

The Blood Confession (Excerpt)

By Alisa M. Libby

A small sharp blade is required for sharpening the point of a quill. I sit close to the fire in this dim chamber, honing the point of a feather to ready it for the awaiting page.

“I can do that for you, my lady,” a young servant steps into my light, her face flushed and urgent.

“No need,” I mutter, but she moves closer and holds out her hand.

“Please, my lady,” she repeats. She is a young woman but there is a deep crease between her eyes. She looks at me steadily with her hand outstretched.

“Does it make you nervous,” I ask her, “to see me hold a knife?”

I balance the slim blade between my thumb and forefinger. She does not answer but all of the servants watch us, their eyes gleaming in the dimness. Obediently, I rest the blade and quill in her open palm.

Settling back in my chair by the fire I watch the servant work. She struggles to hold the quill steady while paring the edges to a fine point.

“I’m going to write a statement of confession before they bring me to trial.” I watch how my words are reflected in their faces. “Don’t you think that’s wise?”

“I suppose that would be, Countess,” one servant ventures, cautiously, “unless you would rather wait for the Prince to arrive.”

“I’m tired of waiting, he takes too long,” I inform them, restlessly. The five young women sit in a crescent around me upon silk cushioned sofas and chairs; assembled like

an audience, I muse, and I am on the stage. None of them look at me, their noses buried in embroidery in the flickering light of the fire, their eyes creased with strain.

“I can tell you all a story, while we wait. You do like stories, don’t you?” I ask them. A few acknowledge my question with a flash of their eyes. Others stare dutifully at the mending upon their laps. One young girl begins to nod, but is cut down by a harsh look from the woman beside her. I smile at this girl especially.

“You’ve heard this story before, I’m sure. It’s the story of the evil queen,” I begin, my voice a bit louder than before, “who sees a girl far more beautiful than she, the girl’s face appearing in the queen’s mirror.”

The women say nothing, but I know they are listening. I hear the guard shift nervously outside the door of the tower.

“The evil queen sends a hunter to kill the beautiful child and bring back her heart, so that she may make a feast of it for her dinner. The taste of the girl’s blood will give the queen’s envious heart peace, for it will make her again the most beautiful. You do know this story, don’t you?”

I look again at the girl who nodded and I smile. She begins to smile but blushes and looks back to her mending, fearing any repercussions. *It’s inappropriate to smile at a mad woman.*

“Yes, I remember,” she murmurs.

“It teaches a valuable lesson. Beauty can be transferred through the blood, from one woman to another.”

A log cracks upon the flames and a shower of sparks fall over the hearth.

“There is danger in beauty, as well as power. Wouldn’t you agree?”

No one answers. One servant purses her lips and sighs, setting aside her embroidery. She walks to lift a tapestry from a narrow window, to check the hour. From where I'm seated I can see the pink light of sunset reflected upon her pale face.

When night falls I will remain in this tower, and two guards will stand at my door. The rest of the servants will tramp gratefully down the spiral stairs and sigh into bedchambers on the first floor of the castle. Despite their seeming indifference, these stories will rise in the darkness, while they lie in bed not sleeping. My voice will repeat these words in their heads. When they wake and trudge up the stairs to this tower tomorrow their shoulders will be hunched; their eyes will look bruised.

It is this way in the village, as well, where such stories were born. This castle lies in the distance, sprawled upon the mountains like a great, sleeping lion. In the daytime the peasants of Novoe Mesto will spit angrily in its direction and warn their children to look away. But at night, in the darkness, the image of Castle Bizecka will rise before them and the words of legends will lie upon their bodies like lead.

"Ah!" the servant beside me gasps and a hiss of air escapes her clenched teeth. The quill and knife lie on her white apron as she inspects the cut on her finger: a bead of blood, like a ruby, rises from the wound. The sight of it warms, satisfies me.

The taste of the girl's blood will give the queen's envious heart peace. Some of those old stories are true.

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