

KENNETH OPPEL



THIS DARK ENDEAVOUR

The Apprenticeship of
VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN

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About the Book

The purest intentions can stir up the darkest obsessions.

In this prequel to Mary Shelley's gothic classic, *Frankenstein*, 16-year-old Victor Frankenstein begins a dark journey that will change his life forever. Victor's twin, Konrad, has fallen ill, and no doctor is able to cure him. Unwilling to give up on his brother, Victor enlists his beautiful cousin Elizabeth and best friend Henry on a treacherous search for the ingredients to create the forbidden Elixir of Life. Impossible odds, dangerous alchemy and a bitter love triangle threaten their quest at every turn.

Victor knows he must not fail. But his success depends on how far he is willing to push the boundaries of nature, science, and love – and how much he is willing to sacrifice.

KENNETH OPPEL

THIS DARK ENDEAVOUR

*The Apprenticeship of
Victor Frankenstein*



BOOK ONE



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To Philippa

CHAPTER ONE

MONSTER

WE FOUND THE monster on a rocky ledge high above the lake. For three dark days my brother and I had tracked it through the maze of caves to its lair on the mountain's summit. And now we beheld it, curled atop its treasure, its pale fur and scales ablaze with moonlight.

It knew we were here. Doubtless it had smelled us coming, its flared nostrils drinking in our sweat and fear. Its crested head lifted slightly, almost lazily. Coins and jewels clinked and shifted as its body began to uncoil.

'Kill it!' I roared. My sword was in my hand, and my brother was at my side, his own blade flashing.

The speed with which the beast struck was incomprehensible. I tried to throw myself clear, but its muscular neck crashed against me, and I felt my arm break and dangle uselessly at my side. But my sword hand was my left, and with a bellow of pain I slashed at the monster's chest, my blade deflecting off its mighty ribs.

I was aware of my brother striking at the beast's lower regions, all the while trying to avoid its lashing barbed tail. The monster came at me again, jaws agape. I battered its head, trying to stab its mouth or eyes, but it was quick as a cobra. It knocked me sprawling to the stone, perilously close to the precipice's edge. The monster reared back, ready to strike, and then shrieked in pain, for my brother had severed one of its hind legs.

But still the monster faced only me – as if I were its sole adversary.

I pushed myself up with my good hand. Before the monster could strike, I hurled myself at it. This time my sword plunged deep into its chest, so deep I could scarcely wrench it out. A ribbon of dark fluid unfurled in the moonlight, and the monster reared to its full height, terrible to behold, and then crumpled.

Its head shattered on the ground, and there, amid the bloodied fur and cracked crest, was the face of a beautiful girl.

My brother came to my side, and together we gazed at her, marvelling.

‘We’ve broken the curse,’ he said to me. ‘We have saved the town. And we have released her.’

The girl’s eyes opened, and she looked from my brother to me. I knew she didn’t have long to live, and a question burned inside me. I knelt.

‘Why?’ I asked her. ‘Why was it only me you attacked?’

‘Because it is you,’ she whispered, ‘who is the real monster.’

And with that, she died, leaving me shaken. I staggered back. My brother could not have heard her words – they were spoken so softly – and when he asked me what she’d said, I only shook my head.

‘Your arm,’ he said with concern, steadying me.

‘It will heal.’

I turned my gaze to the pile of treasure.

‘We have more than can ever be spent,’ my brother murmured.

I looked at him. ‘The treasure is mine alone.’

He stared back in astonishment, this brother of mine who looked so much like me, we might have been the same person. And indeed we were, for we were identical twins.

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

I lifted my sword, the tip against his throat, and forced him, step by step, towards the edge of the precipice.

‘Why should we not share this,’ he demanded, ‘as we’ve shared everything else equally?’

I laughed then, at the lie of it. ‘No twins are ever completely equal,’ I said. ‘Though we’re of one body, we are not equal, brother, for you were born the sooner by two minutes. Even in our mother’s womb you stole from me. The family birthright is yours. And such a treasure that is, to make this one look like a pauper’s pittance. But I want it, all of it. And I shall have it.’

At that moment the monster stirred, and in alarm I turned – only to see its final death contraction. But in that same instant my brother drew his sword.

‘You will not cheat me!’ he shouted.

Back and forth across the ledge we fought. We were both strong, with broad shoulders, and taut muscles that thrived on exertion. My brother had always been the better swordsman, and with my broken arm I was even more disadvantaged. But my cold serpent’s resolve was strong, and before long I had smacked the sword from his hand and forced him to his knees. Even as he stared at me with my own face, and pleaded with me in my own voice, I plunged the sword into his heart and stole his life.

I gave a sigh of utter relief and looked up at the moon, felt the cool May air caress my face.

‘Now I shall have all the riches in the world,’ I said. ‘And I am, at last, *alone*.’

For a moment there was only the shushing of the breeze over the glacial lake – and then applause burst forth.

Standing on the broad balcony, I turned to face the audience, which had been watching us from their rows of chairs just inside the ballroom. There was Mother and Father, and their friends, their delighted faces bathed in candlelight.

My brother Konrad sprang to his feet, and together we ran back to the crumpled monster and helped our cousin emerge from her costume. Her luxuriant amber hair spilled

free, and her olive complexion glowed in the torchlight. The applause grew louder still. The three of us joined hands and took a bow.

‘Henry!’ I called. ‘Join us!’ We waved him out. Reluctantly, our best friend, a tall blond wisp of a fellow, emerged from his lurking spot near the French doors. ‘Ladies and gentleman,’ I announced to the audience. ‘Henry Clerval, our illustrious playwright!’

‘Bravo!’ cried my father, and his praise was echoed round the room.

‘Elizabeth Lavenza as the monster, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Konrad with a flourish. Our cousin made a very pretty curtsy. ‘My name is Konrad. And this’ – he looked at me with a mischievous grin – ‘is the hero of our tale, my evil twin, Victor!’

And now everyone was rising to their feet, to give us a standing ovation.

The applause was intoxicating. Impulsively I jumped up onto the stone balustrade to take another bow, and reached out my hand for Konrad to join me.

‘Victor!’ I heard my mother call. ‘Come down from there at once!’

I ignored her. The balustrade was broad and strong, and, after all, it was hardly the first time I had stood on it – but I had always done so secretly, for the drop was considerable: fifty feet to the shore of Lake Geneva.

Konrad took my hand, but instead of yielding to my pull he exerted his own and tried to bring me down. ‘You’re worrying Mother,’ he whispered.

As if Konrad hadn’t played on the balustrade himself!

‘Oh, come on,’ I said. ‘Just one bow!’

Our hands were still joined, and I felt his grip tighten, intent on bringing me back to the balcony. And I was suddenly angry at him for being so sensible, for not sharing my joy at the applause – for making me feel like a childish prima donna.

I jerked my hand free, but too fast and too forcefully.

I felt my balance shift. Already weighed down by my heavy cape, I had to take a step backwards. Except there was nowhere to step, and suddenly I was falling and my arms were windmilling. I tried to throw myself forward, but it was all too late, much too late.

Half turning I saw the black mountains, and the blacker lake, and directly below me the rocky shore – and my death, rushing up to meet me.

Down I fell towards the jagged shallows.

But I never reached them, for I landed hard upon the narrow roof of a bow window on the chateau's lower floor. Pain shrieked from my left foot as I collapsed and then rolled – and my body began to slide over the edge, legs first. My hands scrabbled, but there was nothing to grasp and I was powerless to stop myself. My hips went over, then chest and head – but the roof had a lip of stone, and it was there my frenzied hands finally found purchase.

I dangled. With my feet I kicked at the window, but its leaded panes were very strong. Even if I could've cracked the glass, I doubted I could swing myself inside from such a position.

More important, I knew I could not hold on for very long.

With all my might I tried to pull myself back up. My head crested the roof, and I managed to hook my chin over the lip of stone. My flexed arms trembled with fatigue, and I could do no more.

From directly above me came a great clamour, and I glimpsed a throng of people peering over the balustrade, their faces ghastly in the torchlight. I saw Elizabeth and Henry, my mother and father – but it was Konrad on whom my gaze locked.

Around one of the balustrade's posts, he had tied his cloak so that it hung like a rope. I heard my mother's shrieks of protest and my father's angry shouts as Konrad

swung himself over the balustrade. He grabbed hold of the cloak, and half climbed, half slid, down to its very end.

Even as the strength ebbed from my arms and hands, I watched, enthralled. Konrad's legs still dangled some six feet from my little roof, and his landing spot was not generous. He glanced down, and let go. He hit the roof standing, teetered off balance – to the gasps of all the onlookers – but then crouched, low and steady.

'Konrad,' I wheezed. I knew I only had seconds left before my muscles failed and my fingers unlocked. He reached out for me.

'No!' I grunted. 'I'll pull you off!'

'Do you wish to die?' he shouted, making to grab my wrists.

'Sit down!' I told him. 'Back against the wall. Brace your feet against the ledge!'

He did as I instructed, then reached for my hands with both of his. I did not know how this could work, for we weighed the same and gravity was against us.

And yet ... and yet ... with our hands grasping the other's wrists, his legs pushing against the stone ledge, he pulled with all his strength – and then something more still – and lifted me up and over the roof's edge. I collapsed on top of my brother, shaking and crying and laughing all at once.

'You fool,' he gasped as we hugged each other tight. 'You great fool. You almost died.'

THE DARK LIBRARY

'IT'S A TERRIBLE thing,' I said, 'to be crippled in the prime of one's life.'

'You've *sprained* your ankle,' said Konrad wryly. 'Elizabeth, why on earth do you keep pushing him around in that wheelchair?'

'Oh,' said Elizabeth, laughing, 'I find it amusing. For now.'

'Dr Lesage said it mustn't bear any weight for a week,' I protested.

Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows of the west sitting room, one of the many large and elegantly furnished chambers in the chateau. It was a Sunday, four days since my brush with death. Father had gone into Geneva to attend to some urgent business, and my mother had accompanied him to visit an ailing aunt in town. My two younger brothers, Ernest, who was nine, and William, who had scarcely learned to walk, were with Justine, their nanny, in the courtyard, planting a small vegetable garden for their amusement.

'Honestly,' said Konrad, shaking his head, 'it's like a nursemaid with a pram.'

I turned to Elizabeth. 'I think our Konrad wants a turn in the chair. He's feeling left out.'

I glanced back at my brother, hoping for a satisfying reaction. His face was virtually identical to my own, and even our parents sometimes had trouble telling us apart from a distance, for we shared the same brooding demeanour: dark and abundant hair that had a habit of

falling across our eyes, high cheekbones, heavy eyebrows, a square jaw. Mother often lamented what she called the 'ruthless turn' of our lips. A Frankenstein trait – it did not come from the Beaufort side of the family, she was quite certain.

'Victor,' my brother said, 'I'm starting to doubt that your ankle's even sprained. You're play-acting. Again. Come on, up you get!'

'I'm not strong enough!' I objected. 'Elizabeth, you were there when the doctor examined me. Tell him!'

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. 'I seem to recall he said it might be sprained. *Slightly.*'

'You should be ready to hobble about, then!' Konrad proclaimed, trying to haul me from the chair. 'You don't want to get sickly!'

'Mother will be vexed!' I said, fighting back. 'This could leave me permanently lame ...'

'You two,' said Elizabeth with a sigh, and then began giggling, for it must have been a comic sight, the two of us wrestling while the wheelchair rolled and skidded about.

At last the chair tipped over, spilling me onto the floor.

'You madman!' I cried, getting to my feet. 'Is this how you treat an invalid?'

'A little diva is what you are,' said Konrad. 'Look at you, standing!'

I hunched, wincing for effect, but Konrad started laughing, and I did too. It was hard to watch oneself laughing without doing the same.

'It's still sore,' I said, testing the foot gingerly.

He passed me the crutches Dr Lesage had brought. 'Try these,' he said, 'and let Elizabeth have a rest.'

Elizabeth had righted the wheelchair and arranged herself gracefully on the cushioned seat. 'You little wretch,' she said to me, her hazel eyes narrowing. 'It's very comfortable. I can see why you didn't want to get out!'

Elizabeth was a distant cousin of ours, from Father's side of the family. When she was only five, her mother died, and her father remarried and promptly abandoned her to an Italian convent. When Father got word of this some two years later, he travelled at once to the convent and brought her home to us.

When she first arrived she was like a feral cat. She hid. Konrad and I, seven years old, were forever trying to find her. To us it was a wonderful game of hide-and-seek. But it was no amusement to her; she just wanted to be left alone. If we found her, she became angry. She hissed and snarled and hit. Sometimes she bit.

Mother and Father told us she needed time. Elizabeth, they said, had not wanted to leave the convent. The nuns had been very kind to her, and their affection had been the closest thing she'd known to a mother's love. She hadn't wanted to be torn away from them to live with strangers. Konrad and I were told to let her be, but of course we did nothing of the sort.

We continued to pursue her for the next two months. Then, one day, when we found her latest hiding place, she actually smiled. I almost yelped in surprise.

'Close your eyes,' she ordered us. 'Count to a hundred and find me again.'

And then it truly was a game, and from that moment the three of us were inseparable. Her laughter filled the house, and her sullenness and silence disappeared.

Her temper, however, did not.

Elizabeth was fiery. She did not lose her temper quickly, but when she did, all her old wildcat fury returned. Growing up together, she and I often came to blows over some disagreement – she even bit me once, when I suggested girls' brains were smaller than boys'. Konrad never seemed to infuriate her like I could, but she and I fought tooth and nail.

Now that we were sixteen, all that was far behind us.

‘Well, then,’ said Konrad, grinning wickedly at Elizabeth, ‘you shall finally have your turn in the chair.’

At top speed he propelled her out of the sitting room and down the great hallway, me hurrying to keep up on my crutches, and then tossing them aside and running after them on my miraculously healed ankle.

Great portraits of our ancestors looked smugly down at me as I ran past. A full suit of armour, brandishing a sword still stained with blood, stood sentry in a niche.

Ahead, I saw Konrad and Elizabeth disappear into the library, and followed. Konrad was in the middle of the grand book-lined room, spinning Elizabeth round and round in a tight circle until she shrieked for him to stop.

‘I’m too dizzy, Konrad!’

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Let’s dance instead.’ And he took her hands and pulled her, none too gently, from the chair.

‘I can’t!’ she protested, staggering like a drunk as Konrad waltzed her clumsily across the room.

I watched them, and there was within me a brief flicker of a feeling I did not recognize. It looked like me dancing with Elizabeth, but it was not.

She caught my eye, laughing. ‘Victor, make him stop! I must look ridiculous!’

Having grown up with us, she was used to such rough play. I was not worried for her. If she so wanted, she could have freed herself from Konrad’s clutches.

‘All right, my lady,’ said Konrad, ‘I release you.’ And he gave her a final spin and let go.

Laughing still, Elizabeth lurched to one side, tried to regain her balance, and then fell against the shelves, her hand dislodging an entire row of books before she collapsed to the floor.

I looked at my twin with mock severity. ‘Konrad, look what you’ve done, you scoundrel!’

‘No. Look what *I*’ve done!’ Elizabeth exclaimed.

The bookshelf behind her had swung inwards on invisible hinges, revealing a narrow opening.

'Incredible!' I exclaimed. 'A secret passage we haven't discovered yet!'

Chateau Frankenstein had been built by our ancestors more than three hundred years ago, outside the village of Bellerive, not four miles from Geneva. The chateau was constructed as both home and fortress, and its thick walls and high turrets rose from a promontory overlooking the lake, surrounded on three sides by water.

Though we also had a handsome house within Geneva itself, we usually stayed there only in the winter months, and at the first signs of spring, we moved back to the chateau. Over the years, Konrad, Elizabeth and I had spent countless hours and days exploring its many levels, its sumptuous chambers and ballrooms, boathouse, stables, and ramparts. There were damp subterranean dungeons, portcullises that clanged down to block entranceways – and, of course, secret passages.

We had naively thought we'd discovered all of these. But here we were, the three of us, staring with delight at this gap in the library wall.

'Fetch a candlestick,' Konrad told me.

'*You* fetch a candlestick,' I retorted. 'I can practically see in the dark.' And I pushed the thick bookshelf so that it swung further inwards – enough for a person to squeeze through if he turned sideways. The darkness beyond was total, but I resolutely moved towards it, hands outstretched.

'Don't be daft,' said Elizabeth, grabbing my arm. 'There might be stairs – or nothing at all. You've fallen to your death once already this week.'

Konrad was pushing past us now, a candlestick in his hand, leading the way. With a grimace I followed Elizabeth, and hadn't taken two steps before Konrad brought us up short.

‘Stop! There’s no railing – and a good drop.’

The three of us stood, pressed together, upon a small ledge that overlooked a broad square shaft. The candlelight did not reveal the bottom.

‘Perhaps it’s an old chimney,’ Elizabeth suggested.

‘If it’s a chimney, why are there stairs?’ I said, for jutting from the brick walls were small wooden steps.

‘I wonder if Father knows about this,’ said Konrad. ‘We should tell him.’

‘We should go down first,’ I said. ‘See where it leads.’

We all looked at the thin steps, little more than plank ends.

‘They might be rotted through,’ my brother said sensibly.

‘Give me the candle, then,’ I said impatiently. ‘I’ll test them as I go.’

‘It’s not safe, Victor, especially for Elizabeth in her skirt and heeled shoes—’

In two swift movements Elizabeth had slipped off both shoes. I saw her eyes flash eagerly in the candlelight.

‘They don’t look so rotted,’ she said.

‘All right,’ said Konrad. ‘But stick close to the wall – and tread carefully!’

I badly wanted to go first, but Konrad held the candle and led the way. Elizabeth went next, lifting her skirts. I came last. My eyes were fixed on the steps, one hand brushing the wall, as much for reassurance as balance. Three ... four ... five steps ... and then a ninety-degree turn along the next wall. I paused and looked back up at the narrow bar of light from the library door. I was glad we’d left it ajar.

From below rose an evil, musty smell, like rotted lake weed. After a few more steps Konrad called out:

‘There’s a door here!’

In the halo of candlelight I saw, set into the side of the shaft, a large wooden door. Its rough surface was gouged

with scratches. Where the handle ought to have been was a hole. Painted across the top were the words

ENTER ONLY WITH A FRIEND'S WELCOME

'Not very friendly to have no handle,' Elizabeth remarked.

Konrad gave the door a couple of good shoves. 'Locked tight,' he said.

The stairs continued down, and my brother held the candle at arm's length, trying to light the depths.

I squinted. 'I think I see the bottom!'

It was indeed the bottom, and we reached it in another twenty steps. In the middle of the damp dirt floor was a well.

We walked around it and peered inside. I couldn't tell if what I saw was oily water or just more blackness.

'Why would they hide a well in here?' Elizabeth asked.

'Maybe it's a siege well,' I said, pleased with myself.

Konrad lifted an eyebrow. 'A siege well?'

'In case the chateau were besieged, and all other supplies of water were cut off.'

'Makes good sense,' said Elizabeth. 'And maybe that door we passed leads to a secret escape tunnel!'

'Is that ... a bone?' Konrad asked, holding his candle closer to the ground.

I felt myself shiver. We all bent down. The object was half buried in the earth, very small and white and slender, with a knobby end.

'Maybe a finger bone?' I said.

'Animal or human?' Elizabeth asked.

'We could dig it up,' said Konrad.

'Perhaps later,' said Elizabeth. 'No doubt it's just a bit of another Frankenstein relative.'

We all giggled, and the noise echoed about unpleasantly.

'Shall we go back up?' Konrad said.

I wondered if he was scared. I was, but would not show it.

‘That door ...’ I said. ‘I wonder where it goes.’

‘It may simply be bricked up on the other side,’ said Konrad.

‘May I?’ I said, and took the candle from his hand. I led the way back up the splintered stairs and stopped outside the door. I held the flame to the small hole but still could not see what was beyond. Passing the candle down to Elizabeth, I swallowed, and stretched my hand towards the dark hole.

‘What are you doing, Victor?’ Konrad asked.

‘There might be a catch inside,’ I said, and chuckled to conceal my nervousness. ‘No doubt something will grab my hand.’

I folded my hand small, slipped it into the hole – and immediately something seized me.

The fingers were cold and very, very strong, and they gripped so tightly that I bellowed in both pain and terror.

‘Victor, is this a joke?’ Elizabeth demanded angrily.

I was pulling with all my might, trying to wrench my hand free. ‘It’s got me!’ I roared. ‘It’s got my hand!’

‘*What’s* got your hand?’ shouted Konrad from below.

In my hysteria all I could think was, *If it has a hand, it has a head, and if it has a mouth, it has teeth.*

I pounded at the door with my other fist. ‘Let me go, you fiend!’

The more I pulled, the tighter it held me. But even in my panic I suddenly realized that this grip did not feel like flesh. It was too hard and inflexible.

‘It’s not a real hand!’ I cried. ‘It’s some kind of machine!’

‘Victor, you idiot, what have you done now?’ Konrad said.

‘It won’t release me!’

‘I’m going for help,’ said Elizabeth, carefully moving around me and up the narrow steps. But just before she

reached the door, there was a dull thud, and the glow from the library disappeared.

‘What happened?’ Konrad called out.

‘It closed itself!’ Elizabeth called back. ‘There’s a handle but it won’t turn!’ She began to pound on the thick door and call for help. Her voice echoed about the shaft like a bat’s flurry of panic.

All this time I was still struggling to pull my hand free.

‘Be calm,’ said Konrad at my side. ‘Elizabeth, can you return the candle to us, please?’

‘I’ll be trapped down here for ever!’ I wailed, thinking of the bone we’d seen in the dirt. I now understood the deep scratches in the door, no doubt gouged by desperate fingernails. ‘You’ll have to saw my hand off!’

Exhausted, I stopped fighting the mechanical hand, and instantly it stopped tightening – but it did not release me.

‘*Enter only with a friend’s welcome*,’ Elizabeth said, reading the message painted on the door. ‘It’s some kind of riddle. *A friend’s welcome ...*’

‘Crushing someone’s hand to pulp!’ I said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘When you welcome a friend, you say hello, you ask how they’ve been, you ... *shake their hand*! Victor, maybe it wants you to shake hands!’

‘I’ve been shaking hands with it for ten minutes!’

But had I? I’d been pulling and thrashing wildly about. I forced myself to take a deep, calming breath. As smoothly as I could, I tried to lift my hand. Amazingly, I was permitted to do so. Then I pushed gently down – and then politely pumped up and down once more. Instantly the mechanical fingers sprang apart, my hand was released, and the door creaked open a few inches.

I cradled my molested hand, flexing my fingers to make sure none were broken. ‘Thank you,’ I said to Elizabeth. ‘That was a very good idea.’

‘You troublemaker,’ she said angrily. ‘Your adventure’s got us locked in – *Victor*, what are you doing now?’

‘Don’t you want to have a look inside?’ I said, poking the door open a little more.

‘You must be mad,’ said Konrad, ‘after what that door just did to you.’

‘It may be our only way out,’ I said. I was aware that I’d done a good deal of wailing and shrieking. At least I hadn’t wept. But I wanted to save face – and I was genuinely curious to know what was inside.

‘Come on,’ I said to Elizabeth, plucking the candle from her grasp.

I pushed the door wide, stood to one side, and waited. Nothing flew out. Cautiously I stepped in, and peered behind the door.

‘Look at this!’ I exclaimed.

An elaborate machine, all gears and pulleys, was bolted to the back of the door. Against the hole was an amazing mechanical hand with jointed wooden fingers.

‘What an ingenious lock,’ said Konrad in amazement.

‘And look here,’ I said, pointing up. ‘I bet those ropes go to the library door. Didn’t it close and lock after the machine grabbed my hand? I’d wager we can unlock it from here. A brilliant trap to guard the room.’

‘But why,’ Elizabeth began slowly, ‘does it need to be guarded?’

As one, we all turned. The skin of my neck turned to gooseflesh, for I honestly did not know what to expect. A gruesome torture chamber? Human remains?

I held the candle high. We were in a surprisingly large chamber. Nearby was a torch jutting from a wall sconce, and I quickly lit it. The room brightened, an orange glow flickering over tables scattered with oddly shaped glassware and metal instruments – and row upon row of shelves groaning with thick tomes.

‘It’s just a library,’ I said, relieved.

‘We must be the first to discover it,’ Elizabeth said in wonder.

I stroked my finger through the thick dust on the closest table, looked at the cobwebs sagging from the corners of the low ceiling. 'Maybe so,' I murmured.

'Curious instruments,' said Konrad, peering at the glassware and scales and sharply angled tools arranged atop the table.

'It looks a bit like an apothecary shop,' I said, noting the large sooty hearth. 'Maybe one of our ancestors made primitive medicines.'

'That would explain the well,' Elizabeth said. 'They'd need water.'

'But why do it in a secret chamber?' I wondered aloud. I walked over to one of the shelves and squinted at the books' cracked spines. 'The titles are all Latin and Greek and ... languages I've never seen.'

I heard Elizabeth laugh, and turned.

'Here is a spell to rid your garden of slugs,' she said, paging through a black tome. 'And another to make someone fall in love with you.' Her eyes lingered a bit longer on this one. 'And here is one to make your enemy sicken and die ...' Her voice trailed off. 'There is a very upsetting picture of a body covered in running sores.'

We laughed, or tried to laugh, but we were all, I think, in awe of this strange place and the books it held.

'And here,' said Konrad, paging through another volume, 'are instructions on how to speak to the dead.'

I looked at my brother. I often had the uncanny feeling that I was waiting for his show of emotions so I could better know my own. Right now I saw fear – but not my own powerful fascination with this place.

He swallowed. 'We should leave.'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth, replacing her book.

'I want to stay a little longer,' I said. I was not pretending. Books usually held little interest for me, but these had a dark lustre, and I wanted to run my fingers over their ancient pages, gaze upon their strange contents.

I caught sight of a book titled *Occulta Philosophia* and thirstily drew it from the shelf.

‘Occult Philosophy,’ said Konrad, looking over my shoulder.

I turned the first few vellum pages to find the author’s name.

‘Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa,’ I read aloud. ‘Any idea who this old fellow was?’

‘A medieval German magician,’ said a voice, and Elizabeth gave a shriek, for the answer had come from behind us.

We all whirled to behold, standing in the doorway ... Father.

‘You’ve discovered the Biblioteka Obscura, I see,’ he said, torchlight and shadow dancing disconcertingly over his craggy face.

He was a powerfully built man, leonine with his thick silver hair and steady hunter’s gaze. I would not have wanted to stand before him in his courtroom.

‘It was an accident,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I fell against the books, you see, and the door opened before us.’

Father’s mood was rarely as severe as his fierce demeanour, and he grinned now. ‘And naturally you had to descend the stairs.’

‘Naturally,’ I said.

‘And would I be right in assuming, Victor, that you were the one to shake hands with the door?’

I heard Konrad chuckle.

‘Yes,’ I admitted, ‘and it very nearly crushed my hand!’

‘No,’ said my father, ‘it was not designed to crush the hand, just to hold on to it. For ever.’

I looked at him, shocked. ‘Truly?’

‘When I discovered this secret passage as a young man, no one had descended the stairs for more than two hundred years. And the last person to do so was still here. What remained of him, anyway. The bones of his forearm dangled

from the door. The rest of his ruined body had fallen into the shaft.'

'We wondered if we'd seen ... a finger bone down there,' Elizabeth said.

'No doubt I missed a bit,' said Father.

'Who was it?' Konrad asked.

Father shook his head. 'Judging by his clothing, a servant - unlucky enough to have discovered the secret passage.'

'But who built all this?' I asked.

'Ah,' said Father. 'That would be your ancestor Wilhelm Frankenstein. By all accounts he was a brilliant man, and a very wealthy one. Some three hundred years ago, when he constructed the chateau, he created the Biblioteka Obscura.'

'Biblioteka Obscura,' Elizabeth said, and then translated the Latin. 'Dark Library. Why was it kept in darkness?'

'He was an alchemist. And during his lifetime its practice was often outlawed. He was obsessed with the transmutation of matter, especially turning base metals into gold.'

I had heard of such a thing. Imagine the riches, the power!

'Did he succeed?' I demanded.

Father chuckled. 'No, Victor. It cannot be done.'

I persisted. 'But maybe that explains why he was so wealthy.'

There was something almost rueful in Father's smile. 'It makes a fine story, but it is nonsense.' He waved his hand at the shelves. 'You must understand that these books were written centuries ago. They are primitive attempts to explain the world. There are *some* shards of learning in them, but compared to our modern knowledge they are like childish dreams.'

'Didn't the alchemists also make medicines?' Elizabeth asked.

‘Yes, or at least tried to,’ Father said. ‘Some believed they could master all elements, and create elixirs that would make people live for ever. And some, including our fine ancestor, turned their attentions to matters even more fantastical.’

‘Like what?’ Konrad asked.

‘Conversing with spirits. Raising ghosts.’

A chill swept through my body. ‘Wilhelm Frankenstein practised witchcraft?’

‘They burned witches back then,’ Elizabeth murmured.

‘There is no such thing as witchcraft,’ Father said firmly. ‘But the Church of Rome condemned virtually each and every one of these books. I think you can see why the library was kept in darkness.’

‘He was never caught, was he?’ I asked.

Father shook his head. ‘But one day, in his forty-third year, without telling anyone where he was going, he mounted a horse and rode away from the chateau. He left behind his wife and children, and was never seen again.’

‘That is ... quite chilling,’ said Elizabeth, looking from Konrad to me.

‘Our family history is colourful, is it not?’ said Father humorously.

My gaze returned once more to the bookshelves, glowing in the torchlight. ‘May we look at them some more?’

‘No.’

I was startled, for his voice had lost its affectionate joviality and become hard.

‘But, Father,’ I objected, ‘you yourself have said that the pursuit of knowledge is a grand thing.’

‘This is not knowledge,’ he said. ‘It is a *corruption* of knowledge. And these books are not to be read.’

‘Then, why do you keep them?’ I asked defiantly. ‘Why not just burn them?’

For a moment his brow furrowed angrily, then softened. 'I keep them, dear, arrogant Victor, because they are artefacts of an ignorant, wicked past – and it is a good thing not to forget our past mistakes. To keep us humble. To keep us vigilant. You see, my boy?'

'Yes, Father,' I said, but was not sure I did. It seemed impossible to me that all this ink could contain nothing but lies.

'Now, come away from this dark place,' he told the three of us. 'It's best if you do not speak of it to anyone – especially your little brothers. The stairs are perilous enough, and you already know the hazards of the door.' He looked at us gravely. 'And make me a promise that I will not find you here again.'

'I promise,' the three of us said, almost in unison. Though I was not so sure I could resist the strange allure of these books.

'Excellent. And, Victor,' he added with a wry grin, 'wonderful to see you on your feet again. Now, if I'm not mistaken, it is nearly time for us to prepare dinner for the servants.'

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'Surely that's enough now,' I muttered, tossing another peeled potato into the heaping bowl.

'A few more, I think,' Konrad said, still diligently peeling. He glanced over at Ernest, who was sitting beside us at the long table, his brow furrowed with concentration as he worked away at a potato. He in no way resembled Konrad and me. He took after our mother, with fair hair and large, blue eyes.

'Remember, push the knife away from yourself,' Konrad said gently. 'You don't want to cut your hand. Good. That's it.'

Ernest beamed at Konrad's praise; the boy practically hero-worshipped him.

I added yet another potato to the bowl and looked about the crowded kitchen. Mother and Elizabeth were preparing the ham, and chatting happily with some of the maids. Mother was much adored by all the servants. She was younger than Father by nearly twenty years, and very beautiful, with thick blonde hair, a high forehead, and frank, gentle eyes. I couldn't remember her ever speaking sharply to any of our staff.

At the far end of the table, Father chopped parsnips and carrots for the roasting pan, and talked to Schultz, his butler of twenty-five years, who was currently sipping our finest sherry while my father worked.

Our home was a most peculiar one.

The city of Geneva was a republic. We had no king or queen or prince to rule over us. We were governed by the General Council, which our male citizens elected. We had servants, as all wealthy families did, but they were the best paid in Geneva, and were given ample free time. Otherwise, as Father said, they would have been little better than slaves. Just because they did not have our advantages of wealth and education, Father said, that did not make them lesser.

Both Mother and Father were considered exceedingly liberal by many people.

Liberal meant open-minded.

Liberal meant making dinner every Sunday night for our own servants.

'It's terrible, sir, this situation in France,' Schultz was saying to my father.

'The terror these mobs are spreading is despicable,' Father agreed.

'Do you still think the Revolution so good a thing now, sir?' Schultz asked in his frank way, and I could see all the