

Blutbinden: The Beginning

[Recording One: Dated 03/09/2514]

I was twelve when I first heard the screaming. Well, I suppose it was more like an amplified gurgle more than anything. An attempt at screaming through crushed, wet vocal chords. That chill inducing, squelching sound came just below my bedroom window. Judging by the volume, I guessed whatever was producing such a racket was only a few feet away. That night was cold; the one when I first heard the screams. I was shoved in-between white sheets and white comforters with all of my fluffy white pillows piled on top of my head. I remember my heart beating out of control. My body tensed with a strange kind of irrational fear. Well, of course I was scared. Usually, the only sound where I lived was that of the blistering wind. Not this time.

Settle down, Faeley. Do what he told you if you got worked up.

I heeded my own pep talk and tried the breathing exercises I was taught.

A sip of air in through the mouth.

An expulsion out through the nose.

After a couple goes with no success, I reverted to my infantile reaction. I shoved a fist in my mouth to block my own shrieks. Nothing worked, and the gurgle screams only increased in what might have been urgency. My imagination began to infiltrate common sense. This all too human noise could be anything. An unnaturally mutated wolf with green fangs and speckled purple pelt. A dragon filled with musty black smoke straight from the netherworld. A troll hoping that curiosity would lure me from my bed and then he'd peel off my skin layer by layer.

The list ran long. It kept running because in the back of my head I recognized the scream, and that particular truth was something that was far worse than imagination.

Finally, I could no longer endure being faced with some howling creature and only myself to depend on for safety. I hopped out of the warm plethora of blankets on my bed and felt the instant cold sting of tiled floor on my bare feet. I used light from the moon that flickered between my blinds as a pathway to my room's white door. Quietly, I turned the smooth white gold knob and creaked the door open.

Now, I hear when most people open a door on the third floor they expect at least something like carpet, wooden panels, or some stairs immediately thereafter. That scene was not what I was accustomed to.

When *I* looked down I saw nothingness. If I stepped out as the situation currently presented itself, I would have tumbled straight below to the first floor, becoming a lovely splatter mark to whoever might have been my father's next guest. Because I knew better, I instead carefully bent down to activate a tiny white button located at the corner of the doorframe.

A slight glimmer shuddered into existence in the voided darkness. Stairs formed one after another directly down to floor one. They pulsed as if they were newly born glistening veins. I patiently waited until this process ended. Melia, my sweet old nanny from when I was much younger, had caught me just before I stepped right through one of these steps when I was four.

“Miss Auttenburg, please do wait you careless child. Do you want to die? Do you want me to?” Melia asked in her familiar nasal squeak. I had a feeling she was not talking about death by stairs. The old woman nervously fingered an uncovered spot on the back of

her neck as she spoke. A spot that everyone had. The nanny nonetheless smiled, quickly fixed her gray hair, and told me how to recognize the golden opportunity was to use the stairs.

I knew what I was doing now thanks to Melia. Even if the stairs had the barest of pulses or if I could still see through them, putting my weight on only one would mean another untimely death ended at the front door. This mechanism was just a fancy toy my father contracted his favorite inventor to create, and so I never thought too much about why I truly needed an invisible staircase.

On I went, used to the notion of my room connected to one wall with nothing to lead up to it. I reached the bottom, and as a habit, I located the small button camouflaged as a paisley mark at the base of the conjured staircase. The process of decomposing the stairs was much faster than the birth of them. During the entirety of this progression, I could still hear the noises. The screams were like a persistent gnat. They pursued me as I pattered along the ornate hallways of my father's mansion.

I wanted to find Father. He should've been aware as to what was producing that noise. I knew he would not be in his bedroom or the office filled with his official papers and stamps, despite strict Curfew rules. After a stress ridden day sleep would not be easy for him, and the idea of more work this late would only repulse him. There was only one place I guessed I would discover him.

I came upon a golden door with images of ancient lions and unicorns dancing along swirled bronzed paneling. Father called the pictures, medieval. The illustrations were both simplistic and yet highly fascinating. Almost as if the creatures were magically caught in a type of glue to keep them on the door. The beasts momentarily amazed me, for I was too

used to the pure whiteness of my own habitation. Despite the fear still tumbling inside my stomach I still felt the bitter taste of jealousy coat my tongue.

How come I couldn't be free to have even a painting in my room? Where was the harm in allowing some personalization to my confinement?

Before I could regain my composure, I heard a smoothed, almost polished voice rumble from the space beyond the mythical animals.

“Come in, daughter.”

Even though it was my idea to see him, the command from Father made me want to turn tail and embrace the wails from the window. I knew the consequences that came with disobedience, and so I entered my father's library.

Inside were too many items for me to account now. I remember glimpses of silver painted shelves pregnant with so many books, papers, notes, and bobbles, my senses became overwhelmed.

On my left were glass cases of books that were over three hundred years old and some far older. Thick and worn, I always wanted to touch their spines to see if they could truly come to life like their words inside of my head did. Unfortunately, these books were locked away. The novels and tomes to my right were free for anyone to read. They were piled on three mahogany desks in heaps of browns, burnt reds, and deep oranges. Even though these were out in the open, no one dared to touch them while Father was in the library.

Right, Father. There was no going back now.

“You have activated the stairs, daughter.” The thunderstorm said from his grand golden chair near the large, foreboding fireplace. The little figures carved into the

mantelpiece of the fireplace were half naked fawns, and they almost danced out of the fire as I watched. I shuddered and straightened my white nightshift from habit.

“Come here, child, and explain to me why you have broken Curfew.” From the arm of his chair, I could see that Father’s hand encircled a wine glass. I could almost smell the pungent, fruity aroma from where I stood in petrification. My tongue turned into cotton. I had made a grave mistake coming here, but I could not turn back and expect to stay mentally in one piece now. Instead of retorting with asking him why he was also breaking Curfew, I meekly replied.

“I apologize for my—”

“Quiet. Let me see you.”

I shuffled around the elaborate hand woven rug of sprites and castles. Scooted past one of the tables that carried an outspread map of the city we hovered on. Blut Binden. All the while Father became clearer. His cold, ivory skin so different from my tea colored brown. The sharp snap of navy blue eyes. An ocean of shoulder length ebony hair tied back by a blue ribbon. A scar across his full lips. No freckles, which made me ponder where I inherited mine. He was still wearing the dark cerulean suit he adorned only for the most important of meetings with the Bluts. I kept walking until my entire body blocked the now sinister fireplace, and I could see Father fully.

“Good.” He set his wineglass on the end table next to him. “Now you may speak.”

“Sir, I apologize.” I completely forgot what I was hoping to say to alleviate any foreseeable pain. Some lie about hurting my finger and wanting to bandage the fake wound myself. Looking back now, a lie from my lips would have incurred a worse punishment. I had a panel for all wounds installed on the wall next to my four poster bed. If I had been

wounded, all I needed to do was tell the panel what had been sliced or bludgeoned and an array of tools would slide from the wall. Not to mention a few medical staff tramping up to my room. I was lucky if it was my favorite maid, Marrow, who came.

Truth would have to be my best option.

“I heard screaming outside of my window. It scared me, so I tried to find you.”

“And what would you do, now that you found me, to convince me that you weren’t dreaming this nonsense up?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Father sighed heavily, adopting the voice that meant he was pretending to care.

“Daughter, you know where we live, do you not?”

“Yes, I do know.”

Father continued his eerily calm voice.

“We live near seventy one meters up in the sky.”

“I, I know. Sir, I know!”

Suddenly, Father stood. He loomed over me like some six foot six mountain over my mere twelve-year-old five feet. I wished the mythical animals would wake from their slumber and defend me when his voice warped slightly. Just enough to let me understand that I should never, under any circumstance, do this again.

“How then, if you are so informed, can you believe that there can be someone under your window?”

“It can be a servant?” I ventured, grasping for anything to protect my intelligence, not to mention myself.

“You know as well as I do that the Curfew does not only apply to yourself.”

I gulped and finally, finally told him my true reason for braving his ire.

“The screams sound like Tutor Three!”

The moment I uncovered my fear, Father relaxed. His shoulders, of which this whole time he held up to both ears, fell. He sat back down in his warm cushioned arm chair almost smiling. I found the whole scene unnerving.

“Ridiculous girl. You understand already that I sent him away to be some other brat’s tutor.”

“But it sounds exactly like him. He’s in pain.” I knew my voice wobbled. It was hard to admit that for all my imaginings, having Tutor Three be the monster was the most frightening option of them all.

After Melia left the household when I was five, Tutor One came to teach me my letters and mathematics. She lasted for only six months until her and Father had a terrible fight. He said Tutor One stormed out of the mansion and onto the acres of land that surrounded the building. Back then, I did not know about our flight methods and always had nightmares about Tutor One jumping from the mansion’s land plot and falling, falling, falling. I still have scraps of those nightmares.

Tutor Two did not fair any better seeing as he taught me until I was only seven, and I was alright with that. I did my best to make his life terrible in return for him doing the same to me. He always growled at me under his breath, and I’m sure it was nothing sweet.

But Tutor Three. He was special.

He had bronze skin, brick red hair, and golden eyes. I admit, he was nice to look at and made my child’s heart patter when he carefully wrote notes down with long, slender fingers. Tutor Three taught me national history, high manners, all of the five languages

(Blut, Hoch, Mitte, Boden, and Müll,) along with the rest of the basic learning associated with a young half-Blut.

Tutor Three was my favorite because sometimes when he felt certain that no one was listening in he would write secret things. About gardening. About forgotten and forbidden tales with princes and adventures. About things that I was certain were what made Father send Tutor Three away.

I wasn't sure how Father found out. Tutor Three covered his tracks sufficiently enough. He would eat the strips of paper he wrote secrets on after I read them, or I would bury the pieces in my own secret place I kept in my closet. That way, Father or any of the servants would not find out that some silences were actually filled with secret learning. Yes. Yes I knew that those gurgles of agony belonged to Tutor Three like I knew my own speaking voice. Yet Father laced his hands together and leered at me as if I were the butt of some unpleasant joke.

"Forget Tutor Three, child." Father said my tutor's name like it were something absurd. "Go back to your room, and get back to your bed. Do not step foot on Floor One until I've prepared for you a Tutor Four. Won't that make you happy?"

"But, sir, if Tutor Three is hurt, we should help him."

"Are you disobeying me?" Father paused pleasantly enough, but then a tick in his jaw and the subtle redness around his cheeks warned me. That horrid scar on his lips almost pulsed, and my stomach churned. He asked again. "Are you disobeying me, child?"

"N-no, Father."

Quick. It was too quick. One moment he sat like a tightly wound cat. Still. Waiting. The next, he flew at me like a hawk diving for prey. He did not actually hit me. He was close,

with his large hand hovering over my cheek. There was no contact, but I still felt as if he smashed his hand across my face without restraint. I knew I wouldn't have a black eye or a swollen brow the next day, but it sure felt like there was some damage. I never knew how he was able to make me hurt with no physical damage. This ability must have been another toy Father made his mad scientist invent. Crying wouldn't help, no matter how much I wanted to, so I stayed still and silent like I was taught.

“Good. Good,” Father mumbled. He bent down to circle his arms around me. I tensed, smelling the hint of his cologne; something far too sweet for his personality, like peppermint. The sleeve of his suit brushed my face and it was a struggle to keep my mouth shut. The aftereffects of his faux slap still clung to me.

My father sat back, and I am sure he was satisfied he reached his quota of interacting with me for the month. “Leave my sight.”

I did not have to be told again. Back I fled. Through the night touched hallways decorated with ancient panels. Past the empty and elegant dining room where every night at six I would be paraded around the highest officials like I was the thing they were going to eat for dinner. To the parlor room tastefully painted with creamy hues of pinks and blues. I managed to ignore the golden bowl of fake jeweled apples, an item of decoration that beckoned me to throw out of my window.

There was the hidden button on the corner of a floor tile exactly fifteen steps southeast from the hall I just came from. I pressed it. The wait was brief as the stairs crawled to my own floating room. I almost bolted up, slipping a few times while I cradled my intact cheek. When I reached my door and flung myself in I did not have to turn to find that I was again trapped in my delicate white cage.

The yells of Tutor Three, or whoever the terrible noise belonged to, continued. I heard the blood chilling screams from nine at night until they melted into the hours of six in the morning. Exactly when Curfew began and ended. I stayed awake for the full nine hours, biting my nails until they bled. Pulling out single strands of my long, messy black hair one by one. Doing nearly anything I could do to silence the constant caterwauling. By the time a month of this agony rolled by, my nails were chewed to the beds, my hair had thinned drastically, and there were heavy circles around my pale hazel eyes.

Half of the time, I wondered if I was the one conjuring the stagnated pitch inside of my head. It could have been possible as I was only allowed out of my room for Dinner at six for that whole month with no interaction from others. But who would truly want to talk to the Dinner guests? It was like talking to a wall. (Unfortunately, I had practice with that.) Of course, those screams were very much real. Only something part of reality could create whole fields of gooseflesh on my chalky arms and drive a painful twist to the bottom of my heart.

Around the end of the month of torture holed up in the ivory prison my father constructed for me, the screams began to lighten. Started to sound like half-hearted moans. Became almost like mush. Then, they ended all together. I thought I could sleep again. The end of the screams should have signaled the beginning of my peace of mind. I should have been overjoyed.

I could still hear him.

I could hear him at night. Tutor Three, beaming at me as if only I could make him proud. Sitting on my floor with pages of books torn out for only me to scan. (Bits from Tristan and Isolde, Grimm's Fairy Tales, stories from lives so, so far away both in time and

from my reach.) I could hear his pleasant, knowledgeable voice melting into the bare bones of the last month's terror.

I screamed, too. Howling until I believed my throat might have been slashed with millions of glass shards. No one came to see if I was alright. Perhaps no one was allowed to or else Marrow surely would have smoothed my unraveled mutterings. I was sure that I had gone insane.

On one particular night a few months after speaking with my father I found that I could not close my eyes due to the ache simply shutting them caused. Again, Tutor Three was reduced to the squeal of a dead thing to begin his nightly cruelty. Panicked, I knocked items from my white nightstand to find anything, just anything, to occupy myself from my internal mental abuse. I found old papers, required workbooks, small knick knacks, nothing—nothing! Desperate, I shoved the stand over, scattering all of its contents. I almost gave up until I found a glint of something after I scanned the shiny floor tiles covered with trash.

“What are you?” My voice, usually soft and obedient, cracked. I had not spoken since that last conversation with Father. Not even to his guests or the servants. I would merely nod when I was introduced and that was usually enough for those stuffy adults. My father answered any questions pertaining to how I fared. I didn't care if what he said was always far from the truth. Lies.

I reached out and swiped the thing. Between my pointer finger and thumb was a device about the size of a rectangular, miniscule pill. I knew what the item was as soon as the uncovered starlight from my window hit it. About three months prior, I had left the item buried under the papers myself.

“Insert that disk into the port underneath the back of your skull.” That was what Father said to do. Since he managed and was trusted with most of the Blut’s technological services, he was privy to a great deal of the in-process and test stage inventions.

He said that this disc would connect to the manmade port everyone had on the back of their neck installed since birth. This port was directly linked to a chip that was imbedded on the spinal chord, recording our locations at all times, what we were saying and seeing, and I always fancied that it even took down what we ate. Basic information like that.

My chip was different, though. Since I was the daughter of a Blut and a Hoch, the chip was not used to record movements like they did for the Bodens and Mülls. Essentially, my chip was completely blank. My installed technology and the subsequent port was specialized to incorporate devices like the ones Father funded inventors to create.

I knew Bluts, Hochs, and if they were lucky, Mittes, would use the ports to communicate with others over long distances, to be plugged into some type of complicated database that spread over the world, or to play special emersion games. Such a large and intricate universe that anyone could access seemed like a myth to me. To think that others could use their ports freely and talk to friends and family so easily was baffling.

Father never let me have any opportunity to link with the outside, and disabled my chip from those specific functions. Thinking about it now, if he had given me the materials to reach out to others, what point would there be sticking me in a floating room that rested in a mansion two hundred feet up in the sky? So when he came to my room with this gift of a disc, I was naturally wary of the item.

“What does it do?” I asked.

“It lets you live in your imagination.” The sun was out that day, and the way the beams came in clashed with the white of my walls. Somehow, all of that light created a deep shadow upon my father’s face with only his profound blue eyes shining behind the mask of undertones.

“The developer called the disk Phantine or Imachine. Something along those lines. What an unoriginal name either way.”

“Live in my imagination...”

“Yes. Plug this into your port and what you conjure into your head will seem perfectly real to you.”

“So I could make a dragon appear on my bed?”

“Not exactly. You cannot project your imagination into reality.” He licked his lips as if they had suddenly become dry. Or maybe he thought he was wasting his time explaining something so simple to a kid like me. “You are inserted into your own mind. You withdraw.”

“What do you mean?”

I might have heard the strain it took from Father not to become aggravated as he answered my question.

“The whole world as you see it now is just data. Data that your brain collects to be siphoned through and quickly interpreted. What you see outside of yourself, then, is what you’ve deciphered from the collected data.” Father took a second to massage the crease rapidly building in-between his eyes. His hair was out of the usual low ponytail, and so a few strands clung to his neck.

“My scientist discovered a way to take the data inside of your own head, your imagination, and set said potential before you as if you were actually perceiving, let’s say, that dragon on your bed. But only internally. It’s truly a massive discovery.”

Something was wrong with his expression when he said, “You should be honored to test his invention. If this works, there will be no more boundaries. No more limitations. I need you to think hard, and I suggest laying down. Also, set an alarm. An imagination can get addicting.”

Father placed the disc on my palm, and a zap of something branched into my skin. Whatever I felt was completely uncomfortable, and I knew right then and there that I would not be using Phantine. Yet something else was warning me not to use this.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

Father sighed as if I was asking him to again explain why we must float above the Bodens and Mülls, or if we must hide ourselves, why I could not see the townsfolk of Blut Binden. I’d ask him those very questions as a child one too many times, and now his answer was something I could not take lightly again.

“The developer wanted me to test the disc for kinks, I suppose. To point out the wrinkles in his blasted device. I have no time for such nonsense, but I should not waste the man’s talents. Not after what he did to fix the chip’s functions for our watchdogs. Oh yes, that benefited us all in the end.” His grin became primal. “Daughter, use I machine whenever you have time.” I’m sure he meant that as an obvious jab. I had all the time in the world. But I could see the odd and calculating countenance seething behind his eyes. I stopped myself from asking anymore, determined to question Tutor Three once he came for our lesson. Knowing that Father was withholding important information. Father kept talking.

“You’ll need this soon enough, girl.” Then he turned and left me to shove the wretched Phantine under a nest of books and papers.

I remembered my resolve to absolutely not use the disc. If my father wanted me to plug the thing into my port, then that was the biggest reason to refuse even entertaining the idea of using the thing. But the screams, the howls, the guttural groans. I couldn’t continue being alone for so long with nothing but my insanity for company. It would seem that Father backed me into a corner.

I gulped, my mouth completely dry, and positioned the disc between my fingers. The tears in my eyes stung. I did not want to do this. I knew that if I plugged myself into whatever my father gave me I would be playing right into his trap. I was weak, then. Too weak to fight a man as strong willed as my father.

The disc slipped in tightly. A slight snap clicked into my spine and I waited. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. My room stayed exactly how I saw it all my life. The bed, my overturned stand, the bare walls, my open closet, everything. I almost laughed from my desperate actions. All this turmoil just for a dysfunctional Phantine? Reaching back to unplug the disc from its port I quickly imagined the paintings from my father’s library door shaking their heads in sympathy. I saw the unicorn’s coarse fur. Its smoothed horn twisting like an ivory and gold candy into a deadly point. The dangerous lion moved and a glimmer of the feline’s mane was almost real. Too real.

My feet were walking, taking me closer to the fictional animals. My bed, closet, and window disappeared. Around my peripherals trees began to materialize. They were at first only long, brown sticks. Ribbons of bark wrapped around the sticks over and over like one would watch the anatomy of a human being’s internal system, one artery and capillary after

another. First the bones, then the muscles, then the veins, and then the skin. I have only seen maples, evergreens, oaks, hickories, and weeping willows on the plot the mansion rested on, and so these were the trees that were forming. I reached out to touch a particular oak, and it was like feeling the rough texture of an oak tree in the small garden below my room. The bark mimicked that very oak's covering down to the "F" scar I carved into the tree years ago.

I continued walking. Grass sprung from the ground in all colors of green, and I wondered if grass could be shades of dark blue in the city under the mansion. Immediately, patches of grass darkened into a vivid blue almost as dark as my father's eyes.

My room was no longer the pristine white I lived in for twelve years. In fact, it wasn't even my room. There was a sky painted light pinks and purples and dotted with faint, glowing stars. They were cheerful and I hurt with the want to be like them. There was a cliff supporting tons of glittering water cascading down into cool, streaming water that flowed down to my suddenly booted feet. I was wearing poofy pants and a peasant shirt like the outfits I always imagined would be on a medieval adventurer. I could smell the mist dangling in the air and feel my new apparel cling warmly to my body.

The longer I watched this fantasy world grow, the wider my smile became. I charged down a hill filled with wild flowers mostly comprised of the blooms I grew in my secret garden. I added outrageous colors of oranges, yellows, greens, or whatever I could think of that was not white. They turned to me, shouting my name excitedly.

"Aaah, I'm free!" I breathed in rapture. "I'm alive!" I laughed with the burning joy running through my body. I reached the mythical animals and they nuzzled me. I did not know what a lion or unicorn would feel like, so I gave them the consistency of my hair, but

shorter and softer. They had the scent of Tutor Three, of warmed honey and the outside of the mansion. “I won’t go back, I won’t,” I said into the mane of the lion. It wrapped its massive paws around me and purred.

“Then you do not have to.”

My head shot up, and I backed away. I was shaking from adrenaline and shock. The lion was gone and in its place was Tutor Three whole and alive. Not a wailing monster but his usual glowing self. He spread his arms open, and how could I not run into them?

[End Recording One]