

# BLOOD OF THE DAMNED - SHADOWS OVER RIGA - THE NOSFERATU EXPERIMENT

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Latvian: "Skopais maksā divreiz." English: "The stingy one pays twice."

*This proverb warns against being overly frugal or cheap, as it often leads to higher costs in the long run.*

## Chapter 1: The Risky Summons

The forest smells like rot and iron. Autumn in Latvia holds both the decay of leaves turning to mulch and the metallic ghost of blood. Not hers, she thinks. Not yet.

The footsteps behind her have not stopped for six kilometers. Or maybe twelve. Time collapses when you run.

Her name is Elina. She knows this. She was born in Riga, thirty-four years ago, because her mother called her by that name once before dying. After all, the invitation three weeks ago was addressed to her specifically. She knows this is the way just as she knows her own face, intuitively, without immediate conviction. Right now, she is simply jogging through the forest at the edge of her endurance, lungs pulling air that tastes like copper and pine resin, consciousness fractured between present terror and the incomprehensible past seventy-two hours.

The invitation came on heavy cream paper. Hand-addressed. Her name in careful calligraphy that suggested a woman, she'd thought, had taken time over each letter. The text was brief. Elegant. Impossible to refuse.

Your presence is requested for a gathering of significant consequence. October 21st through October 23rd. Suduva Manor, outside Riga. All arrangements provided. You have been selected because you understand something others do not.

There was no signature. No sender identification. The postmark and stamp seemed Latvian.

She had researched for three days. Suduva Manor was a pre-war mansion in rural territory between Riga and the coast, maintained by someone or some entity that preferred obscurity. Property records went back to the 1930s. The name appeared in old photographs. A nobleman's estate, beautiful in a precise, unromantic way. No recent history. No public presence.

She had called two friends. Both advised against it. One suggested it was a scam targeting naive professionals. The other suggested it was something worse, yet she didn't specify what. Elina had felt the pull anyway. The certainty that you have been selected was not manipulation but recognition. Someone had chosen her. Someone knew her.

She had left Riga on the 20th of October. The drive took ninety minutes through a changing landscape, from urban sprawl to agricultural margin to forest. The autumn was advanced, the trees surrendering color with the exhaustion of those who had endured occupation. She had arrived at the manor gates as afternoon light turned metallic. Seventeen other people stood in the entrance courtyard.

That was three days ago.

Now, branches whip her face; her left cheek blooms with pain where bark has cut the skin. She doesn't slow. Slowing is death. She knows this with absolute certainty, though she cannot articulate how she knows it. The knowledge lives in her muscles, in the animal panic that has overridden everything learned and civilized in her.

Behind her: Footsteps, voices, the occasional shout in a language that might be Latvian or might be Russian. Multiple pursuers. At least three.

Maybe more. They are not trying to be quiet, which means they believe she cannot escape. They believe they will catch her. The forest will deliver her to them, or she will collapse, and they will simply walk up and take her.

She does not know this from experience. She has never been hunted before. She knows it from a place deeper than experience, from something inscribed in her genetics that predates her birth.

The thought arrives with such clarity that she stumbles.

A root, maybe. Or the thought itself, snagging her consciousness. She catches herself against a birch trunk, white bark rough against her palms, and pushes forward. The footsteps behind her pause. They have heard the disruption. They accelerate their pursuit.

Elina accelerates, too.

The mansion courtyard had smelled like rain and old stone. The woman who greeted them, the keeper, though no one called her that yet, had been precise. Elderly. Eastern European accent wrapped around careful English. She had known their names before they introduced themselves. Had mentioned personal details that seemed to suggest reconnaissance. She had fed them. Given them rooms. Let them mingle and grow confused about why they had been invited.

Twenty guests. Elina had counted. Tried to find patterns. What connected them?

Most were in their thirties or forties. Mixed nationalities, yet predominantly Eastern European: Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, and one who claimed Swedish and Russian heritage. One American. One British. One with an accent Elina couldn't place. All of them had arrived as individuals, though in the mansion they had begun to recognize something in each other. A family resemblance that couldn't quite be articulated. Similar bone structure. Similar height. Similar nervous tics.

The second evening, the woman who introduced herself as Magdalena had noticed it too. "We vaguely look alike," she had said. Not a question. Observation. "At least some of us. It's uncanny."

That was when the windows had exploded inward.

The glass had not just broken, it had shattered with the violence of deliberate destruction. Gunfire, she realized, though the sound was strange, dampened by the mansion's stone walls. People screaming. The keeper standing in the doorway between the dining room and the hall, completely still, as if she had expected exactly this. As if the breach was scheduled.

Elina had run. She doesn't remember the decision to run, only the recognition that stopping meant death. She had moved toward the rear of the house, toward the kitchen, and from there toward the service entrance. She had heard more gunfire behind her. She had heard screaming from two of the men and one of the women. She had heard Magdalena's voice crying something in Polish.

She had not stopped to check if anyone else was escaping.

The forest has begun to change. The trees are closer together, denser. The light failing, it's late afternoon now, or later. She has been running for perhaps two hours. Her legs have moved beyond pain into a numb, mechanical execution of muscle memory. Her breath comes in ragged pulls. Her vision is tunneling, the periphery darkening, consciousness narrowing to immediate obstacles. This is shocking, she thinks distantly. This is what dying feels like from the inside.

She forces her consciousness to expand. To look for landmarks. To assess the possibility.

To her right: the forest continues. To her left, she glimpses the edge of a road. Asphalt. The thin strip of civilization cutting through the forest. She does not know, if it is the road she arrived on, or a different road, or a service road leading somewhere else. She does not know where she is anymore.

But roads lead to places. Places lead to towns. Towns might lead to safety.

She veers left.

The transition from forest to roadside happens suddenly. She stumbles down a slight embankment and comes out onto the asphalt, breathing hard. The road is empty in both directions. The afternoon light casts everything in amber and shadow. She looks back toward the forest.

The figures are visible between the trees. Three, she counts. Dark clothing. At least one is carrying something that might be a rifle. They move with the precision of practiced hunters.

She turns left and runs.

The road is newer than the forest around it, and the asphalt is surprisingly well-maintained. She runs for three minutes, maybe five times, still unreliable, before she sees the vehicle. A truck, parked on the shoulder, is facing away from Riga. Its engine is running. The driver's door is open. Someone is moving near the cab.

She does not slow down.

The person in the truck looks up, sees her, and makes a decision. It's a woman. Older. Latvian from the look of her. She seems to be debating between running and confronting.

"Help," Elina gasps. The word tears out of her throat raw. "Please. Help!"

The woman looks back toward the forest. The pursuers have emerged onto the road. They are still fifty meters away, but they are visible now. They are carrying weapons. They are moving toward both, Elina and the woman with the truck.

The woman makes a decision. She moves to the truck, climbs into the cab, and reaches across to open the passenger door.

"Get in. Now."

Elina gets in. The woman accelerates before the door has fully closed. The truck lurches forward, tires gripping asphalt. In the side mirror,

Elina watches the three figures recede. They are shouting, but the truck's engine drowns the sound. One raises the rifle. There is the crack of gunfire, and the rear window explodes.

The woman driving does not react. She accelerates harder. The truck reaches the outskirts of what might be a town, a collection of Soviet-era buildings and modern convenience stores. She drives directly through, not stopping, not slowing. Only when they have put distance between themselves and the forest does she finally speak.

"They were hunting you."

Not a question. Observation, like Magdalena's observation about resemblance.

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

Elina tries to think. What did she do? She attended a gathering. She was seduced by mystery. She spent seventy-two hours confused and terrified by the presence of strangers she didn't understand. And then she ran.

"I don't know," she says.

The woman driving nods, accepting this. She reaches across and closes the truck's passenger door, the one that has been hanging open, and

drives in silence toward Riga. The sun descends toward the western horizon. The city lights appear gradually, then suddenly, and Elina realizes she is alive, though she doesn't yet understand what survival means. Behind her, in the truck's mirror, the forest is already forgotten. Ahead, the city rises like a monument to the possibility of safety.

But in her muscles, in her blood, in the genetic code she hasn't yet learned to read, something surges. Something pursued by three armed figures continues fleeing. Something inherited insists there are more hunters coming, and Riga is not a sanctuary, but the next danger zone.

## Chapter 2: The Invitation

The invitation arrived on a Tuesday in early October. For Lukas, it came by email to the personal address he'd used only for art commissions. He should not have received it. He had been careful. The address was private, used only for the three clients he permitted to contact him directly.

The subject line was blank. The body text was a single paragraph:

Your presence is requested for a gathering of significant consequence. October 21st through October 23rd. Suduva Manor, outside Riga. All arrangements provided. You have been selected because you understand blood differently than most. Bring nothing. Expect everything.

He had read it three times before deleting it. Then he had recovered it from his deleted folder. Then he had read it again.

The phrasing was careful. Specific. It used language that suggested foreknowledge of him, not the public version of Lukas, the art restorer and conservator working for Riga's museums, but the private version. The version that understood blood.

He painted with it sometimes. Old animal blood, collected from butchers, was prepared and mixed with oils to create specific pigmentation. It was an archaic technique, used by Renaissance masters. The blood created depth that modern synthetic pigments couldn't achieve. It created presence. People who saw his work responded to it viscerally, usually without understanding why.

Only the clients who knew about the blood hired him repeatedly. The others sensed something wrong in his work. Dangerous. They preferred safer artists.

Lukas had stared at the email for a long time, then had made a decision that surprised himself: he accepted.

For Dārta, the invitation came as a physical letter delivered to her apartment in the suburbs of Riga. She was a translator, Latvian to English, English to German, occasionally Polish. The envelope was expensive, cream-colored, her name written in careful calligraphy.

She opened it in her kitchen, standing at the counter with morning coffee cooling in her hand. The text was brief. Elegant. It mentioned nothing specific about her, but the tone suggested intimacy. The tone suggested recognition.

She had been isolated for two years since her father's death, a long, angry illness in a Riga hospital, and then silence. She had continued working, continued existing, continued moving through the world with the mechanical precision of someone operating at minimum viable function. The invitation arrived like a voice from outside her containment, suggesting that someone somewhere had noticed her silence and was offering a possibility.

She called the number listed at the bottom of the invitation. A woman answered. Elderly. Accent Eastern European. She was expecting Dārta's call.

"Will you come?" the woman asked.

"I don't know you," Dārta said.

"Not yet," the woman agreed. "But you will recognize something when you arrive. The others will, too. You will not be alone."

Dārta accepted.

For Alexei, the invitation came from a contact who contacted him in person, in a bar in central Riga where he sometimes drank. The man was not one of Alexei's usual associates. He was precise, careful, and

he seemed to know things about Alexei that Alexei had taken efforts to hide.

"There's a gathering," the man said. "Outside the city. Three days. It's for people like you."

"What do you mean, people like me?"

"People with unfinished business. People waiting for something without knowing what."

The man left a card. Suduva Manor. Dates. A confirmation request.

Alexei had not confirmed. He had continued his usual life. The construction job he performed for money that funded other activities, the contacts in the criminal underworld of Riga that provided meaning he couldn't articulate, the constant background sense that he was meant for something larger than he had achieved.

But he had kept the card.

On the morning of October 21st, he had packed a small bag and driven toward the address.

For Kata, the invitation was wordless. She arrived at the bus station in Riga, and a taxi was awaiting her; the driver held a sign with her name.

She had not called a taxi. She had not arranged transportation. But her daughter in London had called three days earlier with unusual urgency.

"There's a gathering," her daughter had said. "Outside Riga. October 21st. You need to go."

"How do you know about this?"

"I just do. I woke up thinking about it. I keep dreaming about a place. A manor. It's important, Mum. You have to go."

Kata had not believed in her daughter's dreams. But her daughter had never been wrong about intuitive knowledge before. So Kata journeyed from London to Riga's bus stop, arrived at the station, and found the taxi waiting with her name, and moved toward the vehicle like someone following a script she had never read, still somehow knew by heart.

There were twenty of them. They arrived in separate transports, at different times, from different places. They came from Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, and Latvia. One came from London. One from Berlin. One from Dublin. One from New York.

They did not know each other. But they recognized something in each other's faces immediately.

It was not obvious. It was not something they could articulate. But when Elina arrived and saw Lukas in the entrance courtyard of the mansion,

she felt a strange pull. Not attraction. Recognition. The sense that they shared something. Genetic, maybe. Or spiritual. Something that lived deeper than conscious knowledge.

The keeper greeted each arrival with the same procedure. She knew their names. She knew some of them had come from a great distance. She knew, somehow, that they had accepted the invitation almost against their will—that accepting had felt inevitable, even for those who had initially resisted.

"Welcome," she said to each arrival. "You have been cautiously selected. There are nineteen others like you, and by tomorrow, you will understand why. For now, please settle in. There is food. There are rooms. There is time enough for the revelation."

What revelation? They asked each other in whispers, in the corridors, in the library where they gathered to try to understand their shared circumstance.

Magdalena, from Warsaw, was the first to articulate it. "We look alike," she said, gathering several of them together in the evening of the first day. "Look at us. We share features. Height. Bone structure. Something in the eyes. How is that possible, if we're strangers?"

"Chance, for I will not accept Nazi experiment sermon!" offered Thomas, from Dublin. He was a professor of history, accustomed to rational explanations. "Physical similarity is statistically inevitable across any sufficiently large population."

"Twenty people from across all of Europe don't randomly assemble with identical features," Magdalena said. "This is not a chance. This is design."

They looked at each other. She was right. It was impossible to deny once it had been articulated. They were similar in ways that could not be explained as a random occurrence. Similar enough that they could have been distant cousins. Similar enough that if they'd been arranged in a photograph, they would have looked like members of a specific family.

By the second evening, they were discussing genealogy. By the night of the second day, they were beginning to articulate a question that none of them had the answer to:

What bloodline connects us?

And then the windows exploded inward.

### **Chapter 3: Before**

Occupation Record, Archives of the Latvian Institute of History, dated October 1941:

The nobleman identified as Leonid Suduva (birth records indicate 1898, location: Suduva Manor) has been flagged for requisition of properties and assets. Initial reports suggest voluntary cooperation with the provisional Soviet administration.

His primary residence, Suduva Manor, remains his own through the arrangement of local administration. Recommend continued monitoring for potential counter-revolutionary activity.

Testimony of Ilga Gruntaine, recorded 1995:

My mother was fourteen when the soldiers came. She was not born in Latvia; she was born in Poland, and her family had moved to Riga in 1930 seeking work. When the Russians came, everything was chaos. People were being deported. The border was closing. My mother's family tried to flee, but there was no route. They were trapped in Riga.

She was taken to Suduva Manor in the winter of 1941. She was not the only one. There were others: Polish girls, Latvian girls, Russian girls whose families had fled from other territories. He chose us. The nobleman, Suduva. We never understood why. Maybe because we were foreign, unprotected. Maybe because he could.

My mother was pregnant within a month. She was fourteen. She had not understood what would happen. No one prepared her for it. When she realized, she tried to kill herself. She cut her wrists with glass from the manor kitchen. The servants found her. They stopped the bleeding. She carried the pregnancy to term.

I was born in 1942. My mother lived until 1985, but she never spoke about the pregnancy. Never spoke about the manor. Never spoke about the man. I learned to ask questions slowly, carefully, in ways she could answer without fully acknowledging the truth.

He disappeared in 1943. The official records say he was arrested by Soviet authorities. The unofficial stories, the ones the women told each other in whispers, said something else. They said he transformed. They said he became something else. They said that the blood of all the girls he had used created something, and what it created was not human anymore.

My mother knew I was born from violence. But she also knew I was born from something else. Something she could never quite specify. She said sometimes I smelled wrong. Not bad. Wrong. Like I was part wolf, part bird, part something that did not have a name in human language.

I never understood what she meant. I understood it only when I was older and began to recognize the thing in myself that she had sensed. The thing that could smell blood from miles away. The thing that could be seen in the darkness. The thing that made other people uncomfortable in ways they dared not articulate.

The thing I inherited from him.

Birth Records, Suduva Manor Archives, 1941-1943:

Marija Kalnins, born March 1942. Mother: Anna Kalnins (age 14). Father: noted as "nobleman, local proprietor." Birth weight: 4.2 kg. Observations: unusual pigmentation in eyes (golden); unusual olfactory sensitivity (noted by attending physician as "perhaps mythological").

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