

Of Licorice and Decadence

A Prequel Short to
Eldritch Legacy 2: Lessons Learned
By Katrina Strauss

The great Klauss von Alstynne stretched his arms before him, cracked his knuckles with a loud *pop*, and raised his hands high, the lace train of his sleeves fluttering below. With exaggerated flair, he swooped down upon the ivory keys, banged out a dramatic opening chord, and then...

Nothing.

His fellow party guests sighed in disappointment and returned to their idle drunken chatter, gradually drowning out the broken notes that echoed and dimmed through the drawing room.

"Good god," cursed Klauss under his breath, pressing his useless musician's hands against his weary face and running them back through his chin-length hair, pale as corn silk, damned near as white as the powdered wigs that had been in style two decades before.

The distant strains of a new composition had teased at the back of his mind for the past fortnight; yet when he sat down to play, he produced a discordant cacophony at best. He did not wish to offend his own delicate sensibilities, much less those of an avid audience who had come to expect nothing less than perfection from the great von Alstynne. The toast of the Empire at age twenty-four, Klauss was beginning to worry that his career had been prematurely snuffed like a candle dipped with too short a wick.

Shoulders slumped in defeat, he simply sat and studied the recently purchased piano with the same wistful ache as a man longing after an unattainable virgin. His gray eyes followed

elegant curves of mahogany, smoothed to a fine polished sheen and still bearing the scent of the woodlands. The leather hammers, stiff from disuse, begged to be broken in; the strings, taut and untouched, cried for a good loosening. Absently, Klauss pushed and released the damper pedal with the toe of his right foot, the light *thud* the most pleasant sound he'd gotten out of the piano yet.

Languidly, he stretched his arm and stroked one fingertip against the ivory-plated spruce keys farthest from his left. The instrument utilized the latest innovation—an extended clavier to reach a sixth octave, lending the strings a wider range of tones, currently unexplored by Klauss' rival composers.

Three extra keys, he mused, and they're going to waste.

Of course, the never-ending soiree at his best mate's manor didn't help. Sighing, Klauss reached for the heavy, short-stemmed glass on the end of the piano. He sipped the half-finished absinthe—his third serving that night—in hope the wormwood would take hold and work its usual magic. The problem was, he'd consumed so much since discovering the potent green beverage a few months earlier that he'd begun to build a tolerance for it.

And here came his friend now. The infamous poet Stefan Eldritch approached with a buxom beauty clutched in each arm. Klauss paid the women little heed, vaguely noting one was brunette, the other a redhead.

Given Klauss' following, combined with what he'd often been told were his good looks, he'd well tasted the pleasures of countless female admirers. At the moment, however, the musician's attentions were focused on finding his elusive mistress, the Muse. He looked back at the blank sheet of stave paper propped on the music rack, knowing the notes wouldn't appear on their own, holding out for a miracle nonetheless.

The poet, his hair black and disheveled where Klauss' was white and smoothly in place, leaned across the piano.

"I say, old chap," said Stefan, his speech slurred from his preferred poison of brandy, "why don't you give it a rest and join me and these two lovely ladies? My dear, sweet Nicolette is eager to meet you."

Obligingly, Klauss looked up from the stave paper...

...and found himself immersed in two liquid pools of warm copper.

Startled, he took in the rest of the woman's features as she demurely lowered her marabou fan to reveal a heart-shaped face, unfashionably bronzed by the kiss of the sun, yet stylishly framed by fringed chocolate curls. The remainder of her luxurious tresses streamed from where they were gathered high atop her head. His attention caught, he recognized her as the actress, Nicolette Neville.

She released her grip on Stefan and extended her hand. "It is truly an honor to meet the great von Alstyne."

Her voice flowed in a low, raspy *mezzo soprano*, the sheer sultriness of it calling to mind one of his more sensual melodies.

Klauss realized he was gaping stupidly. Remembering his manners, he snapped his jaw shut and rose from the bench. Towering a good foot above the brunette, he took her gloved hand between both of his. Bowing, he pressed his lips to her elegantly tapered fingers, as any proper gentleman should, yet as her eyes seared into his, the errant thoughts that danced through his head were far from polite. To slip off that glove, suck her fingers into his mouth, take them between his teeth...

Gathering his wits, he turned on the charm and made pointed mention of her surname.

"The honor is all mine, Miss Neville."

"Please—" she smiled warmly "—do call me Nicolette."

"Then I must insist you call me Klauss. And really," he added with a casual wave of his arm, "this *great* business is entirely overrated." *Particularly given his recent lack of productivity.*

Stefan watched their exchange with great interest before whispering into the redhead's ear. Klauss distinctly heard the words, "My work here is done."

Why, that sly devil, thought Klauss, albeit with gratitude.

As if divining his thoughts, the poet looked back at him with a broad grin. "Why don't I leave you two to get better acquainted while...er, Charisse, is it?" He turned to the redhead in question.

"*Clarisse,*" the redhead corrected him wryly.

"Yes, right. While *Clarisse* and I scour the manor for more brandy. The bar seems to have run dry again."

"Don't forget to read the book I brought you," Nicolette cooed over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, love, I shall." Stefan sauntered off with *Clarisse*, likely plotting to get her alone and, more likely, undressed.

Nicolette turned back to Klauss. "I gave him a copy of Camille Rocheford's book. I have known her since we were little girls."

"Ah yes, Miss Rocheford," said Klauss. "Her book has created quite the stir, has it not? A woman novelist—"

"She certainly is not the first," interrupted Nicolette, her tone stiffening.

"Of course, my dear," smiled Klauss, squeezing her hand, quick to gloss over any inadvertent rudeness on his part. He did not wish to offend this talented beauty. "I meant to say, a woman novelist published under her own name, as she rightfully should be."

Nicolette relaxed, seemingly appeased. Her gaze drifted toward the storm doors, opened wide to the manicured garden behind the manor. The faint summer breeze, cooled by the reflecting pond, smelled sweetly of roses as it wafted through the house and infused the drawing room.

"It is a beautiful night, Klauss," she said. Her eyes glittered playfully above her fan. "Would you care to join me for a walk on the grounds?"

"I would be most delighted." He picked up his glass and swallowed the last few sips of absinthe. Licking the licorice-tinged drink from his lips, he proffered his elbow to his stunning new acquaintance and escorted her toward the door, taking full leave of the piano for the first time in days.

As they stepped onto the terra cotta patio, Klauss' senses were assaulted by the fragrance of the garden. By the light of the full moon, the shallow pool reflected mercury while the lush garden, bursting by day with the colorful vestiges of spring, took on a shimmering silver hue.

Perhaps the absinthe had touched him after all.

Guests milled noisily about, laughing and chattering, drinking and smoking. A civilized gathering, by all appearances; yet beneath the scent of tobacco, the cloying balm of opium hung in the air. And if one listened closely, the nearby bushes rattled with the sounds of copulation.

Klauss cleared his throat. "I caught one of your performances at the city playhouse last season. Both your beauty and commanding presence moved me. Your death scene proved so convincing, I—" He could not tell her he had been moved to tears. He was a man, by god! "—

well, I must confess, I attempted to meet you backstage afterward, to ensure you truly remained alive! But I saw you stepping into a carriage with your beau."

"I have no beau," she smiled. "Simply...friends."

Her meaning was clear—*paramours*. Klauss' throat flushed hot beneath his neatly-pinned cravat.

Taking the lead, he scanned the grounds for a place to get her alone for but a few precious, advantageous moments. Casually, he directed her to the entrance of their poet friend's pride and joy, the yew maze.

"*The Labyrinth*," announced Klauss. "I trust you are familiar with Stefan's rule?"

"I certainly am," laughed Nicolette.

She and Klauss recited in unison. "*If one gets trapped in The Labyrinth, then one must spend the night there.*"

"Not that I would know from personal experience," Klauss grinned sheepishly.

"Nor would I," she winked. Her laughter tinkled merrily from between her lush, earthy lips. As she swept her fan downward, his sight drifted and followed the tickling trail of feathers. Her full, firm bosom swelled just above the sash tied directly beneath her low-cut bodice—and naturally so, for it was evident that she had foregone wearing a corset beneath her sheer white gown.

Or any other sort of undergarment, for that matter, as he could distinctly make out the curves of her breasts, waist, hips, and thighs. More and more these days, women wore less and less clothing, eschewing pantaloons, stays, and petticoats for a more comfortable mode of dress. And the gorgeous creature before him had wholly embraced this relaxed aesthetic, right down to

the puffed cap of her left short sleeve which had slipped carelessly from her shoulder and exposed the smooth olive flesh.

Truly, it was a wonderful time for a man to be alive!

On the premise of adjusting her sleeve, he reached out and cupped her bared shoulder, his touch lingering as he traced across her collarbone. She fixed her gaze on him.

"Do you want me?" she asked bluntly.

Just like that, no pretense or faux modesty whatsoever. Why, paid courtesans were not so frank! And yet Klauss respected the actress' candor.

"Oh god, yes," he answered, finding his voice, leaning in for the kiss.

As his lips brushed hers, she pulled away and giggled.

"You will have to catch me first." And then she dropped her fan and bolted into the maze.

"Wait!" he called, chasing her down the first row of hedges. "I'll lose you! I'll never find you!"

"No worries, *mon chéri*," she laughed, rounding to her left and disappearing from view. Her voice faded. "I shall leave a trail of clues!"

He veered to the left and found her pashmina scarf snagged on boughs of yew. The fine-spun wool bunched in his hands as he held it to his face and sniffed her floral, feminine essence. His cock instantly swelled against his tight breeches.

Klauss reached the end of the row and looked to either direction. He spied one dainty flat slipper with a pointed toe. Swooping down, he retrieved the shoe and continued running.

Nicolette's sing-song laughter chimed softly a few rows to his right.

"Olly olly oxen free."

In spirited pursuit, he delved deeper into the maze, away from the manor and the noise of the party. There, her other slipper! Farther along the way, he discovered a glove.

When he bent to retrieve the second glove, he found himself staring at a hopelessly passé pair of ribboned, high-heeled shoes.

"Greetings, my dear fellow," a drunken voice entreated. "Would you know the way out of this blasted maze?"

Klauss straightened to meet an old-time dandy, a relic from the days before The Great Terror, right down to his lead-powdered face, wax mole, and pink wig which hung askew and displayed the antiquated gentleman's bald spot. His fine, golden coat, embroidered with an intricately woven pattern of fruits and leaves, was bedecked with endless flounces of lace stained burgundy in several spots from wine. He stood grandly, one hand behind his back, drink held to his chest, one foot braced erect before the other. He smiled through crimson-painted lips, revealing a set of teeth blackened by snuff.

"Er, I'm not quite sure from which way I came," Klauss replied in polite apology. Inwardly, he wondered how this particular gentleman had managed to escape the guillotine years ago.

Why, his appalling fashion sense alone should still warrant arrest! Haughtily, Klauss smoothed the lapels of his black velvet waistcoat, simple yet elegant and befitting the tastes of the affluent Imperial young.

"Ah well," sighed the dandy. "She didn't know, either."

Klauss' ears perked. "*She?*"

"Why yes, that bewitching minx who just ran through here. Oh, she asked me to give you this." The gentleman started to hand over his cup. "Oh, pardon me, wrong hand." He jerked the

cup away, wine sloshing over the rim and drenching the ruff of his sleeve. He pulled his other hand from behind his back and presented one white silk stocking along with the blue satin ribbon used to garter it at the thigh.

Klauss eyes lit. "Which way did she go?"

The dandy peered back over his shoulder, one bejeweled finger raised to pursed lips, and thought a moment. "Take your second left. No, wait. Right. Yes, that's it...the second right."

"Thank you, good man!" said Klauss, vaulting past him.

After deducing that he'd been given inaccurate information, Klauss spent the next several minutes retracing his steps.

"A-ha!" he smirked in triumph, snatching her second stocking from where it hung hooked on the hedge.

"Good god," Klauss groaned when he found her dress. It was at that moment that the absinthe hit him full force.

His head buzzed pleasantly, yet at the same time, his senses grew sharper and keenly alert. A beautiful unclothed woman awaited him in the maze. The mere thought unleashed something primitive from the deepest recesses within him. He inhaled the scent of her dress, still warm from where it had clung to her curves, and then let it flutter to the ground.

Unpinning his cravat, he loosed the knot and pulled the silk free. Closing his eyes, he sniffed the breeze and listened to the night.

There. Footsteps padding softly, her fragrance filling his nostrils; like a wolf, he honed in on her. Ripping off his waistcoat, he unbuttoned his shirt as he sprinted now, intent on his quarry—winding, twisting, rushing through the maze, panting, sweating, heart racing wildly, wormwood pumping through his veins, his mouth watering and his cock poised to strike.

Shirtless now, chest heaving, he came to an opening and halted, winded, gulping for air. Through his moonlit haze of lust, his surroundings vibrated with an otherworldly glow. He stood in a circle of grass, the centerpoint marked by a sundial, the gnomon angled atop a granite column that rose from a rounded marble base. "Why, I've reached the middle of *The Labyrinth*," murmured Klauss in astonishment. No one, save Stefan, knew the path to the reputed sundial.

However, Stefan had failed to mention the statue—bronze cast in the likeness of a gloriously naked goddess.

The statue twitched, and then cackled in glee. With a snarl, Klauss lunged and pawed Nicolette to the ground.

"*Yes!*" she encouraged him. "Ravish me right here on the grass, under the stars, clothed only in the rays of the moon!"

By god, the way this woman talked!

He drew her tongue into his mouth, to savor the source of such deliciously provocative speech, and clamped his teeth, holding her there. Her scrumptious body strained against his own as she raked her nails down his back and clawed his buttocks, her manner feral, her hunger equal to his.

"*Mmm*," she moaned, breaking his violent kiss, "you taste of licorice."

"And you, my dear, taste of sheer decadence," he growled in return. Greedily, he trailed his lips over the breasts squeezed between his hands. Roughly, he sucked at one beige bud, then the other, relishing the way they stiffened and peaked in his mouth. Gauging her reaction, he bit down. She yelped pleurably and writhed against him.

Grasping the sumptuous flanks of her thighs, he spread them wide; clutching one hand against the curled tendrils of her mound, he found her swollen bud. With the deft tips of his

musician's fingers, he played her sweet spot with short quick strikes, eliciting a series of sharp staccato gasps. Sliding his lips down her torso, he followed the scent of her heated arousal.

"Sing for me, love," he murmured, and then he trilled his tongue against her.

Staccato smoothed to legato, and her cries of passion resounded through the night, the pitch drawn high and pure. Honeyed juices filled his mouth, washing his palate like the purest nepenthe.

Kicking off his buckle shoes, fumbling with his high-waisted fly, Klauss slid back up her. Eagerly, Nicolette helped free his breeches and stockings. With a skilled pivot of his hips, he sank inside. Enveloped by her slick heat, her velvet walls snug around his length, he pummeled into her like a beast in rut. Her hips bucked forth and matched his thrusts in perfect syncopation, moved by the timeless tempo of carnal fulfillment. She wrapped her legs around him, hooked her ankles at the small of his back, and pulled him closer and deeper.

As her cries rang once more, Klauss joined in the chorus, lending his rich baritone to her rousing soprano. In awe, he listened as Nicolette's pitch rose perfectly from the A below middle C to the A two octaves above.

When they reached crescendo he pulled out, and his passion burst forth upon the soft swell of her belly. Drained from their duet, he collapsed against her, his spent seed slick between them, their breath slowed in diminuendo.

"Darling," he murmured. "Where did you learn to sing? The most rigorously trained diva could not produce such clarity!"

"I sing from the heart," she replied simply. Her body twisted and rolled, and he found himself on his back. "Shall we call for an encore?"

Before Klauss could answer, she began to ride him, his cock already grown hard again, his absinthe-fueled libido raging like a wildfire. As Nicolette worked up and down his shaft, her curls loosened and tumbled past her shoulders. He lay back and watched, amazed, as the constellations above her started to spin and the earth beneath him shifted in a dizzying rush.

Klauss' eyes fluttered and then squinted against the harsh glare of daylight. With a groan, he rolled to his side and sat up. The blades of grass, which had cushioned his flesh several hours before, had grown coarse and scratchy. Through blurred vision he spied Stefan propped against the sundial, one leg crooked, his expression amused; yet Klauss received the distinct impression that his friend also stood guard. Some secret lay hidden here, in the center of the maze...

"Good morning," Stefan grinned, one brow arched. "Or should I say, afternoon?"

"What time is it?" muttered Klauss.

Stefan glanced down at the sundial. "A bit past three. Time for breakfast—well at least for me, anyway. Oh, and congratulations on the rare accomplishment of finding your way through *The Labyrinth*." His eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. "You wouldn't happen to remember the path you followed, would you?"

"No." Klauss shook his head, and instantly regretted the stabbing throb induced in his temples.

"Good," smiled Stefan.

Leaning down, the poet retrieved Klauss' discarded breeches from the ground and flung them through the air. Groggily, Klauss caught them. As he stood on wobbly legs, his head reeled.

Stepping into his pants, he noted with embarrassment that his knees were stained green. Tugging his pants upward, he suspected the cheeks of his ass looked the same.

"Was she just a dream?" asked Klauss. "A hallucination?"

"Oh no, I assure you Miss Neville was no illusion. I helped her out of the maze and back into her dress right before dawn, and then I kissed her goodbye and sent her on her merry way. She was due for rehearsal today and didn't wish to be late."

"Kissed her?" asked Klauss sharply, his words cut by the trace edge of jealousy.

"Now now, chap," laughed Stefan. "Our fair actress is one of the few women I have kissed chastely. My affection for her is akin to that of a brother to his sister. Well within the normal confines of love between siblings, that is to say. I have heard tales of other poets that defy even my standards!"

As Klauss followed Stefan through the maze, he retrieved his shirt from where it had caught on a hedge. Slipping his arms through white silk, he saw that in his haste to undress, he had lost a few buttons and torn the lace of his sleeves.

"Do you think I'll meet her again?" he asked hopefully.

"Nicolette owes me a favor," said Stefan. "I'll see what I can arrange, though it may be several months before she is free to return."

"I shall wait an eternity," vowed Klauss, "if but for one more night to hold her in my arms."

"Damn it, man!" chided Stefan. "Don't betray our sworn pact of bachelorhood and go daft in the head over one woman! Variety is the spice of life."

Once back inside the drawing room, Stefan went to the table and poured a cup of tea from the tray the servants had set out. He added two extra lumps of sugar, and then pulled a pewter

flask from his waistcoat pocket. Unstopping the cork, he added a dash of brandy to the gold-rimmed porcelain cup and then passed it to Klaus.

"Ah yes, the hair of the dog that bit me." Klaus smiled wanly. Despite his stomach's grumble of protest, he blew on the tea and took a sip, having benefited from the poet's hangover cure several times since their boarding school days.

Stefan lifted the tray and headed for the landing. "Now if you'll excuse me," said the poet over his shoulder, "I have two lovely ladies in my bed who demand my attention. Charisse and..."

"*Clarisse*," corrected Klaus. He remembered that much from last night, at least.

"Ah, yes, Clarisse and—" Stefan paused at the bottom of the stairs, his lips pressed thoughtfully "—well, I didn't catch the other girl's name, but we happened upon her whilst en route to my room. Would you care to help serve breakfast?"

"No, thank you," said Klaus, the tea already working, the fog from his head beginning to clear. "I think I'll have a try at the piano. I am feeling...inspired."

"Have it your way," shrugged Stefan, starting up the stairs. "I handled both girls well enough last night. I suppose I'm up to the task again."

Once alone, Klaus set the cup and saucer at the edge of the clavier. Taking his seat at the bench, he stretched his arms before him, cracked his knuckles with a loud *pop*, and then raised his hands high, the torn lace of his sleeves dangling below. He closed his eyes and envisioned himself in the front row of the playhouse, the one lone member of the audience. The crimson curtains parted to reveal Nicolette Neville, onstage and naked, her bronzed curves glistening warmly in the gaslight. Lifting both her arms and her voice, she performed for Klaus, and

Klauss alone. Her song swirled around him, tore into him, reached inside to the very core of his being and became at one with his soul.

With exaggerated flair, he swooped down upon the ivory keys, banged out a dramatic opening chord, and then...

Music. Sweet, blessed music. The notes blended and wove into a haunting, ethereal melody that told a story, of the high silver moon and the warm night breeze; the thrill of the chase and the victory of the hunt; the smooth taste of licorice and the rich spoils of decadence.

As his mind's eye watched his Muse slip her hand between her thighs, he stretched his own arm and found that impossible sixth octave. Thrumming his fingers in rapid succession, he played those three extra keys like Nicolette's sweet spot and made the piano sing like a chorus of angels.

He knew instinctively that this new score would prove his finest symphony to date, and that it would survive beyond his lifetime, immortalizing his name in the annals of Western culture as a true musical genius.

With this thought came a smug smile. He was, after all, the great Klauss von Alstyne.

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