia, despite her determination not to believe in legends, felt an icy shiver run down her spine. The voice that had pronounced her name... she could not ignore it. It was real.

"Very well, we leave," she said, her voice trembling for the first time. "But we shall return, and we shall be better prepared."

Théo nodded, taking Mia's hand to support her.

"Let us leave here now."

The Strategic Retreat

Sofia, still shaken by Mia's vision and by the voice that had pronounced her name, nodded.

"We shall return," she promised, "but we shall take all necessary precautions. This place is more dangerous than we thought. Infinitely more dangerous. For now, let us return to the hotel. Night is beginning to fall, and we absolutely do not wish to be here after sunset. We shall be back tomorrow morning to continue our exploration."

Théo nodded, still attentive to Mia who was still trembling.

"Yes, it is safer this way. We can better prepare. Perhaps find protections, amulets, I do not know."

Mia, though still terrified, felt slightly reassured by her friends' wise decision.

"Very well, but be extremely careful leaving. I sense that the danger is far from over. The castle does not wish to let us leave easily."

They hurried through the dark corridors, their footsteps resonating with urgency. Every shadow seemed to watch them, every whisper to pursue them. But when they reached the entrance hall, the door through which they had entered remained obstinately closed.

"It still will not move!" cried Théo, pushing with all his strength.

"There must be another exit," said Sofia, fighting the panic that rose within her. "Let us search."

After several minutes of anguish, they discovered a side door which, miraculously, opened. They rushed outside, emerging into the inner courtyard bathed in the declining light of dusk.

The Escape

Upon finally reaching the castle gate, they cast one last glance behind them. The imposing and menacing silhouette of Tergnée stood out against the twilight sky, darker and more sinister than ever.

And there, at the second-floor window, they saw it clearly. The silhouette of a man, tall and imposing, watching them. His eyes gleamed with a reddish glow in the darkness. The silhouette slowly raised a hand, as though in greeting... or warning.

"Kaedy," murmured Mia, petrified. "It is him. It is truly him."

They ran to the car without looking back.

As they drove away, Sofia murmured, more to herself than to the others:

"We shall return, and we shall discover the truth." But she added, almost despite herself: "Even if I am beginning to believe in these vampire stories."

Tergnée Castle still stood, dark and silent, jealously guarding its secrets and its darkness. The three friends knew they had not finished with this cursed place. The shadows of the Batthyány had followed them, and the struggle to discover the truth was only beginning.

And somewhere in the depths of the castle, a grave voice murmured in the darkness: "Sofia... you will return... daughter of blood..."

Chapter X

Night of Revelations

The Deceptive Refuge

Upon arriving at their hotel, situated a few kilometres from Tergnée Castle, Sofia, Théo, and Mia felt a certain relief as they entered the warm atmosphere of the establishment. The hall, though modest, offered reassuring comfort, with its crackling fire in the hearth and dark wooden furniture that invited relaxation. After depositing their bags in their respective rooms, they gathered in the lounge to discuss the troubling events of the day.

"I still cannot believe what happened there," murmured Théo, sinking into a leather armchair. "That voice which pronounced your name, Sofia... it was so real."

Sofia, her hands clasped around her cup of tea, nodded slowly. "I know. I... I can no longer deny what we experienced. But I want to understand. There must be an explanation."

Mia watched them in silence, her face still pale. "It is more than mere curiosity now, is it not? That place has something on you, Sofia."

The Unexpected Encounter

As they sipped their drinks in oppressive silence, a group of five people burst into the hall, their laughter and animated conversations contrasting sharply with the tense atmosphere of the trio. The newcomers, apparently regulars of the establishment, wore urban exploration equipment similar to their own: head torches, cameras, reinforced backpacks.

One of them, a man in his thirties with curly black hair and a carefully trimmed beard, noticed Théo's preoccupied air and approached them with a friendly smile. His dark eyes shone with keen intelligence.

"You have just visited Tergnée Castle, have you not?" he asked in a grave and assured voice.

Sofia looked up, surprised by the stranger's perspicacity. "Yes, how did you guess?"

The man burst into a warm laugh. "Your somewhat shaken appearance, your exploration bags covered in ancient dust, and above all..." He indicated their hands. "That nervous way of clutching your cups. We have seen that same look on many visitors to the castle. My name is Anton, and these are my friends."

He beckoned his group to approach. A red-haired woman with piercing green eyes introduced herself first: "I am Élise, a historian specialising in medieval occultism." She was in her forties, with a presence both academic and mystical.

A young blond man in his twenties, equipped with impressive professional photographic equipment, added: "Marc, photographer specialising in abandoned places. I have already visited the castle seven times."

A woman of Asian origin in her thirties, with long black braided hair, introduced herself in a soft voice: "Linh, medium and parapsychologist." Her gaze met Mia's with troubling intensity.

Finally, a massive man in his fifties, with a weathered face and calloused hands, concluded: "Dimitri. Former local guide. I have known every stone of that castle and its surroundings for forty years."

Mia, still wary, felt a wave of unease as she observed this heteroclite group. "You know the castle well, then?"

Anton sat at their table, whilst his companions took their places around them. His expression suddenly became grave.

"Oh yes, we know it well. Too well, even. And believe me, it is not a place to be taken lightly. You have no doubt felt its... particular atmosphere."

Anton's Revelations

Théo nodded, his face becoming serious. "Yes, that is putting it mildly. We experienced some rather... troubling experiences there."

Marc, the photographer, pulled out a camera and scrolled through his images. "Troubling? That is a very diplomatic way of putting it. Look at this." He showed them a series of photographs taken inside the castle. On several shots, luminous orbs and blurred silhouettes were clearly visible.

"These photographs were taken with professional equipment," he specified. "No trickery possible. And look at this one..." He zoomed in on a photograph of the great hall. In the background, a dark humanoid silhouette stood out sharply.

Sofia felt a shiver run down her spine as she recognised the silhouette. "That is... that is the one we saw."

Anton became even graver, his gaze fixing intently upon Sofia. "I am not surprised. Tergnée Castle has a very dark history, especially in connection with the Batthyány family. Local legends speak of occult practices and vampirism. It is said that their spirits still haunt the place, unable to find rest after what they did."

Élise, the historian, opened a notebook filled with handwritten notes. "I have spent three years studying the archives concerning the Batthyány. What I have discovered is... terrifying. Between 1620 and 1642, at least forty-seven disappearances were reported in the surrounding villages. All young people in good health. No body was ever recovered."

"Forty-seven," repeated Théo, horrified. "Are you certain of that number?"

"That is the documented number," specified Élise. "The reality is probably far worse. The peasants of the era lived in constant terror. They called Kaedy Batthyány 'The Lord of Blood.'"

Sofia raised her eyebrows, her scepticism wavering. "Do you truly believe in these vampire stories?"

Linh, the medium, spoke for the first time since the introductions, her voice strangely melodious: "To believe or not to believe is not the question. The energy of that place is undeniable." She turned towards Mia. "You feel it too, do you not? You have the gift."

Mia nodded slowly, surprised to be thus understood. "Yes... I have had visions. Terrifying ones."

"Visions of bloody rituals? Of Kaedy Batthyány?" asked Linh with troubling intensity.

"How... how do you know that?" stammered Mia.

Linh sighed deeply. "Because I have had the same visions. We have all had them, to one degree or another. It is as though the castle wished to show us its history. Its bloody history."

Anton leaned forward, fixing particularly upon Sofia. "But there is something different about you three. Especially about you, Sofia. The castle seems to... have chosen you."

A heavy silence fell upon the table. Sofia felt all eyes upon her.

"What do you mean by 'chosen'?" she asked, her throat tight.

The Disturbing Warnings

Dimitri, who had remained silent until then, spoke in a gravelly voice: "Three years ago, a group of four explorers entered the castle. Three came out. The fourth, a young woman named Elena, never returned. We searched for days. Not a trace."

"What happened to her?" whispered Théo.

"We do not know," replied Dimitri gravely. "But her friends recounted that she had become obsessed with the castle. That she heard voices calling her by name."

Sofia paled. "Voices... calling her by name?"

Anton nodded slowly. "Exactly as happened to you today, is that not so?"

The silence that followed was deafening. Mia took Sofia's hand beneath the table, squeezing it tightly.

"There is something powerful there," continued Anton, "and it is definitely not friendly. My advice? Do not return alone. If you are determined to continue your exploration, we can accompany you tomorrow. We shall show you what we know, and perhaps we can protect you from what you do not yet understand."

Élise added: "We have also gathered certain objects that could offer protection. Amulets, protective symbols, blessed herbs. It may seem ridiculous to your rational eyes, but faced with something irrational, sometimes only the irrational can save us."

Marc showed another series of photographs. "And we have mapped the castle over the years. There are zones where we never go. Rooms where the paranormal activity is too intense. If you return, you must know where not to go."

Sofia and Théo exchanged a long look. The idea of returning to the castle with experienced people seemed both reassuring and terrifying.

"Thank you for your offer," said Théo finally. "We accept it gladly. Better to be well prepared and not alone to face... whatever awaits us there."

Anton smiled, but his eyes remained profoundly grave. "Good. Then let us rest this evening. We shall meet again tomorrow at dawn. And be prepared. Tomorrow, we return to Tergnée Castle together, and we shall discover what the Batthyány are truly hiding. Their secrets do not reveal themselves easily, and they will protect them at any cost. Sometimes at the cost of blood."

Linh placed a hand upon Mia's arm. "You two," she said, indicating Mia and Sofia, "stay close to one another tonight. Do not separate. Something began today at the castle. A connection has been established. The spirits now know who you are."

The Nocturnal Debate

The group parted for the night, but a palpable tension persisted in the air. In their hotel room, Mia and Sofia were briefly joined by Théo to discuss their encounter with Anton and his group, and the prospect of returning to the castle.

"I do not know," said Mia, arms crossed, looking anxious. "Even with Anton and his friends, I truly feel we should not return. That place is evil. You heard Elena's story. She disappeared. Disappeared! And she had the same symptoms as you, Sofia."

Théo nodded slowly, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I understand your fears, Mia. What we experienced today was terrifying. But with Anton and his friends, we shall be better prepared. They know the place, they have experience, and they seem to know how to protect themselves."

Sofia, seated near the window, gazed at the darkness with a disturbing fascination. "I feel... drawn to that place. It is stronger than myself. As though something there were calling me, waiting for me. I must understand what is happening there. We cannot abandon now, especially after what we have discovered."

Mia rose abruptly, turning a worried gaze towards Sofia. "It is precisely this attraction that worries me! Do you not see? That is what happened to Elena. The castle is exerting an influence upon you. What if it were a trap? What if the spirits of the Batthyány, if Kaedy himself, were seeking to lure you for some sinister purpose?"

Sofia sighed, conscious of the gravity of Mia's words. "I know it may seem senseless. I know I should be afraid. But I cannot ignore this sensation. It is as though... as though a part of me already belonged to that place."

"Do you hear what you are saying?" cried Mia, tears in her eyes. "A part of you that belongs to a castle haunted by vampires? Sofia, this is madness!"

Théo attempted to find a compromise, rising to position himself between the two friends. "What if we returned with every possible precaution? Anton and his friends have protections, knowledge. We must simply be on our guard and ready to leave if things become too dangerous. We establish clear limits, alarm signals."

Mia hesitated at length, her gaze passing from Théo to Sofia. "I still do not agree. But I cannot let you go there alone. If you are determined to return, I shall come with you. But promise me we shall be extremely careful. At the slightest suspicious thing, at the slightest manifestation, we leave immediately. No discussion."

Sofia rose and took Mia's hands. "Very well, it is a promise. We shall be careful and listen to your instincts. Your gift has already saved us today. But we must see this through to the end. I must know why I hear that voice. Why it calls me."

Théo nodded with determination. "We are a team. We shall face this mystery together, but always keeping our safety in mind. And with Anton and his group, we shall have more chances to understand and protect ourselves."

After a few final recommendations, Théo returned to his own room, leaving Sofia and Mia alone. The two friends prepared for the night, but the oppressive atmosphere of Tergnée Castle seemed to have followed them to their hotel.

The Invisible Presence

They lay down in their respective beds, their minds agitated by the events of the day and the troubling revelations of Anton and his group. Sofia, lying on her back, stared at the ceiling, unable to find sleep. Every shadow in the room seemed to dance sinisterly in the glow of the bedside lamp, casting disquieting shapes upon the walls.

She felt an invisible presence near her, as though eyes were scrutinising her from the darkness. The same sensation she had felt in the castle, but more subtle, more patient.

"Can you sleep?" she murmured to Mia, hoping that her friend's voice would reassure her.

Mia, on the other side of the room, turned slowly towards Sofia, her eyes wide open and gleaming in the gloom. "No, I cannot relax. I feel as though there is something here, with us. Linh was right. Something has followed us."

Sofia shivered, attempting to repel the fear that rose within her like a tide. "It is surely just our imagination. This day has been long and stressful. And Anton's stories have not helped matters."

But Mia shook her head firmly, clutching the sheets with her trembling hands. "No, Sofia. I can feel it. This presence... it is here, in this room. As though something had followed us from the castle. Something particularly interested in you."

An agonising silence settled between them, punctuated only by the distant sounds of the hotel. Every creak of wood, every breath of wind outside seemed amplified, adding to their unease. Sofia closed her eyes, trying to convince herself that all of this was merely the fruit of her overstimulated imagination.

Suddenly, a light brushing was felt near her face, like an icy breath caressing her cheek. She opened her eyes abruptly, her heart pounding wildly.

"Mia, did you feel that?"

Mia nodded, her eyes wide with fear. "Yes... I felt it too. As though someone or something were very close. Just above your bed."

Sofia sat up in bed, her body tense as a bow. "Perhaps we should turn on more lights. That might banish this sensation."

Mia nodded and turned on the bedside lamp beside her bed, bathing the room in a warm and comforting light. Yet despite this glow, anguish did not leave their hearts. The silence thickened, filled with that invisible presence which seemed to watch them from the shadows.

The two friends remained silent, listening for the slightest sound. Everything seemed strangely amplified: the light creak of wood in the warmth, the murmur of the wind outside, and even the rapid beating of their own hearts.

"Sofia," murmured Mia after a long moment, "I believe this presence is trying to communicate something to us. Or rather... it is trying to communicate something to you."

Sofia shivered at these words. "Perhaps. But what? Is it a warning, or is it trying to lure me back to the castle?"

Mia lowered her eyes, uncertain. "I do not know. But what I feel is nothing good. What if the spirits of the Batthyány were seeking to trap us? What if tomorrow, when we return, it is too late to escape?"

Sofia crossed her arms, attempting to master her fear and this strange fascination she felt. "We must remain strong, Mia. Tomorrow, we shall return to the castle. But we shall be better prepared, more cautious. And we shall not be alone. Anton and his group know this place. They have survived several visits."

Mia nodded, though worry was still visible upon her face. "Very well. But let us promise not to ignore our instincts. If something too strange occurs, we leave immediately. I do not want you to become... like Elena."

Sofia felt a shiver run down her spine at the mention of the vanished young woman. "It is a promise. I do not wish to disappear in that castle."

The Premonitory Dreams

After what seemed an eternity, the two friends finally sank into a fitful sleep. Troubling dreams assailed them, filled with visions of the castle, dark corridors, and indistinct whispers that resonated in the darkness. The presence that had followed them seemed to insinuate itself into their dreams, blurring the boundary between dream and reality.

Sofia dreamt that she was walking alone through the corridors of the castle. Her footsteps made no sound. Behind her, a shadow followed, always at the same distance, never approaching but never receding either. And at the end of the corridor, she heard that familiar voice murmuring her name: "Sofia... daughter of blood..."

Mia, for her part, dreamt of the crypt. But this time, the coffins were open. And inside, thirteen silhouettes were slowly rising, their eyes gleaming with a red glow in the darkness.

The Disquieting Dawn

In the early morning, a grey light filtered through the curtains, illuminating the room with a spectral pallor. Mia awoke first, her mind still clouded by memories of the night. She cast a glance at Sofia, who was still asleep, an expression of worry frozen upon her face.

Mia rose gently, trying not to wake her friend, and made her way towards the window. The landscape that presented itself seemed oppressive, with the massive walls of the castle outlined upon the horizon, bathed in the morning mist. She felt again that sensation of unease, that certainty that something invisible awaited them, lurking in the shadows.

Sofia stirred in her bed and slowly opened her eyes, meeting Mia's worried gaze.

"You are already awake?" asked Sofia, her voice still drowsy.

"Yes, I did not sleep very well," admitted Mia. "And you?"

Sofia shook her head. "Not really. I had dreams... very strange. I was in the castle, and something was following me. A shadow."

Mia nodded gravely. "Me too. I dreamt of the coffins. They were open, and..." She shivered. "I cannot stop thinking about what we are going to find there today."

A heavy silence settled, whilst the two friends prepared in silence for the coming day. The memory of the night's dreams haunted them, each gesture of their morning routine seeming enveloped in an oppressive heaviness.

The Imminent Departure

A few hours later, after a breakfast taken in tense silence, they met Théo in the hall. Anton and his four companions were already waiting for them, their faces grave, ready to accompany them for this new day of revelations at Tergnée Castle.

Anton carried a backpack visibly weighed down with equipment. Élise held an ancient leather-bound book. Marc had his complete photographic equipment. Linh clutched against her a pouch containing, according to her, objects of protection. And Dimitri had a sturdy rope coiled upon his shoulder and a powerful torch.

"Are you ready?" asked Anton, scrutinising the group with a gleam of determination in his eyes. "Because once we have entered, it may be difficult to leave. The castle has... its own rules."

Théo, Sofia, and Mia exchanged a long look before nodding. They were ready, at least as much as they could be.

"Good," said Élise, opening her ancient book. "But before we leave, there is something you must know. I have found a passage in this seventeenth-century manuscript. It speaks of a ritual that Kaedy Batthyány supposedly attempted to perform just before his disappearance. A ritual which required..." She hesitated. "... the blood of a female descendant."

Sofia paled. "A female descendant? Descendant of whom?"

"The text is not clear," admitted Élise. "But if Kaedy is calling you 'daughter of blood,' that could mean..."

"That I am connected to them in some way," completed Sofia, her voice trembling.

A heavy silence fell upon the group. Linh approached Sofia and handed her a silver amulet. "Wear this. It is a protection against spiritual influences. It guarantees nothing, but it is better than nothing."

Sofia took the amulet, clasping it in her hand. It was still warm from Linh's touch.

In silence, the group of eight left the hotel, making their way towards the castle. Each of them conscious that this day would mark a decisive turning point in their quest for truth. Tergnée Castle awaited them, its secrets buried within its ancient walls, ready to reveal themselves to those who dared to unearth them.

The shadows of the past were about to awaken, and none of them could guess what they would reveal. Nor what price they would have to pay for this knowledge.

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend
The Castle of Tergnée

Chapter XI

Translated from French to British English

Chapter XI

Return to the Castle of Darkness

The Haunted Morning

After a tumultuous night, Mia, Sofia, and Théo gathered in the hotel hall, their weary faces and haunted gazes betraying a sleepless night marked by troubling events. The dark circles beneath their eyes bore witness to their lack of sleep, and their nervous gestures revealed a palpable tension.

"We hardly closed our eyes," murmured Sofia, sipping her coffee, her trembling hands nearly spilling the cup. "It was as though an invisible presence were constantly watching us. I felt an icy breath near my face, several times. And at one point, I had the impression that something touched my shoulder."

Mia nodded vigorously, her eyes filled with worry and fatigue. "It was absolutely terrifying, Théo. That presence was so palpable, so real. It was not our imagination. I am certain the spirits of the Batthyány have followed us here. They will not release us now."

Théo, whilst listening attentively, took a sip of coffee, attempting to master the anguish that rose within him like a wave. "I understand why you are worried. What you experienced sounds truly disturbing. On my side, I too had strange dreams. Endless corridors, voices calling me... Fortunately, Anton and his friends will be with us today. We are not alone this time."

Sofia nodded, though still shaken. "Yes, their help will be invaluable. But we must remain extremely on our guard. This castle hides far more secrets than we had imagined. And after what happened to me yesterday... that voice which pronounced my name..." She shivered.

Reunion with the Group

As they continued their conversation in hushed tones, the hotel hall began to come alive. Anton and his four companions made their appearance, their faces grave but friendly. They greeted the trio with encouraging smiles, ready to accompany them for this new exploration of the castle of darkness.

"Good morning to all," said Anton, settling at their table and setting down his heavily laden bag. "Did you sleep well?" His scrutinising gaze suggested he already knew the answer.

Théo exchanged an eloquent look with the girls before responding. "Not really, to be honest. The night was... difficult. But we are ready. Thank you for accompanying us."

Élise, the historian, placed her notebook upon the table. "That is not surprising. The first night after a visit to the castle is often the worst. The entities that reside there have a way of... clinging to visitors."

Linh, the medium, fixed Mia and Sofia intensely. "You felt presences last night, did you not? In your hotel room?"

Sofia and Mia exchanged a surprised look. "How do you know that?" asked Sofia.

"Because it is always thus," replied Linh gravely. "Once the castle has marked you, it does not release you easily. It is like an invisible imprint."

Marc, the photographer, took out his equipment. "I checked my photographs from yesterday evening. The anomalies have multiplied. Look." He showed them a series of shots taken the previous day. On several, luminous orbs and spectral trails were visible.

Dimitri, the local guide, added in a gravelly voice: "The castle is awakening. After years of relative slumber, something has roused it." He looked at Sofia meaningfully. "Or rather, someone."

A heavy silence fell upon the table.

Anton nodded finally, placing a reassuring hand upon Théo's shoulder. "It is normal to be nervous, but together, we shall be able to confront what awaits us. We have prepared additional protections." He patted his bag. "Let us finish our coffees, then set off. The sooner we arrive, the better."

The Journey to the Castle

Eyes fixed upon their cups, Mia, Sofia, and Théo mentally prepared themselves for the day ahead. The return to the castle of darkness promised to be even more intense than their first visit, but they were determined to discover the truth, whatever shadows awaited them.

They took their respective cars and set off towards the castle. The morning was fresh, a light mist floating over the landscape, adding a sinister touch to their destination. The journey began in silence, each lost in their thoughts, preparing for what awaited them.

Halfway there, Anton's car stopped abruptly at the roadside. Théo, who was following behind, also braked. Anton alighted and beckoned the others to join him.

"Before we arrive, we must establish some rules," he said firmly once everyone had gathered. "Rule number one: no one separates from the group. Ever. Not even by a few metres."

"Rule number two," continued Élise, "if anyone senses or sees anything unusual, they signal it immediately. No secrets, no foolish bravery."

Linh added: "Rule number three: if I say we must leave, we leave. Without discussion. My intuition has saved us more than once."

Marc raised his camera. "Rule number four: I document everything. If something happens, we shall have proof."

Dimitri concluded: "And rule number five: we have exactly two hours inside. Not a minute more. After two hours, paranormal activity increases exponentially."

Sofia, Théo, and Mia nodded solemnly.

"One last thing," said Anton, taking amulets and sachets of herbs from his bag. "Each take a protection. It guarantees nothing, but it is better than nothing."

They set off again, more sombre and more focused.

The Terrifying Return

Upon arrival, the imposing ruins of Tergnée Castle rose before them, more menacing than ever. The mist clung to the blackened walls, giving the impression that the castle was floating in a spectral cloud.

Mia's anguish overwhelmed her the moment she set foot upon the ground. She clenched her fists, fighting against the fear that rose within her like nausea. Her legs trembled, and she had to lean against the car for support.

Anton immediately noticed her distress. "Mia, are you all right? You seem truly distressed. Even more so than yesterday."

Mia attempted to respond, but the words remained stuck in her throat. She merely shook her head, her eyes wide with terror, fixed upon the second-floor windows.

Sofia, seeing Anton's concern and understanding that Mia could not speak, took the floor. "Anton, there is something you must know, if it is not already obvious. Mia has gifts of clairvoyance. She senses things that we cannot perceive. And at this moment, she is sensing something very powerful."

Anton looked at her, his expression becoming graver. "Gifts of clairvoyance? That would explain many things. Mia, have you sensed something particular here, right now?"

Mia took several deep breaths and finally managed to speak, her voice barely audible. "Yes... as soon as we arrived... it is as though... as though we were expected. They know we have returned. And they are... pleased. No, not pleased. Excited. Hungry."

Linh approached Mia, placing a hand upon her arm. "I feel it too. The energy is completely different from yesterday. It is as though the castle were more... awake."

Anton nodded gravely. "Thank you for informing me, Sofia. Mia, we must be very careful. If you sense anything dangerous, tell us immediately. Your safety, all our safety, comes before everything."

Théo approached Mia, placing a comforting hand upon her shoulder. "Do not worry, Mia. We are all together in this adventure. Listen to your instincts, and we shall do the same."

Entering the Darkness

Anton beckoned his group to gather in a circle. "Right, we are going to enter the castle. We have some specific places to check, places we were unable to explore in detail before. The cellars, notably."

They passed through the rusted gates which creaked sinisterly, as though announcing their arrival, and advanced cautiously into the inner courtyard overrun by vegetation. The dark walls and gaping windows seemed to watch them, and Sofia had the distinct impression of seeing shadows moving behind the shattered panes.

"Did you see that?" she whispered, pointing towards a second-floor window.

Marc immediately raised his camera and took several rapid shots. "I captured something. We shall check later."

"So, where do we begin?" asked Théo, attempting to conceal his growing apprehension.

Anton pointed to a half-collapsed spiral staircase on their left. "We shall start with the cellars. Legends tell that the darkest rituals of the Batthyány took place down there. If we are to find clues about what haunts this castle, about why Sofia was specifically targeted, it will probably be there."

Mia, despite her visceral fear, forced herself to advance. "I... I shall try to remain calm. If something manifests, I shall warn you immediately."

Sofia squeezed Mia's hand in a gesture of support. "We are here for you. And we shall find the truth, together. Whatever happens."

They descended the spiral staircase cautiously, the stone steps slippery and uneven beneath their feet. The narrow, dark passage enveloped them, each sound resonating like a sinister echo. The air grew colder as they plunged into the depths of the castle.

"How many steps have you counted?" asked Dimitri suddenly.

"About twenty-three," replied Théo.

"That is strange," murmured Dimitri. "The last time I came down here, there were only seventeen."

An uncomfortable silence settled.

"Staircases do not change size," said Sofia, attempting to remain rational.

"In this castle, they do," replied Élise simply.

The Cursed Cellars

Upon reaching the bottom, they found themselves in a long corridor, illuminated only by the beams of their torches. The walls were covered with occult symbols and ancient engravings, silent witnesses to past rituals.

"Look at these inscriptions," murmured Sofia, pointing her torch towards a complex symbol carved deep into the stone. "It is the same as the one we saw in the banqueting hall yesterday."

Anton nodded gravely. "Yes, these symbols were used to invoke supernatural forces. Be very attentive. The Batthyány were known for their cruelty and their mastery of the occult. What we find here could be far more dangerous than anything we have seen thus far."

Élise stopped before a particularly elaborate panel of symbols. "These runes... they form a warning. 'Let him who enters here abandon all hope of salvation.' It is medieval Latin mixed with pagan symbols."

Suddenly, in the oppressive silence, they distinctly heard breathing. Not their own. Other breathing. Slow, deep, multiple. As though several invisible persons were breathing around them.

"Do you hear that?" whispered Marc, his camera raised.

"Yes," replied Linh, eyes closed, concentrating. "We are not alone. We never have been."

The breathing continued for some thirty seconds before gradually fading away.

Mia closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating on her feelings. Her face contorted with pain. "I sense a presence... over there," she said, pointing to a massive door at the end of the corridor, a door of black wood adorned with rusted ironwork. "Something very ancient and very powerful. And it... it is calling me. No, not me." She turned towards Sofia. "It is calling you."

The group advanced with caution, their footsteps echoing in the darkness. As they approached the door, the temperature dropped brutally. Their breath became visible, forming small clouds of vapour.

"My thermometer shows minus five degrees," announced Marc, incredulous. "That is impossible. We are underground, not in a freezer."

"In this castle, anything is possible," murmured Anton.

Sofia's Disappearance

What was bound to happen, happened. In the oppressive darkness of the castle cellars, when they were but a few metres from the massive door, Sofia released Mia's hand.

It was not a voluntary movement. Her hand seemed to slip from Mia's as though it had suddenly become oily, impossible to hold. Mia felt her friend's fingers slipping from her grasp, and before she could react, Sofia took a step backwards.

"Sofia?" said Mia, turning around.

But Sofia was no longer there. The space she had occupied a second before was empty. Completely empty.

For a moment, Mia thought she had simply taken a few steps back. But when she swept the corridor with her torch, Sofia was nowhere to be seen. As though she had been erased from reality.

"Sofia! No!" cried Mia with all her strength, her voice resonating through the dark and damp corridors, the echo reverberating dozens of times. Absolute panic seized her as she desperately called for her friend.

Théo and Anton turned simultaneously, alarmed by Mia's heartrending cry. "Sofia! Where are you?" shouted Théo, his heart pounding wildly, fear gripping his throat.

The entire group immediately dispersed, their torches frantically sweeping the stone walls and dark corners. The shadows seemed to twist and dance, mocking them, making every corner of the castle more threatening.

"Sofia! Answer us!" cried Anton, his voice imbued with an anguish he could not conceal.

"She was right there!" sobbed Mia, pointing to the empty space beside her. "Her hand was in mine, and then... she just disappeared! As though she had been torn from me!"

Linh knelt at the spot where Sofia had last stood, placing her hands upon the cold floor. "There was a major energetic disturbance here. Something

has... teleported her. Torn her from our reality and moved her elsewhere in the castle."

"Teleported?" repeated Théo, incredulous. "That is impossible!"

"Look at the floor," said Dimitri, illuminating the spot with his powerful torch. Upon the stone, marks had appeared. Symbols that had not been there seconds before. Symbols that glowed faintly with a reddish light.

The Frantic Hunt

"Sofia! Sofia, where are you?" Théo was now running from room to room, calling desperately, his voice breaking with emotion.

The corridors seemed to close in around them, every sound amplified by the sinister echo of the ancient stones. The cold breath of the castle seemed to intensify, as though the walls themselves were whispering warnings and threats.

Anton, attempting to keep calm despite the situation spiralling out of control, turned towards Mia. "Use your gifts, Mia. Please. Perhaps you can sense where she has been taken."

Mia closed her eyes, tears flowing freely down her cheeks, desperately seeking to calm the frantic beating of her heart to concentrate on her feelings. All around her, the atmosphere seemed to tighten, as though the darkness itself were trying to suffocate her, to prevent her from finding her friend.

After several long seconds of intense and painful concentration, a wave of intense cold passed through her, followed by a strange sensation, a mixture of profound despair and physical pain. And then, an image. Blurred at first, then increasingly clear. A room. Symbols upon the floor. Sofia at the centre, unconscious.

"This way," she murmured, her voice trembling, reopening her eyes and pointing to a corridor even more obscure to her right. "I sense her presence... she is alive, but unconscious. And there is something else with her... something very ancient and very dangerous. A masculine presence. Powerful."

"Kaedy," murmured Linh. "It is him. He has taken her."

Without hesitating a second, Anton and Théo set off, following Mia who advanced slowly, guided by her painful intuitions. Their footsteps echoed sinisterly upon the stone floor, each echo amplifying the tension that thickened around them like a toxic fog.

The air became even more glacial as they progressed, and an acrid smell, similar to that of damp earth and mould mixed with something metallic, ancient blood, permeated the atmosphere.

Whispers began to make themselves heard. So faint at first that they could be mistaken for the wind. Then increasingly distinct. Multiple voices, whispering Sofia's name. "Sofia... Sofia... daughter of blood... returned..."

"These voices," gasped Marc. "They are coming from the walls."

"No," corrected Linh. "They are coming from everywhere. From nowhere. They are echoes of past rituals. The castle is showing us its history."

The Ritual Chamber

At the end of the corridor, after what seemed an eternity but lasted only a few minutes, they glimpsed a massive wooden door, different from all those they had seen. It was covered with strange symbols carved deep into the wood, symbols that seemed to move and undulate in the flickering light of their torches.

The door seemed to vibrate with a palpable energy, and Mia stopped dead a few metres away, her hand placed upon her chest as though to calm the growing anguish that paralysed her.

"She is behind that door," she said in a faint but certain voice. "But it is not only Sofia... there is something else, something holding her. A ritual. He is performing a ritual."

"A ritual?" repeated Théo, horrified. "What kind of ritual?"

Élise, who had taken out her ancient manuscript, leafed through it rapidly. "If it is the ritual this text speaks of... he is trying to bind Sofia to himself. To make her his... spiritual descendant. To transfer to her a part of his vampiric essence."

"My God," murmured Anton. "We must stop him. Now."

Anton and Théo exchanged a worried glance. Théo, brow furrowed, approached the door and placed a hesitant hand upon the rough wood. A sensation of intense cold ran through his arm, making him shiver violently from head to toe.

"We must go in," he said resolutely, despite the fear that knotted his stomach. "Now. Every second counts."

Anton nodded and, taking a deep breath, pushed the door with force. A sinister, almost human creaking resonated through the corridors as the door slowly opened, revealing a dark and lugubrious chamber.

The spectacle that presented itself to them froze them with horror. The stone floor was covered with carved symbols and traced with what appeared to be fresh blood. At the centre of the room, within a perfect circle of thirteen red candles, Sofia lay, surrounded by a strange, almost unreal glow, a deep and pulsating red.

But what terrified them most was the silhouette standing behind Sofia. A human form, tall, clad in black, half-transparent yet sufficiently solid to cast a shadow. Its eyes gleamed with an intense red glow.

"Kaedy Batthyány," murmured Linh, petrified.

The silhouette slowly turned its head towards them, a cruel smile forming upon its spectral face. Then, in a deep and resonant voice that seemed to come from everywhere at once, it spoke:

"You are late. The ritual is almost complete. The daughter of blood shall be mine."

The Battle Against Darkness

Théo made to rush towards Sofia, but Anton stopped him abruptly, placing a firm hand upon his shoulder. "Wait," he murmured intensely. "There is something strange here... this glow, this circle, it is a trap. If you enter it without protection, you will be caught too."

Mia, still at the entrance of the room, fixed Sofia with painful intensity. She could feel the energy emanating from the symbols upon the floor, a dark and malevolent energy, as though it were actively trying to repel her, to repel them all. Closing her eyes and drawing deeply upon her reserves of courage, she concentrated upon the presence holding her friend.

"I must break the bond," she said, her voice imbued with renewed but trembling determination. "I can feel that it is a ritual... an ancient ritual that uses the energies of this place, the very essence of the Batthyány, to imprison Sofia and transform her."

"What must we do exactly?" asked Théo, the anguish palpable in his voice, his hands trembling.

"I shall try to disrupt the ritual," replied Mia, her eyes fixed upon the symbols on the floor. "But I shall need your help. Anton, you must trace a line with this white chalk around Sofia, taking absolute care not to touch the existing symbols. Théo, you will have to pronounce these words after me, exactly as I tell you, when I give you the signal. And Linh, you must help me maintain a protective barrier."

The silhouette of Kaedy emitted a grave and mocking laugh. "You believe you can stop me? After 381 years of waiting?"

"We are going to try," replied Mia with a bravery she did not truly feel.

Anton quickly searched his pocket and produced a piece of blessed white chalk. He knelt carefully near the circle and began to slowly trace a line around Sofia, taking extreme care to avoid the occult engravings upon the floor. Each centimetre traced seemed to cost him immense effort, as though an invisible force were resisting.

Mia, hands trembling, began to recite an ancient prayer she had secretly learnt from her grandmother, a woman recognised for her knowledge of protective magic. The words, in a language she did not truly understand but felt in her soul, flowed from her lips.

Linh joined her, adding her own protective energy, forming with Mia an invisible but powerful barrier.

Théo, hands clenched together, awaited Mia's instructions, ready to intervene, his heart beating so loudly he could hear it in his ears.

Suddenly, the entire room began to vibrate violently, as though the whole castle were reacting to the group's actions. The symbols upon the floor began to glow with a disquieting red light, growing ever more intense, and the temperature in the chamber dropped brutally, falling from minus five to what must have been minus twenty degrees. Mia knew their time was running out.

The silhouette of Kaedy advanced, extending a clawed hand towards the protective circle that Anton was tracing. "Stop! She is mine!"

"Now, Théo, repeat after me," cried Mia. "Per viam lucis, in nomine veritatis, libera hanc animam a vinculis tenebrarum!"

Théo, his voice trembling but determined, repeated the words in perfect synchrony with Mia. With each repetition, the red light around Sofia gradually weakened, as though the ritual were losing its strength, its grip.

Mia felt a terrible resistance, a dark force that desperately clung to Sofia, categorically refusing to let her go. But she did not yield. She redoubled her efforts, raising her voice even higher, imbuing each word with all her will to save her friend.

The silhouette of Kaedy howled with rage, a sound that made the walls tremble. "NO! She belongs to me! She is of the blood!"

Sofia's Awakening

After what seemed an eternity of fierce struggle, but lasted in reality only a few minutes, a cry pierced the darkness. A strident howl, filled with impotent rage and despair, resonated through the chamber, making the very foundations of the castle tremble. The red light around Sofia was abruptly extinguished, like a candle blown out.

The temperature rose instantly, and the oppressive atmosphere that surrounded them slowly dissipated, like a fog lifting at morning.

The silhouette of Kaedy retreated, becoming ever more transparent. "This is not finished..." it murmured before disappearing completely. "I shall return... the daughter of blood belongs to me..."

Sofia opened her eyes abruptly, gasping, her features deeply marked by fear and confusion but conscious. She looked around her, disoriented, then saw her friends. Eyes full of tears, she tried to speak but her voice broke.

"What happened?" she finally managed to murmur, her voice hoarse. "I thought... I thought I was lost forever. There was a voice. It told me I was home. That I belonged to it."

Théo rushed towards her the moment Anton had completed the protective circle, enveloping her in his arms with desperate strength. "You are safe now, Sofia. We found you. You are safe."

Anton, exhausted but profoundly relieved, cast an admiring glance towards Mia. "You succeeded, Mia. You managed to save her. You broke a ritual several centuries old."

Mia, her eyes still glistening with tears of relief, nodded, a weary smile full of joy upon her lips. "It is not finished, but at least we are all together. Sofia is alive."

The Urgent Evacuation

They helped Sofia to her feet, surrounding her with their warmth and comfort. She was trembling violently, her body weakened by the ordeal she had just undergone.

"We must get out of here, and quickly," said Anton firmly, taking command once more. "This place is far too dangerous. We have disturbed the balance. The other entities are going to react."

As though to confirm his words, the walls began to emit deep rumblings. Crackings. Whispers growing ever louder.

"They are coming," murmured Linh, terrified. "The 13 entities. They are furious."

With caution but speed, they left the dark chamber, supporting Sofia who could barely walk. They climbed the spiral staircase as quickly as possible, their hearts pounding wildly.

The dark walls still seemed to whisper threats, but the daylight at the end of the corridor gave them the strength to press on. When they finally reached the outside, crossing the threshold like shipwrecked sailors reaching dry land, the light mist had dissipated, revealing a grey but luminous sky.

They took a long moment to savour the fresh air, feeling alive once more after this terrifying confrontation with the dark forces of the castle.

"We were very fortunate this time," murmured Anton, his air profoundly grave. "But next time, we shall have to be infinitely better prepared. The

spirits of the Batthyány will not give up so easily. Kaedy has waited 381 years. He can wait still longer."

Mia, Sofia, and Théo exchanged a long look. They knew they could not abandon now. Tergnée Castle still had many secrets to reveal, and even though the darkness that inhabited it was powerful and dangerous, they were determined to confront it together.

Sofia, still weak, murmured: "He said I belonged to him. That I was the daughter of blood. What does that mean?"

Élise opened her manuscript. "I believe we must conduct more thorough research. Into your genealogy, Sofia. It is possible that you are truly connected to them. By blood."

A heavy silence fell upon the group.

They climbed into their cars, casting one last glance at the dark castle that rose behind them, more menacing than ever. The shadows of the Batthyány still haunted them, but they knew they would return one day, better prepared and more determined than ever to pierce the mysteries of this cursed place.

Their adventure was only beginning, and together, they were ready to confront whatever the darkness had in store for them. But now they knew that the stakes were far higher than they had imagined. Sofia was not an ordinary explorer. She was the key. The daughter of blood. And Kaedy Batthyány would not stop until he had reclaimed her.

~ *The End* ~