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opening extract from

Count Karlstein

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PART ONE
Hildi

ONE

Peter crouched over the fire, stirring the embers so that the sparks swarmed up like imps on the rocky walls of hell. Behind him, his shadow shook and flared across the wall and half the ceiling of our little bedroom, and the cracks between the floorboards shone like golden rivers in the darkness.

'Listen,' he said. 'Zamiel!'

And with a delicious shiver I pulled my eiderdown over me and lay on the rug with my face pressed to the floor to hear the voices from the parlour below . . .

We lived in the tavern in Karlstein village, with our ma, who was the landlady. A quiet enough place, though there was usually a stranger or two passing through, and the company in the tavern parlour was as good as any in the mountains – especially on a winter's night, when their pipes were going and their glasses full and there was a good story to be told.

Peter and I each had our favourites: stories of hunting for him and tales of terror for me. The best of all were those about Zamiel, the Prince of the Mountains, the Demon Huntsman. There was usually a bargain in the tale, and a chase, and bloody revenge, and a frenzied victim running in terror through the snow, pursued by the Wild Hunt – great hounds with slavering jaws and luminous eyes, black horses ridden by grinning skeletons and, at the head of it all, the Demon himself, swathed in impenetrable darkness, with eyes of raging fire. Even our ma (we'd see through the cracks in the floorboards) would pause in her work and lean her plump elbows on the counter and stare with wide eyes as the latest tale unfolded.

But none of the customers below ever came so close to Zamiel as Peter and I did, and I came closest of all: I was in the very room when he came for his victim, and I'll never forget what I saw if I live till the year 1900.

It all began on a grey afternoon in October. The year

was 1816, and I'd been working at Castle Karlstein for nearly a year. (My name is Hildi, by the way.) There had been a heavy fall of snow; I was sitting at the parlour window with a bundle of mending in my lap, and Miss Lucy and Miss Charlotte behind me were roasting chestnuts in the fire. I was looking out at the fading light and thinking of drawing the curtains to shut out the chill when I saw a coach lumbering up the narrow road. I gazed at it in surprise, because we'd had no visitors since March; and then, as the coach turned the corner into the castle courtyard, the wheels slipped on the icy road and the coach slewed round towards the precipice.

The horses whinnied with fear and the driver nearly fell off the box as the brakes screeched and failed to grip; the coach banged against the stone gateway, and came away lighter by a great strip of paint. I jumped and cried out – and then at the last moment the wheels gripped, and the coach rolled through into the courtyard. The girls ran up beside me and watched as the coachman got down and leaned shivering against the large back wheel, and mopped his forehead before opening the door of the coach.

Out there stepped, cool as you please, a skinny old gentleman in black, who looked at the coachman as if to say, 'Nerves? I advise you to have 'em cut out, my man, and braided into a whip, the better to guide these shambling nags,' dusted off the flakes of snow that had had the imper-

tinence to settle on his bony old shoulders, and made his way across the white courtyard, where the darkness was already beginning to pile up in the corners, as if driven there by the wind. Johann the footman opened the castle door and let out a great quantity of light, which leapt inside again as soon as he shut it. The coachman began to unharness the horses, with many head-shakings and gesturings to the groom, while the girls tried to guess who the visitor might be.

They were English – not Swiss at all, though they'd picked up enough of our language in the time they'd been here to sound like natives. Lucy was twelve and Charlotte was ten, and I wasn't much older myself; but I counted myself more fortunate by far, because I had a mother still alive and a brother – and no grim uncle like Count Karlstein. They had no other relatives, and since their parents had both died in a shipwreck, they had no choice but Count Karlstein or an orphanage – and if they'd known what he'd be like, they'd have chosen the orphanage without a second's pause. They'd been here a year now, poor things.

He'd been here for nine, nearly. Old Count Ludwig Karlstein, the previous count, had died without an heir, so the estate had passed to Count Heinrich Karlstein, a thin, dark man, much given to gnawing his nails, muttering to himself, and poring over works of German philosophy at midnight in his stone-walled, tapestried study. Nothing so

bad in those things, of course, but he had other defects, such as a temper you'd have put down for its own sake if it'd been a dog, a vile, sarcastic tongue, and – worst of all – a kind of bright-eyed delight in being cruel, whether it was to a horse or dog or a servant – or a little niece from another country, with nowhere else to go. But there it was: he was the master.

And meanwhile, Lucy had remembered who the visitor was.

'It's the lawyer, Charlotte!' she insisted. 'The old man from Geneva! He gave us that dark sweet wine and some cake while we waited for Uncle Heinrich—'

'Meister Haifisch!' said Charlotte.

'That's right. Perhaps he's come to take us away again – can he do that? D'you think he could do that, Hildi?'

'Hildi, go and find out! Go and listen! Please!' said Charlotte.

'I can't do that!' I said. 'They'd throw me out for good, and then where would you be? Just wait and see, that's the best thing to do.'

Lucy made a face, but she saw I was right. And as it happened, none of us had long to wait, because only a minute or so later Frau Muller the housekeeper (as surly as a goose, and with the same way of leaning at you with a long neck when she was cross) came bustling in.

'Miss Lucy and Miss Charlotte! You're to go and wash

yourselves and brush your hair and come down to your Uncle Heinrich in ten minutes. And you, Kelmar, put that sewing down and get along to the drawing-room – Dettweiler fell over in the courtyard and broke her ankle, stupid girl, so you'll have to be parlourmaid for the time being.'

They were hustled away, and I took a candle and hastened down to the drawing-room. Poor little Susi Dettweiler – Count Karlstein had made her cry three times yesterday, and now she breaks her ankle! My heart was thumping wildly as I went in, in case my clumsiness attracted Count Karlstein's attention. I feared he'd lash at me like a tiger.

But when I opened the door, I saw him so deep in conversation with the skinny old stranger, and the skinny old stranger paying such close attention to him, that neither of them noticed me for a moment or two. I don't know what I should have done, but I stood in the shadows, too nervous to go forward, and listened to what they were saying.

'Damn it, Haifisch,' said Count Karlstein (Haifisch! Lucy was right, then: this cool old skeleton was the lawyer from Geneva), 'you're not *sure?* After nine years? How much longer d'you want? Would a hundred years be sufficient? Would you be able to say then, "Yes, Count Karlstein, we have finally established that there is no other claimant – for if there was, he must be dead by now"? Eh?'

Meister Haifisch showed no sign that Count Karlstein's tone annoyed him. He was as calm as he'd been when he'd stepped out of the coach, having missed certain death by the thickness of a wheel rim.

'You asked me to make certain, Count Karlstein,' he said evenly. 'Certainty without evidence, in a case like this, is worthless.'

Count Karlstein snorted. 'Worthless! *You're* worthless, Haifisch, if you can't do better than that. If evidence is all you want, can't you manufacture some? Eh? Make it up?'

The lawyer stood up. That was all he did; but it stopped Count Karlstein's restless prowling and finger-gnawing and sideways kicks at the great log in the fire as effectively as if a gunshot had sounded. Meister Haifisch had a presence that commanded your attention. Like an actor, he knew how to make every movement count. And his audience – both of us, one in the shadows beside the door and one scowling beside the fire – was held still, waiting for his next words.

Which were simple. 'Good night, Count Karlstein,' was all he said; but his voice held such a charge of contempt that it would have shamed the devil himself.

'Oh, sit down, man,' said Count Karlstein irritably; and I knew he'd realized that if he wanted to tamper with the truth, Meister Haifisch wasn't the man to put a legal seal on the doing of it. 'Come and sit down again. I'm out of sorts

– don't mind me. Go through it again, will ye . . . ?' And he threw himself into the carved oak chair at the other side of the fireplace, bent down to tear off a strip of bark from one of the logs in the hearth, and shredded it slowly into tiny pieces as Meister Haifisch spoke.

'The only son of old Count Ludwig Karlstein was stolen from his cradle twenty years ago. I have traced him as far as Geneva, where a child answering to the same description was placed in a foundlings' home a short while after he disappeared. That child – if it was he – grew up and became a groom, working in the stables of the Black Bear Inn; then he joined the army – and that is the last we know. His regiment was scattered at the Battle of Bodelheim; he may have been taken prisoner, or he may be dead. And that, I repeat, is all we know.'

Count Karlstein grunted and slapped his thigh in irritation.

'That's the best you can do?'

'That is the best anyone can do, Count Karlstein. There is no one in Switzerland who knows more about the affairs of the estate of Karlstein than I do; and so what I have told is the limit of human knowledge on the subject.'

Was there a hint of sarcasm in his tone? Maybe, but Count Karlstein didn't hear it if there was. For he looked up then, and saw me. He sprang to his feet with an oath.

'How long have you been there, hussy?' he snarled.

'Only a moment, sir! I knocked, but you didn't hear me!'

The lawyer was watching; otherwise I think the count would have hit me. He sent me out impatiently to fetch some wine, and when I came back, I found that he and Meister Haifisch had given up all attempts at conversation and were standing at opposite ends of the room, examining the books, or the pictures, or the snow-filled darkness outside the window.

I served them the wine, and then the girls came in; Meister Haifisch bent and shook their hands, and asked them how they were; and a warmth came into his expression. He looked as dry as dust and no more kindly than a silver ink-pot, but he was as polite and attentive to those two little girls as if they'd been the Duchess of Savoy and her twin sister. Lucy and Charlotte blossomed, and sat on the sofa at either side of him, sipping their wine and talking with all the elegance in the world, while their uncle prowled, gnawing his fingers, around the edges of the room and said nothing.

Presently Meister Haifisch stood up and bowed to the girls, excusing himself, as it was time to dress for dinner; and while I cleared away the glasses, Count Karlstein came and stood by the fire again and said to them:

'Lucy, Charlotte – how long have you been here now? A year, is it?'

'Almost, Uncle Heinrich,' said Lucy.

The count looked down. Then abruptly he said, 'How would you like a holiday?'

Both the girls looked startled for a moment, then nodded vigorously.

'We'd love it,' said Lucy.

'Leaving tomorrow afternoon,' he said, beaming, trying to be genial. 'Just a few days, mind.'

'Anything!' said Charlotte, eagerly.

'Where would we be going?' said Lucy.

'To my hunting lodge,' said Count Karlstein.

Their faces dropped involuntarily – but only for a second, and then they recovered. He didn't notice.

'That would be very pleasant, Uncle Heinrich,' said Lucy.

'Thank you very much,' said Charlotte, trying as hard as she could to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

'Good, good, that's settled then,' said the count, and dismissed them briskly, settling down at his desk and scribbling at some papers. I followed the girls out.

They were neither of them keen on hunting; and if you don't like hunting, where's the fun in staying at a hunting lodge? Deep in the middle of the forest, all set about with pine trees . . . Set about with wolves, too, and bears and wild boars. What would the girls do there but struggle through the deep snow and watch Count Karlstein hack

the life out of some poor deer his bullets had brought twitching to the ground? What would they do in the evening but sit wrapped in furs beside the skimpy fire and watch Count Karlstein getting drunk with his chief huntsman? A fine holiday they'd have!

And then I realized something that brought a little chill to my heart. Today was Wednesday; they were leaving tomorrow, Thursday, and staying, said the count, for a few days . . . which meant that they'd be at the hunting lodge on All Souls' Eve, Friday night – the very night when Zamiel the Demon Huntsman was said to ride through the forests, driving every living thing before him. Scorched hoofprints were found after his passing, they said, and animals dead of terror, with no mark upon them . . .

But I couldn't tell Charlotte and Lucy that. There're things best kept quiet, for fear of making them worse. So I said nothing – for the moment.