

HEAVEN'S GIFT

by Inez Paskal

A cold cup of coffee and an untouched newspaper sat on the table; Catherine had put them there and then opened the balcony doors. She was drawn out by the beautiful morning sky, staring at cloud formations, not really thinking, and yet tears were trickling down her face. She was just picking up her emotions from where they left off the night before.

'You either move toward love or away from it; there is no other way.'

Catherine had used Vincent's own words, recalling the sound of his voice, reliving the emotion of the moment; she knew that they both understood it as an ultimatum. The possibility that she might never see Vincent again was very real.

"I knew better than to push him too far. He knows I love him. Why can't he accept that love as total? I also know the possibility that it is not me, or my love, which he can't accept, but rather himself," Catherine muttered.

Everything in her knew better, and yet, she also knew their relationship could not stagnate. If it didn't move forward, it would die. Catherine had told him, she would accept her fate if their relationship had to remain always the same. The trouble was, she didn't realize that the relationship stayed the same, but the love had moved forward, ever toward one another.

'The intensity I feel now when I just think of him is unbearable. He always knew this. He always gave me the 'out' before we were in too deep; any separation would be like killing the best part of myself. As long as he believed that our love would reach the point where it would be all-consuming - and our relationship had so many limits - he would offer me the path away from him.' The troubled thoughts plagued her.

The night before had been absolutely perfect. It had become impossible for them not to touch and fondle one another. Catherine didn't know how long they stood staring into each other's eyes, their fingertips caressing each other's face. She could feel her heart pounding, and Vincent's, as she was being held very close to him.

'Oh, please, just let him kiss me. Please! A kiss. One kiss to release some of this passion I feel; a kiss to let him know that I would accept him,' she pleaded in unspoken words.

But as they moved toward each other, lips barely touching, Vincent suddenly whipped around and turned his back to her. It was more than Catherine could take. She forgot all her lofty promises; she could only feel - and she felt denied. That is when Catherine shouted the ultimatum. Vincent turned, looked at her with a pain that she will never forget, and left without saying a word.

So, there Catherine was, staring into the sky - alone. She could no longer feel Vincent. When she gave up her former life style, he was in her heart; when she mourned the twentieth anniversary of her mother's death, he was in her mind. And when her father died, he was at her side; but now she was truly alone. The brick wall was holding her up as she tilted her head back to steady herself. Slowly, she slid down to a heap on the floor, sobbing piteously. They had all left her.

Catherine became aware of a knocking at her door. She didn't know if she wanted to answer it. It stopped, and she was relieved. She got up, cleared the table, and huddled in the corner of her couch. The door buzzer startled her, and Catherine ran to stop the annoying sound.

"Oh, Miss. Chandler, you are there. I thought so. I didn't see you leave. Did you get the package I

delivered?" asked the doorman.

"A package?"

"Yeah. A lady brought it by, and I promised I'd deliver it right away."

"Thanks, Charlie."

Catherine opened the door and retrieved the neatly wrapped package. She went back to the corner of her couch and opened the envelope attached to the outside.

Dear Miss. Chandler,

By way of introduction, my name is Susan Landry. My husband and I bought your father's cottage in the Hamptons last summer. We have just gotten around to getting out here for some cleaning and remodeling. I found this box wedged in the corner of the crawlspace. It seemed carefully wrapped with a note addressed to Catherine. After a little investigating, we decided it was meant for you.

We were very sorry to hear of your father's death. Please accept our condolences. If you ever feel the need to be out here, please know that you are welcome.

Sincerely,

Susan Landry

Catherine carefully unwrapped the first layer of paper. There was another wrapping and another note. She was shocked by the script. It was her mother's handwriting; *'To my beloved daughter, Catherine.'* Her hand shook as she opened the white rose on pink embossed envelope.

Dear Cathy,

I am writing this to you now, because I have just come to the point in my life when I can finally give this up. It is my most precious possession. It is beyond price, monetarily, but more so for the lesson it teaches.

I need to give this to you now, because I have found my love. Your father and I fell in love and were married six years ago, but when two people live as one, there are always adjustments. It has taken me this long to know with every part of my being that I am capable of this depth of love, because he is that love.

You are now only five and cannot possibly understand, so although I need to give this to you now, you will not receive it until you are older and the passions of a woman begin to stir. When you come to me and ask, 'What is love?' I will hand you this prized possession, ask that you read it, and then we will talk.

I named you after the girl in this manuscript. She, to me, was always the ultimate woman - the mother and ruler of a nation. Her strength and courage were undeniable, her love unfathomable.

My father gave this to me. He found it on one of his many trips to Europe, buying rare books. He could not put a price on this work. It has great value, historically, and is a work of art. He made a great ceremony out of presenting it. He called it his legacy to me, and I was forever grateful.

I will now put this away, and when you need to know the tenderness, selflessness, and power of love, we will read it together.

With all that is in me to give.

Love,

Mother

Catherine couldn't continue to open the package. She was crying uncontrollably. She heard herself screaming, "Mommy, what is love? What is love?" Finally, she wiped her eyes and nose, and with tears still moistening her face, Catherine released the rose-print paper. What she then discovered

was fantastic. It was a cask about twelve by fourteen inches and six inches deep. It seemed to be made of gold with wonderful inlaid characters etched over its entirety. Catherine ran her fingers over the lid and sides and wondered how many times her mother had done the same.

She opened the clasp and lifted the lid. Inside was a very old manuscript, truly a handwritten book on parchment with exquisite illustrations. Catherine was very careful as she lifted it out and opened the cover. A look of puzzlement and disappointment crossed her face. It was written in a foreign language, one with which she was not familiar.

'How was she to read this? How did her mother read it?'

Catherine looked back in the cask and noticed a little ribbon pull on its velvet floor. She tugged at it and lifted up the bottom covering. There was a second manuscript---this one done in calligraphy on newer paper. It was in English, a careful, painstaking, artistic translation, she assumed. Opening the cover and reading the letter to her mother, Catherine discovered the translated manuscript was done by her grandfather and dated three years prior to his death. It made her feel as she had never felt before - anchored in and with time.

And she read....

I, Brother Ivan of the Cross, do hereby swear that all that is put down on these pages is the truth as was witnessed by me, or told to me by those I love and trust. It is commissioned by Petros, Bishop of Kronstadt, as a petition for the beautification and sainthood of Katarene, Queen of Sibiru, Klug, and Brasso, Land of the Danube Bohemia.

In the year of Our Lord 1222, a council was convened in Kronstadt to negotiate a treaty to end the thirty years of war which had been waged to determine sovereignty of the region. It was written that the two kings who displayed the most courage and the most compassion during the wars would rule jointly. They were King Wilhelm and King Rudolf. It was further determined that Prince Karl, son of Wilhelm, would carry on the line of succession, he being older than King Rudolf's son, Heinrich. Prince Karl was to marry the daughter of King Gustav, and their son would become the sole ruler eventually marrying a daughter of Prince Heinrich, joining their noble houses.

Prince Heinrich was to marry the daughter of King Leopold the Fierce. In this way, the houses of the four warring kings would be joined. If Prince Karl was to have a daughter only, then she would reign as Queen with her consort, the firstborn of Prince Heinrich. The directives were agreed upon by the four kings and all the delegates.

It was a wise treaty. But it would be over forty years before the houses would be joined to give us one king. The council included in the treaty the betrothal arrangements to be an accomplished edict at the birth of the firstborn male and female of either house.

The two kings were wise and careful in their decisions to rule, and compassionate in their decisions to mend their lands and people. They raised their sons together, and the sons were like brothers, confiding in each other in everything. They understood that they were to reign only until their lineage could be joined.

Prince Karl was of a quiet, thoughtful nature. Prince Heinrich was quick of temper and loud in his anger and joy. They were each other's match in wits and enjoyed playing games which challenged their minds. Their marriages were already arranged. Prince Karl's wife suited him perfectly, and they grew to love each other. Prince Heinrich's wife carried the traits that named her father. She was fierce and vengeful and came into the marriage carrying her father's hatred and bitterness of defeat. War was still being waged through her, and when she was first with child, she called upon all that was evil to curse Prince Heinrich's offspring and thus made a mockery of the betrothal. She became obsessed with this, and her witchly powers became evident with her incantations. As a child, she would watch her father's sorceress chanting incantations at the rituals, giving him the strength of his namesake, the lion. They would all chant, and King Leopold would go into a trance and drink the blood of the lion. The princess learned her lessons well.

Prince Karl was with Prince Heinrich the night the child was born. They were anxious to see the boy. Together they gazed down at the deformed child. They couldn't allow this, so they quickly devised a scheme and announced that the child had died.

The relationship between Heinrich and his wife worsened, if possible, yet he forced her to bear another child as he blamed her curse for the 'death' of his firstborn. The evil princess quietly seethed during her time of confinement but brought forth a normal, healthy boy.

The child was named Laszlo. And as both princes were rejoicing over his birth, the mother plunged a dagger through her heart, ending her madness.

It was another three years before the union of Prince Karl and his wife would bring forth a child. Prince Heinrich was with his friend, and when they were told the child was a girl, they were well satisfied. They announced her betrothal to Laszlo at the same time she was christened Katarene.

The young princess grew happy and healthy surrounded by loving parents and servants. She was taught to rule and knew of her intended marriage from the time she could understand its significance. Princess Katarene was a dutiful daughter, beautiful in face and soul.

Prince Heinrich watched through the years as his son grew handsome and tall, but there was something twisted in this young man. He enjoyed little cruelties to animals. As his strength grew, so did his enjoyment for torture. He never let his father forget that he would one day rule and started slowly usurping Prince Heinrich's authority. And his need for young woman was insatiable. The people of the surrounding countryside hid away their daughters to keep them safe. There were times young girls would disappear. The work of the Devil was at hand.

The castle sits on a cliff, overlooking the Danube River. At the foot of the cliff is the port city of Sibiru. Piers and lovely little cottages and shops nestle on a strip of land between the cliff and the river. Long, low flat boats with high bows carry cargo from Ulm and supply the area with goods. On a lower cliff, at an angle to the highest point of the mountain, is our monastery, white-walled and onion-steepled.

The cliffs below the monastery and castle are honeycombed with tunnels which serve as passages for the easy movement of supplies from the river port. This internal series of halls and caverns are also used by the citizens to move easily from the cliff top through the monastery. It is here that we have often hidden and moved the young maidens of the countryside. Although Laszlo knows this area very well, he played there as a child, the area under the alley can be sealed off.

When Princess Katarene was sixteen, she knew it was time to leave her home. She and Prince Karl started out for Sibiru. Her heart was heavy to leave her home, but she rode beside her father with head held high; she was fulfilling her destiny. They rode together, father and daughter, prince and princess. It had been five years since Katarene had visited the castle overlooking the Danube, but the sight that she now beheld was the same as that last Christmas holiday she had spent with Laszlo.

The day turned into a frightening night. A storm arose suddenly, and a fierce gale blew down the Danube. The rain hit hard against our closed shutters, and it seemed as though the lightning and thunder lingered over our mountain top for hours. There was no end to the crashing sound and flashing light.

Our evening meal was over and compline had begun when there was a pounding at the gates. It did not seem possible that anyone could be out in this storm. As the gates were opened, a flash of lightning revealed a frightening, furious Laszlo. His horse reared, and Laszlo truly looked like a demon. He demanded we give him Katarene. He would not believe we did not have her or knew her whereabouts. Laszlo and his men searched every cell, the chapel and the refectory and then the cellars and the tunnels. He was a madman who was losing the means to his power.

Laszlo grabbed my Lord Abbot, screaming, 'I can only rule through her. I will not spend my life like those two old men up there. She belongs to me! Return my property. I will be King!'

'Not without her,' reminded Abbot Nicholas.

'Or a decree of the Holy Roman Emperor,' hissed Laszlo.

'For that you need the proposal to come from me, and let me remind you that you have just violated sacred ground and disregarded the law of sanctuary. There is no way I will ever recommend anyone as ruthless and as evil as you! It make me shudder to think what this land would become with ultimate power in your hands.' It was clear the Abbot was angry.

'You will have no say in the matter when I marry Princess Katarene,' retorted Laszlo.

'There you are wrong. I do have the means to stop you.'

'You are as senile as my father. Neither of you can go against the treaty. The marriage will take place.'

'We have the way to change your destiny,' threatened the Abbot as his eyes narrowed, and his jaw set.

Laszlo raised his gloved hand, and the blows hit our Abbot on the shoulder as Laszlo spewed, 'Empty threats, old man. Empty threats.'

He then stalked out of our midst, and we tried to regain our shattered peace. We returned to compline. Our Abbot asked Brother Wences to intone the antiphon then he made a special intention that Princess Katarene be found safe and healthy.

On this evening, we did not retire to our cells as was our custom. Abbot Nicholas charged us to go forth from our walls and search and rocks and gullies for the princess. Prayers were on all our lips as we each took a torch and went out into the night. It was still raining, and the ground was muddy and loose; there was an unspoken fear that it would be quite possible for anyone to lose footing and slip off the cliffs.

We searched around every rock and bush, in every crevice, and just when we were about to cease, Brother Wences cried out that he had found the princess. I looked up and saw him as he walked into my torchlight. He was a large man, and he easily carried the small princess. I will never forget my shock when I first saw her. She was covered with mud and blood, and she seemed lifeless.

Abbot Nicholas led he way to the rooms reserved for guests and sent for Brother Andreas, our physician. Then he sent for Sophia, the town's midwife: Princess Katarene needed to be bathed. Brother Andreas first determined that she was still alive but hesitated to touch her until Sophia was present, and they examined her together.

Sophia was a large, motherly woman who wept when she laid eyes upon her princess and all the while she bathed her delicate body. The extent of Katarene's injuries became evident as the mud was laved from her. there was a deep wound on her head which had already caused a purple swelling even as it was bleeding. There were several lacerations about her face, and we all heard Sophia's scream as she discovered a dagger wound in the girl's chest. What horror had brought Katarene to this?

Brother Andreas and Sophia bound her wounds, and Abbot Nicholas asked that Sophia stay by her side. As Brother Wences was a lay-brother and not yet admitted to the novitiate, he was allowed to serve their needs.

We kept vigil in the chapel throughout the night, two at a time. She had to live. The thought that Laszlo could possibly rule our land was ever present, and so, too, was the thought that the beautiful, young maiden had not yet lived her life.

At matins, we were relieved to learn the princess had lived through the night, and although it was only

five o'clock in the morning, this news was an omen of a good day to come. Brother Wences brought the morning meal to Sophia and reported that the princess was sleeping peacefully. He hurriedly ate as Sophia requested clean bandages and water. She also requested that he stay while she spoke with the Abbot.

I was present for this and all meetings that followed concerning the princess, as I was appointed the scribe to record all that transpired.

Sophia told Abbot Nicholas that the chest wound the princess suffered, which had concerned her greatly the night before, was not as deep as first thought. However, the head wound seemed serious. Katarene had not yet awakened. Brother Andreas came into the meeting. He had been in the herb garden and had herbs, fresh and dried, that he wished to burn in the princess' room. We explained that a pungent odor could reach into her senses and awaken her, for if she did not awaken soon, he feared for her life.

They returned to the guest room and set up the burning herb incense. Brother Wences stayed with Princess Katarene while Brother Andreas went about his duties, and Sophia returned to her family. We were to summon her when she was again needed.

It was not long before Princess Katarene seemed disturbed by the sharp odor, and although she did not awaken, she became restless, and her eye would open and then close, not really seeing. (All this was expected and explained to Brother Wences) The restlessness and words that made no sense continued throughout the night as we again kept vigil. Sophia came again to spend the night; and she was pleased that Katarene seemed to hear and would respond when her name was spoken.

On the next day, Brother Andreas gave the order to Brother Wences for him to speak to Katarene often, to call her name, and to keep sounds about her. After Sophia left for the day, Brother Wences brought a manuscript from the bibliotech and read aloud. He had a beautiful, soothing voice, and Katarene was quieted.

We had just finished the noon meal, and Brother Wences had brought some broth to feed to Katarene when we heard a painful scream. The Abbot, Brother Andreas, and I rushed into the room. Princess Katarene was feeling his face, and there were tears streaming from Brother Wences' eyes.

'She is blind,' he said.

'Can she speak?' asked the Abbot.

'Yes, but she is confused.'

'Then we will let her rest before we ask her questions. Brother Wences, you will continue here with her. She seems less frightened when you speak,' observed Abbot Nicholas. 'I will try to send word to her father without Laszlo's knowledge.'

After compline, the Abbot requested that I wait in his study. I took this to mean that Prince Karl would be arriving soon. It wasn't long before the Abbot, Prince Karl, and Prince Heinrich entered the room. I was introduced to them as the scribe, and although there was a certain hesitancy, they soon forgot my presence and began speaking freely. It was evident that the Abbot and the two princes were not only friends but confidants. They had come to the abbey by way of the tunnels as they had apparently done throughout the years.

What follows is direct conversation:

Heinrich: What are we to do? What has happened is all my fault. I have turned my back on Laszlo's wickedness, closing my eyes to the day-to-day torments he inflicted on us all, hoping that somehow, he would outgrow his debauchery, especially where Katarene was concerned. I now know that he is allied with the Devil.

The prince was distraught, and there was genuine fear in his eyes for having begot such a demon.

Nicholas: Then what happened to Katarene was Laszlo's fault?

Karl: Yes. We all had eaten a wonderful evening meal. Laszlo was being extremely charming and was paying proper court to Katarene. Heinrich and I sat together by the fire, sipping mulled wine, appraising the young ones, discussing our pleasure that they seemed fond of each other. They went off together to a small parlor adjacent to the main hall. All was quiet for some time, and then we heard Laszlo raise his voice. From what we could hear, it was evident that he was forcing Katarene to be intimate with him. She was screaming. My friend and I ran to the room, but the door was locked. We could tell she was running from him, but then he caught her and started to beat her. The blows fell hard, and my heart broke. We pounded on the door. 'Go away, old man,' Laszlo hissed. 'There is nothing you can do to save her.' He was laughing in a high pitch, and he truly sounded insane. Katarene was whimpering. Never in her lifetime of care and love could she have imagined such a horror. The guards came and started to break down the door. Laszlo screamed. The door gave way just in time for us to see the battered, bloodied Katarene, clothes torn, plunge Laszlo's dagger into her chest. She had the look of a frightened deer who was finally set free, and she bolted past us in a frenzy, and out the main door. She disappeared into the night as I ran after her. She was dying, but she wasn't sane enough at the moment to even know it. Heinrich tried to confine his son, but alas, too many of the men-at-arms were loyal to Laszlo. He soon set out in search of her.

Prince Karl retold this tale of abuse, sparing his friend the anguish and humiliation.

Heinrich: I am so very grateful that she was found by the monks and brought to the abbey.

He said this through hands which covered his face.

Karl: Now, I shall ask the question again. What are we to do? The treaty must be upheld. You assure us my beloved daughter will live and yet I cannot in good conscious condone this match to Laszlo. Katarene has always been obedient and willing to consummate her betrothal; but she was ready to die rather than defile herself, for she met the demon and saw and felt his evil. Please, Nicholas, you who interpret and guard the treaty, tell us how to face this girl. How do I comfort my daughter?

Nicholas: My friends, this is a judgment from God, himself. It is we who deliberately falsified the treaty, and it is God who has given us the opportunity to right it. I hold within my power the one person who can stand between Katarene and Laszlo. How does the treaty read, Heinrich? The betrothal is to be between Katarene and your firstborn son.

Heinrich: No, you cannot condemn her to that!

Nicholas: You have a choice; Beast in face and form or Demon of heart and soul; Blessed of heart and soul or Beauty of face and form. Which son is it to be? The law reads your firstborn, the child you have not laid eyes on since you placed him in my arms when he was but a few hours old. You have not inquired about him or shown any sign of caring. However, I can find no malice in my heart, for you gave me a precious gift. You gave me a son to raise, and he has filled my life with joy. He is brilliant and a natural leader. His deformity is easily forgotten, because he is easily loved. Even now, at this moment, it is his whispering voice which soothes and comforts the blind princess. Now, I will ask my question again. Which son is it to be?

Heinrich: She is blind and has not yet seen.... What is his name?

Nicholas: I named him Wences.

Heinrich: A truly noble name----the victor, the one who is invincible, the one who is the conqueror.

Karl: Ah! A wise remark. We simply allow him onto the battlefield and let the victor win.

Heinrich: But it will be Katarene who loses.

Karl: Then let it be she who makes the choice.

Heinrich: I will agree to it only if she freely chooses Wences.

Nicholas: Then let her healing continue at the hands of the gentlest man I know.

Karl: I shall merely tell her that we may have found another suitor for her. I am sure she will be relieved. May I see her now?

Nicholas: Brother Ivan, will you please see if Sophia has finished preparing Princess Katarene for the night?

I left the three friends and quickly returned to tell them that the princess was indeed readied for the night and that Sophia had left.

The scene that greeted Prince Karl and Prince Heinrich both shocked and comforted them. The only light in the chamber came from the candles at the head of the bed - just enough light for Wences to read. His chair was pulled up close to the bed so that the back of it was even with the headboard. The princess was sitting up in bed with her head resting on Wences' shoulder, listening to his story, unseeing eyes fixed on the entry.

Both princes gasped when they first saw Wences; they were alarmed by his face, the face that we who loved him dearly had come to look upon as a thing of beauty. Wences look up startled and pulled the cowl of his habit up to cover the long, thick yellow hair, the flattened nose, and cleft lip. However, it seemed as though the brilliant, slanted, blue eyes shone from deep in the high cheekbone sockets despite the shadow cast by the cowl.

Princess Katarene sat upright. 'What is it, Brother Wences? What has made you distraught? Who is there?'

He rose from his place and presented the chair to her father. As Prince Karl spoke, Katarene became overjoyed, and it was a tearful reunion. Brother Wences slipped unnoticed from the room.

It was decided that the princess should stay at the abbey. It was a safe place. If Laszlo came again, she could be taken to our cellars and the secret tunnels. The abbot and the two princes then met with Brother Andreas. Prince Karl, of course was anxious about his daughter's blindness.

'I have seen times when the purple swelling about the head pales, some sight then returns,' said Brother Andreas.

'And when that happens, if that happens, how will she be able to accept what we saw in there tonight? She had her head on the shoulder of a freak, a monster, a throwback to ancient times. He is from mythologies, something not quite human or something conjured out of the devil worship of his mother,' Prince Heinrich said, horrified by his first glimpse of Wences. 'All the sins of the mother on the son.'

'If he was the product of devil worship then the Devil has been cheated,' claimed the Abbot. 'We have agreed to see what shall happen. We will pray that the Lord God guides these events. Amen.'

'Amen,' responded those of us in the room.

It was time for matins when the three old friends said 'goodnight.' As I walked down the hall on the way to chapel, I saw Brother Wences on his pallet outside Princess Katarene's room. I looked down at that unusual face and those powerful hands and wondered how anyone could think he was frightful. But then, I had watched him grow into this magnificent creature, this magnificent man.

That morning as Sophia came to tend to Katarene's personal needs, Brother Wences was waiting for her. He asked if she could spend the morning with the princess as he needed to spend time with the community. Then he requested a meeting with Abbot Nicholas and myself. At the meeting, I discovered this was because I was director of postulants.

The time was ten o'clock, well after the morning meal and chores. Abbot Nicholas sat at his desk, and I stood beside him as Wences entered the room, filling the doorway. He was beckoned forward and

given permission to speak.

'I wish to inquire about my petition to be accepted as a postulant. This is my fifth petition. I have applied every two years for ten years, and yet I have not been accepted. What of this time?' he asked.

'Why do you not wait for the choosing ceremony as in other years?' inquired the Abbot.

'I have been separated from the community since caring for the Princess Katarene,' he said, his voice softening as he spoke her name. *It was easy to see that there had been a change in him. 'I need to become part of the order, to be busy away from her, and....'* He hesitated with bowed head.

'This does not make sense, Wences," replied the Abbot. *'You do not run away from something and so join the Order; you run toward God. I tend to think I must deny your request again.'*

There was true anguish in Wences' face, and a low rumble escaped his throat as sometimes happened.

'Why? It has been ten years, and still I am rejected. Is it because I am not worthy, not human, a bestial thing? Just tell me this, and I will accept it and banish myself to the tunnels.'

'Oh, no, my son. There is a very good reason, and it is not that.'

'Then let someone else care for Katarene. I am certain her father will be happier. I know well his reaction to me. I have experienced it before, but it has never hurt like this.'

'You have deep feelings for the beautiful princess, haven't you, Wences?' asked Abbot Nicholas.

Brother Wences lowered his head so that the yellow hair shadowed most of his face. 'I could not imagine how I should feel if she were to look upon me with the same shock and terror as her father. I need to be away from her before this should happen, as my heart would break.'

'But Wences, she trusts you. It is your voice which assures and soothes her. The horror she experienced at the hands of Laszlo caused much damage. To take away her healing caretaker now would be another cruelty. If there is a sign that she will regain her sight, we will talk again. Until that time, I ask you to continue your loving care.'

'But then it may be too late.'

'For what, my son.'

The answer could barely be heard. 'For me to ever stop loving her, and I cannot love her! I must not love her.'

'If this is how you feel, Wences, it may already be too late. Please return to the princess now. I am sure she is anxious about your absence.'

Wences sighed, and obedient as always, left to return to Princess Katarene.

The next week was a time of great improvement for the princess. She tried walking around her room, always holding onto Wences. She took her meals sitting at her table, Wences always guiding her hand. She would sit at the window, feeling the sun upon her, Wences always reading to her.

One particular day seemed perfect. The sun made everything sparkle, and the roses filled the air with perfume. Wences carried Katarene into the rose garden, and they sat on a stone bench.

'It is very beautiful here, Katarene. The roses are in full bloom. This bush at your right hand is full of red roses, and the one here at my left is pink. Across the path is a row of white rose bushes. Would you like me to pick one for you?'

'Oh, yes, Wences.'

'Let me see, which shall it be,' he mused to himself, as he stood looking about him.

'How about a white one,' said Katarene.

Wences crossed the path and reached for a white rose.

'Oh, that one - the one half-opened, perfect petals reaching to the sky.'

'This one?' asked Wences, pointing.

'Yes.'

He picked the beautiful flower and knelt before her, placing it into her hands. She smiled at him and bent her head forward to place a kiss on his forehead.

It was just then that Wences realized that Katarene had asked for a specific rose. She could see! He reeled and spun away from her as he lifted his cowl.

'Oh, no! Please, don't turn from me,' exclaimed the princess, as she gently turned Wences' shoulders so he faced her. Looking deep into his blue eyes, she said, 'Thank you, my kind friend.'

Their eyes met and locked as each seemed helpless to turn away. A smile crossed the beautiful, full lips of the princess, and Wences dropped his eyes in shame that he should look at her in this manner.

Wences was very honest about his feelings when he reported this to me, but was also filled with awe as he continued his telling of the rest of the day.

'What disturbs you so, Brother Wences?' asked Katarene.

'You have looked upon me. You can see!'

'Yes, and do you see alarm in my face or fear in my eyes?' replied Katarene.

Wences could hardly look up into that beloved face. It was as though he were looking wide-eyed into the sun. 'How long?' he stammered. 'Was I a terrible shock for you? I would never have wished to alarm you. I asked to be replaced before you would gaze upon me.'

Katarene reached for his hand - hairy and long-nailed - and held it between her tiny, delicate palms. 'You are the gentlest of men. I knew that from the very first moment of glimmering consciousness. As the days wore on, the blackness gave way to gray cloudy movement - not quite shadows. The night my father came to visit, I was very aware of his reaction to you, and I felt your shame and hurt as you left the room. I think it was then that I knew you were somehow different. I regretted that I could not see you, but I came to know your graceful step and the slight scratching as you opened the door. I felt your broadness of shoulder and long hair as I rested my head against your arm. I knew your strength and height as you braced my weak back when I tried to walk.

I began to feel that I did not need to see you. I knew you so well. And then, three days ago when I awoke, I could see light and dark, veiled shapes. I knew the large, round shape coming toward me was Sophia, and after she left, I waited anxiously. Finally, I heard your step and watched as the large door effortlessly pushed in, and there you stood. I could not see clearly, and I could not yet focus my gaze, but I knew it was you. I did not distinctly make out your features, but I saw nothing to cause my father's reaction.

I did not reveal the return of my sight, because it did not truly become clear until I woke this morning. It was then that I was sure that my mythical friend was real and not something out of my imagination. I could see your beautiful blue eyes and wonderful yellow hair, and I sat in awe of your magnificence. Please do not be angry with me. I was only looking for a way to tell you which would not cause you uneasiness.'

'And my appearance does not disgust you?' asked Wences.

'No. My gaze is one of warmth and gratitude. You have given me strength and courage and the ability to trust once again. How else am I to look upon you except as friend?'

'Then for this I am grateful. However, now we must part. I can no longer serve you. You no longer need me, and you must prepare to fulfill the treaty.'

Katarene lowered her eyes, and the effort of her breathing heralded tears that silently escaped from between her long lashes. 'I cannot imagine what it will be like not to have you near. Are you sure it must be this way?' she asked, pleading more than asking.

'I would like nothing better than to remain your servant, but you are to be a ruler, and my life is forever here.'

'The thought of seeing Laszlo again terrifies me.' Her brave tremor turned into sobs. 'Oh, Wences! What is to become of me?'

Wences stood beside her and hesitantly, but firmly, put his arm about her and drew her close. The sensation that ran through him made him tremble. He had always known he was not meant to feel this way, and yet there was such sweetness and pleasure in holding this girl that he felt his soul soar. How could this be wrong? The thought left his mind as quickly as it entered. For him, it was wrong.

He finally found words and asked, 'Surely, they won't force the betrothal; or must they.'

'My father told me that he and Prince Heinrich were trying to find a way out, perhaps another suitor.'

'Then my prayers for you will be that he is loving and gentle and respects and honors you.' And as Wences released Katarene, he added, 'Your Highness.'

She stared into his eyes and suddenly and sadly realized that something wonderful had just ended. She cradled the white rose in her hands as Wences helped her to her feet. He held her arm as she walked back to her chamber. Katarene would have rather he carried her. She loved being cradled in his arms just as she cradled the rose.

She later revealed all this to me as her care now fell into my hands.

The next two days were uneventful. I would take Katarene her meals and sit in her chamber as I scribed manuscripts. She was very quiet, and I would say there was a sadness about her. I saw joy in her only twice. Once was when she looked out the window into the courtyard. I went to see what had caused her reaction, and there below, walking in a prayer circle with the monks was Wences.

The other time was a strange experience for me. I have had no contact or firsthand knowledge or observation of love between a man and a woman, so I was not expecting what happened the day Katarene and I walked the arched promenade to the cloister. We had taken but a few steps when Katarene froze, her eyes gazing ahead; she was hardly breathing. I looked up and saw Wences stopped in his tracks about twenty feet away. Their eyes were for each other only, and I could feel a presence as though a third entity was born out of the two of them and not somewhere between.

The air was full of this entity, and it became more and more intense. I was afraid to speak or move, lest I destroy it, and they seemed unable to break the spell.

Wences was the one who finally had the strength to silently turn away as Katarene gasped a little cry. We did not speak of it, but I reported the incident to the Abbot - who just smiled.

And then it happened that Laszlo once again descended upon us. I hurriedly brought the princess below into the tunnels under our cellars. When I returned, Abbot Nicholas was giving Laszlo an ultimatum. He was to abide by any change in the treaty as dictated by the Holy Roman Emperor or be exiled. This was to be his punishment for attempting to defile the princess.

Laszlo was furious. He had been searching the countryside for two weeks, trying to find Katarene. He pushed his way through the abbey, but he knew the Emperor could and would send an army if he continued to outrage the Abbot. Laszlo said that Katarene had to be there, because she was nowhere else. He wanted to burn the monastery to the ground but said he would not as he respected

sanctuary. In truth, he respected nothing. But he knew the Abbot would send a message that could destroy him if he provoked the Abbot further.

As Laszlo was leaving, the Abbot told him to be in the church at ten in the morning two days hence. 'It is then we shall all hear the Emperor's decision.'

When it was safe, Abbott Nicholas sent word to Brother Wences to bring Katarene back to her chamber. I went to get a manuscript I had been working on, and as I tidied the desk, they came to the door.

It was obvious that Wences had been telling Katarene of the treaty going before the Emperor. Her life was now being decided. I could see her clinging to Wences. She was no longer the brave little girl determined to do her duty.

'I know I have no right to feel the way I do, after all you are a monk. But I must say it. We may never have another time. I love you, Wences.'

He was about to tell her that he was only a lay-brother but instead said, 'Perhaps it is better that things are as they are. We feel deeply, and you would do better to love another. I will tell you that I do suffer by the very thought of me loving you, but it is for the best that we part now.'

Katarene moved closer into Wences' embrace. 'Hold me, please. Just once. Hold me close so that I will always have the memory of being held by the man I love.'

It almost broke my heart to see them finally separate and feel their pain. We were all now at the mercy of the Emperor.

The next day, Abbot Nicholas received surprising news. The Emperor himself was coming to announce his decree. There was great excitement in the palace as well as in the abbey. The preparations were many as we readied the basilica for this important event. The nation had waited forty-six years for this day. The princess was to be ceremoniously betrothed. But to whom?

The Emperor arrived among much grandeur. He spent the evening with us and awoke early for his morning mass.

Sophia arrived with the betrothal presents for Katarene. I brought the morning meal for them and stood spellbound at the richness of the gown. It was white with gold and pearl embroidery. The sleeves were long and fitted to points at the back of her hands. The gold and pearly belt lay on her hips and trailed the full length of the skirt. On her head was a small, white hat which fit into her braided hair, and a pearl fell to the middle of her forehead. A gold veil was attached to the front of the hat, and it surrounded her head like a halo. She was dazzling. And she stood very still, not moving as though she were not quite real.

I made a comment about her appearance, but there was no response.

Prince Karl arrived to escort his daughter into the basilica, and I left to take my place with our community around the main altar. Abbot Nicholas was waiting for me. We both approached Wences. He was sitting in the back corner, so he could not easily be seen by the congregation. He preferred the shadows when in public, because he was not allowed to wear the hood with his habit as he had taken no vows. We allowed him this comfort within the abbey, but we followed the rules in the basilica.

'Wences,' started the Abbot, 'this is going to be an unusual day for you. I do not want you to fear for your appearance. It is time the people realize that you have the right to exit. If I am to call on you, I want you to follow all instructions. Will you do this, Wences?'

'I have always been obedient, Abbot Nicholas.'

'This may go beyond obedience. One might say disbelief.'

'Then I shall trust you.'

The Abbot seemed relieved. 'Yes, trust, but trust in the Lord, Wences.'

'I always have, Abbot Nicholas.'

We took our seats as the trumpets announced the entrance of the Emperor with a fanfare. We proceeded up the aisle in purple splendor to the throne placed before the high altar. Following was Prince Karl and Katarene. They stood before the Emperor, heads bowed, but I saw the princess search out Wences. He gave her a smile of encouragement which seemed to calm her a bit.

The Emperor rose and in a loud voice said, 'After much prayer and deliberation, it is my belief and judgment that the treaty stands as written.'

Laszlo shouted and came forth as Katarene turned paled and cringed toward her father.

'Sit down!' ordered the Emperor, glaring at Laszlo. 'I said it stands as written. Katarene is betrothed to the firstborn son of Prince Heinrich. I have learned that Laszlo is not the firstborn. I now call upon Prince Heinrich to bring forth his eldest son.'

Laszlo was protesting and causing a loud commotion. And he was ordered to be quiet or to be put out.

Prince Heinrich slowly rose and stood before Abbot Nicholas. Together they went to Wences and asked him to proceed with them. He did so. As he walked into the light, there were gasps and cries of fear and shock. The Emperor was also taken aback by this leonine man, standing before him. It was clear that neither Wences nor Katarene knew what was taking place.

'This is your firstborn?'

'Yes. Your Majesty,' was all Heinrich could say.

'Because of the strange circumstances of this moment, I will deviate from my original statement and ask Princess Katarene if she would accept this man as a husband. Katarene, do you accept Wences to be your husband?'

'With all of my heart, Your Majesty.'

There were shouts and hisses and cries of alarm - even warnings, curses and foreboding - coming from the congregation. Wences stood still and stunned between the Abbot and Prince Heinrich, afraid to move, not knowing what to believe, and fearing for Katarene should the threats come to pass. Laszlo's threats were especially brutal and descriptive.

The Emperor turned to Laszlo and ordered him to be exiled from the land. He ordered his guards to escort him out immediately. The sound of his threats and curses echoed through the basilica and caused all other sounds to cease so that those horrible echoes were all that could be heard.

The great doors slammed shut, and there was only silence.

'Then the deed which started at your birth is now accomplished,' said the Emperor, so quietly that only those at the altar could hear.

'Your Majesty, may I speak?'" asked Abbot Nicholas.

'Of course.'

'I wish to address Wences.' The Abbot faced this son of his heart and started to speak quietly, choosing his words carefully. "Wences, I know this must be unfathomable to you. It is all true. You are the Prince of Choice. This is the reason I would not accept you into the Order. You are a most exemplary candidate, but I felt you had another destiny. Now, because of my deep respect for you, Your Highness, I ask you, do you accept the terms of this treaty?'

'Because of my love for Katarene, I have seen and rejoiced in this dream a hundred times in these

past weeks. I now, as in those dreams, want only what will be best for Katarene. I do not wish her to be hated and reviled by her people, because she consents to marry me. She must live with their fears and ignorance. I would want this, but only if she is kept from shame.'

'There is no shame in loving you,' protested Princess Katarene.

The Emperor listened very carefully and noted the concern each had for the other. He then walked down the altar steps and faced the congregation. 'My people, I address you as a father. You have been much too long without a king. Your lands have been too long divided. To delay the fulfillment of the treaty would prevent your country from taking its rightful place in the Empire and thus receiving all rights and benefits of membership. For you and for this country, Princess Katarene has consented to wed Prince Wences, knowing full well of his deformities. The sacrifices is hers for you.'

Katarene gasped as if struck, but Wences reached for her hand. 'It is what they must think. It is for the best. I am what I am!'

And so it came to pass that on April 12th, 1268, Prince Wences was wed to Queen Katarene. The ceremony was performed in the basilica two weeks after the betrothal. As elaborate as was the betrothal, the wedding was quiet and simple with only the monks and their fathers present to witness the event.

Wences left the abbey for the first time in his life. The adjustment to palace living was not easy for him, but there were very many projects to undertake. He took his position seriously and worked to improve his country.

Their son was born one year later. Our land had a king, and there was much jubilation and celebration. We at the abbey were anxious to see the child. We all felt like uncles. We did not wait long. Two weeks after his birth, Wences brought the baby to us.

I entered the gathering room and was taken aback by the unusual level of sound. We hardly spoke above a whisper, and here were thirty monks laughing and talking. I made my way to the center of activity and found Wences holding his son.

Our infant king was sleeping peacefully, a tiny fist curled up under his chin. He had blond curls and rosy cheeks. He opened his eyes enough for me to see that they were blue like his father's. The only thought in my head was that God had sent one of his cherubs as a manifestation of Wences and Katarene's love.

The christening, which was cause for celebration throughout the land, lasted one week. The child was named Wencestas, son of Wences, by his mother. The people accepted this gladly, for by this time they knew Wences was a good man who ruled with love and justice. After a year, most had forgotten their shock at his appearance and loved their Prince.

Our country joined with the other countries of Europe in the Holy Roman Empire, and we shared in the peace and prosperity. Travel between the countries was easy and since our borders opened to Russia and the East, we had many visitors with strange stories of spice wars, silk merchants, and jade pirates.

Our abbey became a mission for pilgrims traveling over the mountains or sailing the river. These pilgrims told us of the Mongols and Tartars and of invasions. It seemed very far from us, and the tales were exciting. And then we started hearing tales of a truly evil prince who claimed his lands in the mountains to the east of our borders. He had come from Russia and descended upon the natives with ruthlessness, swift and terrifying.

Wences set up outposts at this border and a series of signal towers to warn of invasion. There were constant skirmishes, and Wences had a sense of impending danger. He could be a frightening enemy if needed to protect his country.

Ten years passed in this manner. Katarene and Wences celebrated a decade of loving marriage. The young king was growing tall and strong. The people were happy and prosperous. Our minds and spirits were at peace, so we were not prepared for what was to come. The signal fires were lit, and a frantic message for help from the borders reached the palace. Wences led his army into battle.

It soon became evident that our enemy was allied with the Tartars. Their aim was not only our conquest but also the conquest of Christianity. The Holy Wars had reached us. Coming down from the North was Khan of Kiptchak, leading the Tartars and from the East the evil prince and his horde. The fighting was fierce and catapulted itself to the very walls of our city.

Wences first drove the Khan and Tartars back to Russia, and then he led the army back to the city. The palace guards and the city-army were holding a line on the plains, so that when Wences descended upon the rear flank of the enemy, it was a devastating blow. And so, after two years of all the horrors of war, it was finally over.

Wences entered the city to the cheers and adulation of his people. He was truly the victor - the hero. He had saved his country and his church. He returned to his family, and all seemed back to normal.

I cannot express to you the feeling of loss, the pain of soul, and the confusion of mind when word reached us one week later that Prince Wences had been killed. He had been stabbed in the back by his brother as he was about to retire to his family chambers.

It was revealed that the enemy prince from the East was, in fact, Laszlo. He had hidden in the tunnels under the palace as his army was fleeing defeat. There he waited until the time was right and entered the palace through the storerooms. He stabbed Wences and returned to the tunnels like a rat. He knew the tunnels well, and so although there was a thorough search, he was never found.

Wences was buried in the cathedral in Kronstadt. The procession wound its way from our city to the cathedral with the procession's size swelling as it went through the countryside. It was led by the young king and Queen Katarene. Their stalwart shoulders and tortured faces touched the heart of all those who followed. There was nothing to do but cry or scream in despair. How could this happen?

Katarene and the king returned to the palace. She went into mourning for seven years. She lived as a nun and cloistered herself behind those walls. People came from throughout the country to seek help from the hospital she opened within the palace. Abandoned and orphaned children were welcomed. She turned no one away. There were reports of miraculous cures at the hands of this sainted woman. We at the abbey do not know of this as firsthand knowledge, but we heard of the reports like everyone else. Katarene died one day after Wences' coronation; he was eighteen.

Your excellency, my initial report is finished. All further investigation into this matter will be welcomed.

As Sworn,

*Brother Ivan auf Crux
Monastery of St. Benedict*

I was sitting at my writing table, trying to gather strength to return to my cell. It was very late, and I had been writing this report all day. I had wanted to finish it and send it to the Bishop in the morning.

I became aware of someone, and a large shadow fell over the table. I spun around and gasped. I was sure I was seeing a ghost. I could only see the silhouetted figure standing in the doorway with the light behind him. He was large, filling the doorway, and the light shimmered off his long, blond hair.

He spoke, and I realized that it was the king. He had come through the tunnels just as he had done more times since childhood. He was very serious. 'I heard that you were writing a preliminary report on my mother for the Bishop.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'May I read it?'

'Of course.'

I handed him the manuscript as he sat next to me. He read and smiled and a tear ran from the corner of his eye. 'I barely remember my grandfathers. It is good to read their words and learn of their ways.' He seemed to be drawn into the writings. 'Now I understand the full meaning of the white rose.' He read on. 'It pleases me that you remember my father as I do. It has been ten years since his death.'

'I am glad that you are pleased.'

'Yes, I am pleased with this manuscript, but I have a strange request. I wish to have it put aside, at least until I am sure in my own mind that it was properly received. Mother needs to rest in peace. You understand her and the love she shared with my father. But once this transcription is sent, it will be the world's forever. How can we be sure that it will not be misunderstood, that purity of their lives and love won't be misinterpreted, that the reaction to my father that day in the basilica won't be the reaction of the tribunal? Can we be so sure Mother won't be considered a witch?'

'How can anyone think that, Your Majesty?'

'Because there is more to the story. It becomes awesome and more beautiful. It is mystic, and yet most natural. It is hard to think of miraculous healing. Mother did everything in love and that is what was Godly.'

You mentioned the feeling of Mother and Father's love as though it were a separate entity. I am well acquainted with that entity. It is part of my first recollections. There was Katarene and Wences and their love between them. Sometimes it was so strong that I could almost see it. I knew of the existence of a God of Love, because I truly knew what love was.

I would watch them look deeply into each other's soul. They would stare silently, and I understood that at that moment, they were on a different plane. They were one being in their love. And then the love would spill out of them in circles and engulf all those who knew them.

Everything they did was within their love. My father found the courage to go out among the people because they needed him. The circle of love reached out, and they responded with love. Then they in turn extended the circle. This is the miracle.

My mother was able to live on and....' He stopped and again tears rolled down his cheeks. Wencestas lowered his head, and the long hair covered his face just as his father's had done. When he started speaking again, his voice was somehow softer; it was his father's voice. 'I truly believe my mother, too, died that horrible night my father died. She and I were playing with my pegs and ball before I went to bed. Father was finishing the household reports in his study. There was much for him to catch up on, and he had only been home one week.

I was first beginning to feel comfortable with him again. Two years is a long time in a young boy's life, especially when he is between the ages of nine and eleven. Mother had an advantage. She would sneak away from the safety of the palace and join Father at the battlefield. She didn't care that it was dangerous; she only wanted to be with her husband. However, he was very concerned and would send her back home. Mother would stay a few weeks then leave for Father's side again.

Our reunion was joyous, and Mother and Father's bond grew stronger than ever. So it was that we were waiting anxiously for him to join us in our chambers. My mother suddenly screamed and cringed just before Father pushed open the door and fell to the floor. The hilt of a Tartar scimitar was all that could be seen. The blade was buried deep into his back. There was so much blood. Too much.

I ran for help, and when I returned, Mother was sitting on the floor, cradling Father's head. She was moving from side to side, and piteous, little sobs struggled from the tension in her throat.

The servants placed Father on the bed, and the physician attended to him, but he could not stop the bleeding. Father was unconscious part of the time. Mother and I were standing close. He spoke more softly than normal. His life was bleeding away, and the weakness was evident. He told us it was Laszlo who had done this to him.

He spoke to me of being a good and kind ruler, saying I was just one of the people, but I had been born with the responsibility to rule. I was to learn from my mother, for she truly knew of royal responsibility. He told me he was proud of me, and he could see that I would be tall and strong, and that I was to use my strength for goodness. Then he looked at my mother. She was so still that one would believe she was about to die, also. Their gaze lingered, and then he said, 'No, Katarene. Go back. They need you. Our son needs you. His burden is heavy. Remember, our love cannot die. It is the only gift of heaven given to earth, the only gift of earth taken to heaven. Love is eternal. It goes on, but we have been there in that other place. I simply go ahead of you and wait. What we share will never die. I will always be with you.' and then he was gone.

I swear to you that at that moment, my mother stopped breathing. She stood there like a statue, a gasp of air rushed from her throat, and she did not take another breath. Neither did she speak. She ate and drank only enough to keep her body alive. She was as pale as the marble pillars and at times felt as cold. This went on that whole winter. I was very worried about her.

Then one day just as the snows were melting and the sun was making the afternoon warm and shiny. I decided to take Mother out in the garden. I sat her on a stone bench. I was not even sure she could see or was aware of anything. I said, 'Well, here we are surrounded by your rose bushes. In another month, there will be buds.' I looked around at the bushes, and I thought what I was seeing was not really there. I turned away then looked back again. But it was there! A beautiful white rose in perfect bloom. It was not possible for this to be, not with the snow still on the bushes. I don't know what prompted me, but I picked that rose, knelt before my mother, and placed it in her hands. She leaned forward and placed a kiss on my forehead. Then she started to cry, and her tears bathed the flower as she gently cradled it.

And now I will tell you of another marvel. Mother brought the white rose to her chamber, and it remained fresh and beautiful until the day she died. And it was from that day on when Mother found the rose that she became part of the living once more. I know now from reading your report that this same scene had happened before. She then knew that Father was with her. She needed to be reminded, and once done, she exploded with love. It needed to be showered on everyone, and so the hospital was opened and orphanage, too.

Mother was very busy and saw to all the details herself. She made sure I learned all the lessons; how to establish and organize, how to finance and manage, how to feed, bed, and clothe a multitude, and how to rule and how to submit. As quiet and as tormented as she was before, she was lively and happy now. Every now and then, she would slip and say, 'Your father feels,' or 'I can feel that he wishes....' Anyone else hearing this would not understand, but I knew, because I could feel their bond. Somehow, she could feel him.

It happened one night that a man appeared at the palace gates. He was driving a wagon and pleaded entry. Once inside, he carefully pulled away the straw in the back of the wagon and revealed a young girl. She was perhaps fifteen years old and had been badly beaten. He begged for help as she was his daughter. Mother brought her into the hospital and found her a bed. We learned the story as the physician was caring for her.

The man had driven across the border. It seems that Laszlo had not stopped his practice of choosing young maidens for his pleasure. This poor girl was one of his many victims. The father drove her these many miles, because no one would dare help him. They could not chance displeasing Laszlo.

A look came over Mother that I had never seen before, determination and revulsion as she said, 'We must do something about this. When you return home, make sure the word is passed that these

doors are open to all maidens as a refuge and a sanctuary. I will defy Laszlo.'

'You do not know....,' started the stranger.

'Yes, I do. I have suffered the most grievous of pain because of him. There is nothing more he can do to me. What is your name, my friend?'

'I am Frederick, Your Majesty.'

'I am Katarene, Frederick.'

The stranger was heartened by Mother's warmth and courage and spread the news of the refuge across the borders. More and more fathers brought their daughters to us. Mother became acquainted with all of them and after some years, they would come to talk to her as well as visit their daughters. The groups would stay two or three days, and soon they were talking more like an army than frightened peasants. They knew they had to rid themselves of the monster in their midst, the evil prince. I could see they were drawing their own courage from Mother's strength and conviction.

It was a week before my eighteenth birthday. We received word there had been an uprising across the border to the east. After three days of siege against the city, the army fell. The angry peasants found Laszlo and dragged him through the streets, impaling him on a pike in the main square. There he was left for all to see.

When Mother heard this, she arose, went to her chamber and began putting her things in order. She went to the hospital and moved from bed to bed saying 'goodnight' as she had done several times before. Then she did the same at the orphanage, stopping to rock a baby and bathe a child. She then went to the refuge and told all the girls to prepare to leave for home. Kissing each goodbye, she wished them a safe journey.

The next two days were spent with me. We went over every book and ledger of the kingdom, the laws, the trade and commerce of the Holy Roman Empire. We had been doing this for years in preparation for my coronation, but this seemed so very final.

The coronation was on my eighteenth birthday. It was a joyous day. I didn't know if I was ready or worthy to become king, but Mother reassured me. We had traveled to Kronstadt the day before. We had not been to the cathedral since my father's burial. Mother went immediately to his crypt, and I was almost afraid that she would not come out. But she did, and there was a peaceful smile on her face.

At noon, all the bells in the cathedral and the countryside began ringing. There were fanfares and cheers as I entered the aisle. I felt as though I were watching a great spectacle. As I approached the high altar, I noticed Mother, radiantly beautiful. But she was preoccupied as though she were listening to someone standing next to her. I knew she was. Our eyes met, I nodded, and we both smiled.

The next day she breakfasted with me. She seemed almost detached from life. She was glowing with happiness and wore a smile I had not seen in years - the one reserved for my father when he would come upon her suddenly.

The young king was having trouble controlling his emotions. His voice was hardly audible, and the tears were flowing freely. I let him cry. He was alone in life, in the center of a country full of citizens who loved him. He was only twenty-two years old, and he knew tragedy well.

'Mother sat next to me and brushed my hair from my face and caressed my forehead. There was such love in that touch that it struck me with awe. It was like shards of light penetrating my being.'

He started sobbing again. 'All that came to mind was, 'The only gift of heaven given to earth, the only gift of earth taken to heaven.' And I knew. I looked at her and cried out. She held and rocked me, and I was engulfed, becoming part of them.'

Once more he was overcome, and I knew how difficult this was for him. I told him he need not continue. He breathed deeply and in a quivering voice finished the story.

'Mother then whispered softly in my ear, 'What we three share will never die. We will always be with you. I do not know how long we sat together but somewhere in that morning, I felt resignation to the inevitable. Then I felt her joy and anticipation. I could feel her emotions very clearly. I knew I could not hold her back. I closed my eyes and released her. Fly, beautiful lady, fly back to him.

She kissed my forehead and left my side.

It was late afternoon before I could get myself to go to her chamber. I knew what I would find. She was lying on the bed, peace and love shining from her face, and in her hand was the white rose. She had brought it with her.'

And so it was that on the 12th of April, 1287 in Kronstadt, at the palace of the Bishop, this beautiful, young woman, having fulfilled her destiny, birthed a king, cared for her people with love, and saw a tyrant dethroned and punished, simply ... died. She was buried in the cathedral next to her beloved husband.

After many days of thought, I decided and wrote ...

Your Majesty,

I think you are right.

Queen Katarene is resting in peace, finally where she longed to be. This is still too painful and personal for you to be given to the world. I give this manuscript to you.

My prayers are that you have a happy life.

Brother Ivan auf Crux

Monastery of St. Benedict

Catherine was reduced to tears. She sat trembling. It could not be possible, yet there it was before her. Their names were the same - a parallel story, the white rose. Could history be repeating itself?

How strange this was indeed. The manuscript coming to her now from her mother who had been dead twenty years. And the rose - her mother's white rose which she had given Vincent. And the description of Wences was that of Vincent.

'I am so blessed,' she thought, 'I have found that love. I know that love, and it cannot die. Oh, Mother! Thank you. You have not left me alone. You are with me.'

Catherine dressed quickly and carefully repacked the manuscript in its gold container. Tears were still streaming down her face as she entered the tunnels. The beauty of that story overwhelmed her emotions. She wasn't really looking ahead and walked into Vincent as she rounded a bend.

"Catherine, what has moved you so?" asked Vincent.

"I love you, Vincent," was all Catherine could say. Then, after a pause said, "Here I think this belongs to you."

"What is it, Catherine?"

But she had left as he was staring down at the beautiful box in his hands.

Catherine returned to her apartment. She sat on the balcony, going over the story in her mind. Were these Vincent's ancestors? How could the world understand such a love bond?

She closed her eyes and allowed the bond she shared with Vincent to reach out and touch him. He was there at the end of her emotions.

Lost in feelings, she sat long after the afternoon light had faded into darkness, still lost in the monk's tale. Her eyes were closed, but she knew Vincent was there. She could feel that he was as deeply moved by the story as she. A smile crossed her face as she opened her eyes.

He came to her. "Catherine, this does not belong to me. It belongs to us. How did you come to find it?"

"My mother sent it to me."

She showed him the letter from Susan Landry and the beautiful paper with the white roses and finally the letter from her mother.

"This is almost as strange as the story," Vincent said.

"I know. I think we needed to be reminded of this precious gift we share," replied Catherine.

"Yes, our gift from heaven." A wistful smile crossed Vincent's face. He knelt before Catherine and removed the white rose from the pouch which hung around his neck. He held it out to Catherine. She cupped his hands in hers.

"Oh, Vincent! Can you feel it?"

"Yes, my love. They are watching over us."

Catherine leaned forward and placed a kiss on his forehead. Vincent then reached up and drew her to him, kissing her gently.

END