

The Mist



BRADLEY PEARCE

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This book is dedicated to:
Edward (Ned) Parffet

“When I die.
You will cease to exist, but I will carry on.”

Marcus Aurelius

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty One](#)
[Chapter Thirty Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty Seven](#)
[Chapter Thirty Eight](#)
[Chapter Thirty Nine](#)
[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty One](#)
[Chapter Forty Two](#)
[Chapter Forty Three](#)
[Chapter Forty Four](#)

[About Edward \(Ned\) John Parffet](#)
[Lady in Red](#)
[About Bradley Pearce](#)

Chapter One

The dilapidated old train pulled into an equally dilapidated station.

Hissing steam over the platform, startling those standing too close. Rattling metal lungs coughed black diesel phlegm into the air. And grumbled, as if it were talking back to itself.

Brakes screeched, jolting a sleeping passenger from a bizarre dream.

Dazed, Ned sits upright and regains his senses. Squinting into the bright exterior of the new day. Taking in the incoherent station outside the cartage window. A far cry from Budapest. Thinking he had slip back in time, then spies a mobile phone. Fingers run through unkempt hair, combing it away from sleepy eyes. Scratching an irritation from the unclipped bristles that had sprouted about his jaw. Wondering if he should keep it when he returned to civilization.

It had been weeks since he had last seen a mirror.

Having detached himself from the outside world. To trek from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. Escaping the hectic pace of New York and the bloody demands of the trauma clinic which he headed. Leaving left behind gunshot wounds and sleep deprivation for mountain vistas and star lit evenings.

Groaning like the train, his body protested its abrupt resurrection. At least Christ had three days to rest. He had had only ten hours. Peering out the carriage window, eyes strained into the early sunlight as he acquainted himself to the new surroundings.

Sighisoara. Nestled in the cradle of the Carpathian Mountains.

Renowned birthplace of the *Dracula*. Vlad III of Wallachia. Immortalized by visiting tourists lured by the legend and myth of a fictional story written four hundred years after his death. A death that would come not by a wooden stake through the heart, but on the battle field, one cold January winter's day.

In the year of the Lord, Fourteen Hundred and Seventy Seven.

Such fables were of no interest to Ned.

Preferring to leave them buried among the pages of Stoker's dark fairytale. Fearing there were darker creatures lurking the streets of New York than the idyllic Slavic countryside of Romania, in which he now found himself.

The spring sun hung low on the horizon, and streamed through the large rectangular window.

Shading his watch in a shadow, he checks the time. And reaches for a folded map. Gauging the distance travelled, and what he had to go. His immediate destination the Bucegi Mountains to the south within two weeks walk. Brows pinch together as though to vindicate the timeframe.

Refolding the map, returns it to the tight pouch on the pack.

Dusty boots lay beneath the dull red leather bench seat that had served as a bed. Burying feet within again, stomps them on the compartment floor to regain feeling that had grown numb with calluses and blisters.

Taking a deep breath, he stands and stretches aching limbs.

The stiffness of the past few weeks had caught up with him during the night. The bench was no better than the terrain he had pitched his tent. Like the old train, his body was reluctant to move. Jerking a pack onto shoulders like a Romanian weight lifter, feels its awkward weight. And shuffled it into place.

Weary steps take him from the train and onto the platform.

Strange faces greet him. None wished to speak to the foreigner passing through their lands. Locals were generally friendly when engaged, otherwise each would kept to themselves. He dismisses the benign faces. As they dismissed him.

Standing atop the steps outside the station, looks up and down the street to get his bearings. The rising sun on his left was the first indication. South would directly ahead of him. The direction he would be heading.

But first he needed a few supplies.

Inhaling the crisp spring breeze, he could almost smell the snow on the distant mountains. A cloud of exhaust of a noisy passing motorcycle drew his attention back to the street. Shuffling the pack on shoulders, heads in the general direction of the traffic.

Ned spies a church steeple. Like a large white finger pointing skywards, as if to God, suggesting a town center lay ahead.

Regaining a rhythm in his step made his way into the town square.

Small shops punctuated facades of ancient stone buildings. Cobbled stone pavements smoothed by centuries of feet and wheels. Remnant history of conquerors that had passed over these lands. The Huns. The Mongols. Ottomans and Moldavians. Each claiming Transylvania as their own. Each being repelled.

Forging brief fragile alliances, before fracturing and another suitor laid claim to the throne.

Taking in the Square, he sensed as though time had stood still and that the world had passed it by. Peasant looking faces stared curiously back at him. As though he was being scrutinized. Being watched. Making him feel uncomfortable. Dismissing their inspection, he proceeded on.

Looking up at the church steeple. Dwarfing the surrounding buildings. Atop the steps, stood a man dressed in black clergy robes. His hands folded before him covering a small dark book. Despite the distance between them, Ned felt was being watched.

As though the man was expecting his arrival.

He followed Ned's movements about the square. Turning away to look in a store window. Hoping to catch the man in its reflection. Only to discover he had disappeared. Relieved, turned about only to see the man still atop of the steps again. Turning back to the reflection. To see the man was not there.

'What the?...' He thought, unsure what to make of the mysterious aberration.

Goosebumps crept over his skin. This time looking about to discover the man had now actually disappeared.

"Coffee... That's what I need... Coffee!" Shaking the man from his thoughts.

Short of a transfusion it had been Ned's life blood.

Not so much addicted, it was more of a committed relationship. And he looked about for a likely café and a grocery store. Spying a store with people with shopping bags leaving its doorway. The overhead sign in Romanian sign meant nothing to him. He peers into the window of the darkened store and could make out familiar shelves of goods.

A bell sounds overhead as he opened the door. Startling him before realizing what it was. Embarrassed, he grins and enters inside. It was no Tesco or Seven-Eleven, but it would have to do. Eyes adjust to the darken interior. Lungs to the dry air. A nose to the strong smell of herbs and spices. A bouquet of smells he wished he could have bottled and taken with him. No seven-eleven ever smelt like this.

Noticing a stolid woman behind the counter, offers a Romanian hello.

“Buna.” Hoping if he had pronounced it correctly.

But the salutation goes unreciprocated, only to break the woman’s conversation with another and she looks at him as though examining a patient.

Ned offers a smile that also goes unrewarded. And he awaited the diagnosis.

“That’s him... He’s the one...” She mutters in Romanian to the other woman who examines the foreigner’s features. “...*Ouster.*”

Ned makes out the faint word and tries to interpret its meaning. The women look out to the square to a bronze statue of a man standing atop of a stone pillar. Following their eyes out the window wondering what they were looking to. Seeing nothing that drew his attention. And wanders off to look over the shelving for the supplies he needed.

The women follows his every move. Accompanied by a commentary between themselves.

Returning with an assortment of items, he carefully placed them onto the counter before the stolid woman. Canned food and rice. Batteries, toothpaste and a bar of soap. And waited on the inanimate storekeeper to come to life and tally the cost. It could well have been a high stake poker game. Her face revealed no indication as what she was thinking. Eyes shift from him to the goods on the counter, then back to him again. Thick fingers begin to punch heavy keys on a cash register.

‘*Punch-punch-punch-ding.*’ Sounds the register loudly, protesting its sudden awakening.

He pondered the register’s and woman’s ages. And listened to the register groaning with the mechanical calculations before stammering out a total.

‘*Ding!*’

A silence hung in the air and the standoff began again.

“How much?” Ned inquires, hoping the woman spoke some English.

Then offered what little Hungarian he knew.

“Mennyi? ... How much?” He asked again. Eyes shift from the lady to the cash register, and back again.

“Patruzeci și șapte Lei” The woman responds.

Having no idea what she had just said. His face showed his confusion. The woman points to the register where he could make out the numbers ‘*forty-seven*’.

“Ah...” Tearing at a tired Velcro wallet.

Pulling several out foreign notes he begins to spread them about on the counter hoping the woman would take what she required. The woman shuffled the currency like a magic trick to find one she liked and removes an American five dollar note. This foreigner would know no difference.

From the open drawer of the register the woman plucks three small silver coins and pushes them towards him. The coins seemed insignificant to the American note. The woman deposits the American tender and closes the cash register’s drawer heavily to suggest their transaction was completed. She begins to pack the items into heavy brown paper bag.

And pushes it towards him.

“Thank you.” He thanked the woman.

“Mulțumesc.” The woman thanked, and turned to the other woman to resume their conversation.

Sensing he had out stayed his welcome made his way to the doorway. Encounters another ‘*ding*’ and a flood of brilliant sunlight. Squinting, he enters the daylight again.

Next on his immediate agenda was a hearty breakfast.

It would camp food after this morning and his last chance to enjoy a decent coffee. Across the square he sees the small café from earlier. Stepping onto the cobbled street, narrowly avoids being hit by a scooter racing pass him. Dismissing the near miss watches on as it splutters on its way. Leaving in its wake a plume of stinking grey exhaust fumes that irritated his senses.

Eyes follow him as he crosses the square.

The café appeared to be open. But there was no sign of life. The darkened interior offered no clues. Sliding the pack from his shoulders

places it next to a table and begins to pack the items away. Then senses someone standing nearby. Looking up to see a young man in a neat white apron standing before him.

“English?” Ned asked hesitantly.

He was in their country now. There was no need for the waiter to speak English.

“A little...” The young man replies.

“Coffee? ... Bacon? ... Eggs?”

“Bien sûr... Un moment.” The young man gestured before disappearing inside the café.

Followed by sound of voices and plates rattling. Ned sits back and takes in the vista of the Square. A central cenotaph stands erect. The statue looked familiar. But could not place who it was. Honoring someone he thought. A dark brass plaque at its base. Perhaps he would check out it before he got under way.

“Hmm.” Pondering its significance.

Suddenly the passing scooter reappeared, baffling its noisy exhaust and spewing more smoke behind it. The blanket of smog drifted over him. An eerie feeling came over him. And those watching, as if it were a sign. The man atop the steps of the church grins amused by the mist drifting over Ned.

Ned however could not see the funny side. Covering his mouth and nose as it slowly drifted away from him and he could finally gasp a breath of fresh air.

Looking beyond the distant buildings.

He could make out the snow-capped peaks of Carpathian Mountains.

The days would become warmer as spring surrendered to the encroaching summer. Unfolds a map on the table to go over the route he had marked. Wolves and bears that populated the dark forests. Those that he had seen had appeared to be more afraid of him, than he was of them.

Running a finger along a dotted line before stopping at a junction. Wondering why it went around a large area when it seemed one could take a shorter straight route. There was no obstruction indicated on the map, and is puzzled by the diversion. Searching the map’s legend for markings to suggest a reason.

Just then the waiter returns carrying a plate and a large cup of coffee.

“Merci.” Ned thanks the young man.

“Cu plăcere... Enjoy... Se bucura.” The waiter offers and walks off to leaves the traveler alone.

Places the cup on the map to hold it in place.

It had been weeks since Ned had tasted freshly cook food and enthusiastically consumed every last morsel and crumb. Pushing the plate forward he sat back and allow food to settle in his stomach. The coffee augmenting the culinary satisfaction. Checking his watch knew he would have to start moving if he wanted to make the designated base camp by that evening.

The waiter returns to collect the plates and the Ned pays him in Euros.

“Keep the change.” He offers.

“Mulțumesc.” Slipping the currency into a pocket of his apron. It was more than enough to cover the meal, and then some. A tip was a rare treat in this town. His mother would be pleased.

“Excuse me...” Asking for the waiter to stay a while longer.

The waiter looks curiously at him as to what he wanted.

“This place... Here...” Pointing to the map and the junction diversion.

“... This place... Forest?”

The young man examines the map, getting his own bearings and identifies location that he was referring to. Then hesitates, displaying a fear that Ned picked up on.

“What’s wrong?” Ned asked wondering what had caused the sudden mood swing.

“You no go dare...” The young man warned him. “...Take path... Please. Here...” Pointing to the direction he should take.

“Why? ... See... Easy way through here... Nothing there. Forest.” Ned tries to fathom the waiter’s logic.

Was something there that was troubled him?

“Bears? ...Wolves?” Ned asked hesitantly.

“No... Bântuit... Bad place. Bântuit” The man nervously warns. Pleading with the foreigner to persuade him to go around.

“Bân-tu-it?” Ned repeats, reaching for an ear tagged pocket book of phrases, tries to find the word.

Before coming across its meaning.

“Haunted?” He said looking back at the young man.

“Yes. Haunted... Stay away from dare... Strange things happen dare.”

“Here? ... Haunted. Like ghosts?” Ned tried not to laugh. The fear on the young man’s face told him not to.

“Bad things here... Mai rau... Go around here. Here...” The Waiter insists.

The waiter jabs at the map with his finger. At the junction and the dotted line indicating the path around the forest.

“Okay. Okay, I understand... Thank you.” Ned lies refolding his map. “...Mul-țu-mesk... Thank you... I’ll go around.” He lied again.

The Waiter sensed the foreigner was not have been telling the truth. He had done his best and warned him nonetheless. Many had gone there, few had ever returned. Those that did spoke of a place not of this world. Walking away, the waiter looks back at the foreigner re-examining the map. Hoping he had heeded the warning.

Ned’s mind wrestled with the strange facts. Was he afraid of Ghosts? This was Romania. The land fabled for blood sucking Vampires. He did not believe in ghosts. Less so Vampires. Putting it down to local superstition and folk-lore, refolded the map. He would decide when he got to the junction.

Standing, levers the pack onto his shoulders. Looking back at the café sees the waiter standing in the doorway observing him leave.

“I’ll go around... Around... Okay?” He told himself unconvincingly. Gesturing with his hands a circular motion to annul the man’s fears.

The Waiter lifted his head and gestured his farewell.

Knowing the foolish foreigner would try to cut through the forest. They always did. Looking to the Priest the waiter shrugged his shoulder. As though to say he tried his best. The Priest nodded he had done what had been asked of him.

Destiny, like Freewill must be unbridled.

“Do you know him?” Ned asked the Waiter.

“Father Michael. He watches over us... So to speak.” The Waiter responds kindly.

“I’m sure he does... I best be off if I want to make camp before dark.”

Looking back, Ned waved farewell to the Waiter and lifted the pack onto his shoulders.

Wrestling it into place, walked from the Square. Forgetting to look at the bronze plaque beneath the cenotaph. That honored him. Eyes followed and watched him leave. As did the two ladies from within the grocery store. They had watched him at the café and talk with the Waiter.

Father Michael stood atop the steps to the church. Watching the wary traveler leave and walk out of the village square. Knowing he would return.

Ned thought he saw a brilliant flash of pure white light. Looking to the sky thinking lightning was about. The sky a deep penetrating blue. Puffy clouds floated like cotton balls.

“Strange place.” He muttered to himself, happy to be leaving the village that seemed to be trapped in a time warp.

The mid-morning sun rose lethargically.

The budding spring rays rejuvenated his spirit, energized his step. Birds chirped and sang songs known only to them. His pack now an extension of him. Time had shredded much of its excess weight, leaving but the bare essentials. The only excess weight was a medical box for emergencies.

One could take Ned out of the ER, but one could not take the ER out of Ned.

Walking the sealed road south, headed towards the imposing Carpathians in the distance. Letting the country side engulf him, the town faded from view with each forward step. The church steeple peered over the trees to watch him leave. Its white crucifix like a hand reaching up as though to wave goodbye. Or gesture him not to go any further. Before it to was swallowed beneath the trees and allowed him to go on his way.

To his destiny.

The road morphed from tar-seal to metal, then to dirt. Narrowing at times, disappearing briefly before reappearing some distance later. A canopy of thick green foliage stifled the strong sunlight. Vivid blue-bell flowers punctuated the undergrowth, as though painted by Monet.

Sun-light pierced the trees like fanning spot lights, before dissipating into thin air as a cloud drifted over the sun. Leaves rustled as a wind blew through the upper branches. The smell of damp earth and compost roused his nostrils. A rambling brook flowed nearby. Toads croaked beneath the undergrowth. Completing the magical realm he had entered.

A place known by all, but seen by few. He was one with nature. His smart phone captured the rare Kodak moment. Finding a rhythm and pace in his step, his body no longer ached and complained.

“Take the path less taken.” He reminds himself of the purpose of his journey that he had begun months earlier in Slovenia.

Taking in a deep breath of the cool morning air to fill his lungs and released it.

Excising the demons of the bedlam of the ER. Releasing the daily violence of the streets of New York. A battle field of knives and gunshot wounds. Life and death hung in the balance. In his hands. Hoping his team were coping without him. That was half a world away now.

Unaware of the blood stained earth he was stepping upon. The sound of snapping twigs could easily have been the breaking of ancient bones beneath his boots.

Checking the compass, heads deeper into the foothills. Taking in the beauty and serenity. Entering a monastery of towering pines, like hooded silent monks.

Watching him, as he passed beneath...

Chapter Two

A beam of strong sunlight punctured the upper limbs of the towering pines.

Creating a carpet of gold, accentuating a white disc of daisies. A small girl with long dark hair runs quickly over to it before it disappears and begins to whirl. Her arms extended out as she gracefully twirls about. Tilting her head from side to side dancing to a song only she could hear. Feeling the warmth of the sun on her face. A red cloak flies outwards with each twirl. Leather shoes scuffed with dust and dirt. She begins to wobble as dizziness takes hold and falls over into a bed of blue-bells just as the sun-beam evaporates.

A child like head of blonde hair protrudes from behind a tree.

His mouth stained from berries. The small boy tries not to giggle. An impossibility for him. He springs out and runs down a bank to fall down beside her. Holding out a hand to offer her some berries he had found. She picks one out and places it in her mouth. Savoring the black berry. Causing her face to contort with the bitter-sweet juices.

“That was funny Kristina.” The boy laughs looking up at the sky trying to see a funny shape cloud.

Panting for breath as she regained her balance. Her mind giddy as trees continue to appeared to keep moving. Slowly the world above her stops moving.

“Let’s find another one!” Kristina jumps up and races off towards another disc of light appearing a short distance away. The boy follows skipping behind her. Both screeching and giggling with the boundless energy of youth.

Suddenly Kristina stops. She senses a sensation beneath her feet. The ground trembles. Hooves.

‘Two... Maybe three horses.’ She thought gauging the distance and direction.

Tilting her head in a direction of a sound.

“This way Sebastian! Hurry! ... They’re coming!” She cries out pulling him with her.

Scurrying beneath a low hanging red-bud tree they crouch and quieten their breath as the hooves thundered closer. Harsh men voices called out for someone to halt. Sebastian looked to Kristina with the same thoughts.

The Overlord’s men.

But there was another sound. The sound of someone running towards them. Their steps hurried. A breath gasping heavily.

“Shh... Stay very quiet.” She whispered, holding Sebastian back.

Peering through the shrouding branches to see a man running frantically with a sack in his hand. Three men on horseback still some distance back, but getting closer. Exhausted, the man trips and falls on the spot where Kristina had been dancing just moments before. Leaving the sack on the ground. Rushes over to the red-bud tree to seek shelter beneath the shrubbery.

Only to discover the two children also in hiding.

“What the?” Exclaims the man panting for breath, taken by surprise of the two urchins in hiding.

Reaching for his knife grabs Kristina’s by the arm pulls her out. Pushing her into the opening. Holding the knife to the boy’s throat. Sebastian looks to the blade and then to Kristina unsure what was happening. His pale blue eyes dart from one to the other.

“Not a word... Or the boy gets it... Understood?” The man threatens gesturing her towards the sack.

Startled, she steps away from the man who sinks beneath the red bud tree from view.

Sebastian in his grip. The blade against his tender young throat. She turns and walks over to the small sack. A hare’s foot protruded from the opening. The man was a poacher on the Overlord’s land. The ground beneath her trembles as horses gallop closer. The sound of hooves slow and she hears the heavy panting of horses. She looks up at three large sweating horses. Frothing at their bits, agitated by being ridden hard. Stomping their forelegs and resisting their rider’s reins.

Three rugged men stare down at her. Amused by the small child standing frightened below them.

“Well, well, well... Look what we have here.” A horseman declares.

“Who are you?!” Grunts the lead horseman, disappointed with having lost sight of the poacher.

“Kristina.” She whimpered, looking up.

“The man that was here... Did you see him pass? ... Speak wench!” Yelled the horseman reaching for the handle of his sword withdrawing partly it to show he meant to use it.

Kristina stood frightened and quiet. Unsure how to respond. Sebastian’s life at stake. Eyes turn and looks over to a track leading deeper into the woods. Frightened, she looks back at the horseman. Her emerald green eyes about to whelm with tears.

Time was being lost. Without hesitation the man pulls hard back on the reins, digs spurs into the flanks of his mount. Causing his mount to neigh loudly, protesting, rises its forelegs off the ground, almost toppling the man over the hind quarters. The other men laugh at the near toppled and the lead glares at them.

“I’ll deal with you two later.” He rebukes loudly them, unamused.

The poacher watches from beneath the shrubbery for any false move. His discovery certain death.

“Get out of the way! ... Get!” The horseman cries out at Kristina to move.

And catapults the horse into the woods. Whipping his charge furiously. Frustrated the poacher had a head start and possibly a place to hide. Two horsemen follow behind whipping their charges heavily to catch up.

Kristina remains still, unable to move. Watching the Overlords men disappear into bracken and woods in pursuit of an imaginary poacher. Then looks over to the red-bud tree. Sebastian is suddenly pushed out onto the ground. Lifeless.

Kristina searches for life. Red liquid coming from his mouth.

“Get up you lazy sod. You ain’t dead yet! ... You’d know if you were!” The poacher kicks him in the side.

Sebastian staggers to his feet and rushes over to Kristina who puts her arms around him to comfort him. Her eyes reading the poacher’s eyes as to his next intent.

“You done good... Not a word to anyone or...” Warns the poacher reaching for the small sack, not finishing his threat.

Without another word or looking back the poacher disappears into the thickening. Crashing through bushes. Kristina listens to his clumsy steps and places his position within the forest. Poaching on the Overlord’s land was prohibited and if caught would result an early death.

Roma were skilled at poaching. This was not a Roma. A vagabond perhaps, passing through the King’s land. If captured it would mean immediate execution. Or a punishment equally as harsh. Such was the law of the land.

A wolf appears on the edge of the thickening.

Then another. Sensing imminent danger. Standing together they stare at Sebastian as though waiting instructions. Tacit thoughts pass between them. He shakes his head and the wolves fade back into to thickening again.

“You okay?” She asked like a concerned mother.

“Yeah... That was fun!” He giggles dismissing the near death experience.

Wiping the red berry juices from berry stuffed cheeks.

Kristina shakes her head and pushes him to the ground. Sitting on his chest and pinning him down.

“Surrender!” Kristina challenges him.

“Never!” He squeals back struggling against her restraints.

Pushing his knees up topples her over him before pinning her to the ground.

“Surrender!” Sebastian challenges her.

“Never!” She cried out defiantly.

A colorful butterfly flutters overhead catches Sebastian’s attention.

And he jumps to his feet to chase it. Kristina lays motionless on the ground. Pinned down with a beam of warm sun light. It all seemed so familiar. Playing out in her mind. Or dreams. She had a special gift. She would ask the Witch next time she saw her. Something to do with the birthmark on her neck that would ache in the moonlight. Knowing she was

of noble blood, but not knowing why she lived the life of gipsy. A Romani. One day someone would explain such mysteries to her.

Until then she had only one priority. Finding Sebastian.

The forest was their playground.

Forbidden by her mother to go there, it was as though the woods were calling her name on the breeze. Playing for hours on end chasing butterflies, and hide and seek. At which Sebastian was quite hopeless, as he always giggled loudly when she got too close. He had never known his parents who had died years earlier of the plague that had ravaged the land.

Miraculously sparing him. But forsaking his parents. He was too young to understand why God had taken them and left him. Blessing him instead with a connection to animals. Summoning them almost at will. Kristina knew she was safe when she was with him.

Sebastian appears above her as she laid on the golden carpet of flowers. Hands cupped as though holding something. Sitting beside her she sits upright captivated by his closed hands. Holding the suspense as long as he could before slowly opening them. Suddenly revealing empty palms.

“Ha! ... Got you!” He squeals wildly and falling to the ground beside her.

Both stare up through the timeless towering tree tops as the sway in the vibrant blue sky and the puffy white clouds floating by. Spring was a warm welcome after another endless winter. Life was returning to the forest.

“That one looks like a rabbit.” Sebastian points the suspicious looking cloud illuminated from within, as if God was hiding inside it.

“It looks like you!” She teases him.

Causing him to giggle and squeal hysterically.

A fox cub pokes its head from behind a tree. Lifting its snout to sniff the breeze for the Overlord’s men. Then scurries over to him to lick the salty sweat from his face. Surprising him and causing him to giggle more. He attempts to tickle the cub as it pounces up and down in excitement. Catching the cub in his hands. Teeth snapping at him. It was all just a game to him. Releasing the cub it runs off in search of its family.

He watches it scurry off and disappear beneath the shrubbery.

A sunbeam projects onto the theatre floor of the forest.

A siren for Kristina to capture it and dance gracefully within. A red cap lifted as she twirled about to an unknown tune in her mind. A remnant memory of the future. Releasing the cape she lets it glide to the ground. Dancing away from the sunbeam. Only to allow it capture her again. As though she was dancing for unseen eyes watching on through the forest haze.

Transporting her to another time and place. Of another life. Far, far away...

Chapter Three

Moving at a steady pace Ned made good progress.

The terrain had been moderately flat and if he kept up the pace he would be at the foothills before sunset. And the junction he would need to decide which way to go.

Coming to a clearing in the forest he stops beside a boulder for a break and slides the pack from his shoulders and rests it against the rock. Taking a swallow from the water bottle, sits and feels the weight come off his legs. Wondering if they would want to move again, or that he should simply make camp here. He looks about the area to gauge its suitability.

But dismisses the procrastinating thought.

'Best keep moving...' He reasoned. *'...There be time for resting later.'*

Taking in the silky meadow of green grass and blue-bell flowers that had sprouted like mushrooms blanketed with brilliant sunlight.

'If there was a heaven... This would be it.' He thought to himself.

Checking the map estimated he was about halfway to the junction. Looking up at the sun to confirm due south and the path to be taken. The sound of a breaking branch echoes from within the surrounding forest. A bear perhaps breaking a branch, or calling for a mate. Too loud to be a wolf. And he dismissed the sound.

Checking his watch again he would dead-reckon his navigation to the next break. Standing, his knees telegraph their stiffness. And he lifts the pack onto his back. Jiggling it about before finding a comfortable position sets off again along an over grown track.

Or what looked like a track.

The first step was always the hardest.

But was it soon forgotten and left behind, as he found his rhythm again. Ahead the sound of a waterfall lifts his hopes of something interesting. The crashing of rushing water grows louder and the air feels cold and damp. He comes upon an opening in the trees. A canyon hidden from view

by the towering trees. Looking up to see a rush of cascading water falling over rocks and into a pool beneath. Ripples lapped rocks about the sides before hurriedly washing whitewater downstream.

It was tempting for him to dive in but time was a limited if he wanted to reach the junction before sun down. A photograph would suffice for now and he reaches for his smartphone. Turning it on to capture the moment before turning it off.

“Keep moving... There’ll be other waterfalls.” He thought aloud.

Leaving the vista in the rear vision of his mind heads back to the forest track. Trees towered above him again. Bringing with it shade and coolness. Insects buzzed about his face. Ned swatted the air before him to cut himself a path through the swarm of incessant buzzing minions.

Coming to another opening in the forest.

There was something creepy about the place. An eerie feeling came over him as though there was something disturbing about the place. Ned spied a solitary tree at its center. The trunks of the trees about him appeared to be twisted as if gasping for breath. Thinking he could make out anguished faces staring back at him? Appearing like lepers bent and hunched over in pain. Somehow knowing they were different to other trees.

Hesitantly he stepped forward as if he were walking on hallow ground. Walking to the center of the open field, avoiding the patches of burnt grass. Triangulated dice like markings. He tried to reconcile the strange patches as if something had landed and its propulsion system had scorched the earth.

Blighted scars on an otherwise pristine green and brown and barren landscape. The solitary tree at the center stood tall and straight. Standing defiant and immune to the torture inflicted on the trees about the perimeter.

Without stopping he continued walking. Keen to leave the alien enclosure. Setting his sights on the far side of the clearing and the distant Carpathian Mountains. Looming higher over him. Rising over two and half thousand meters, their snow caps slowly melting. He would breach though a valley between them. Deferring the goat track trails to their peaks for another day.

Reaching the other side of the clearing he stops to look back at the warped trees. Reaching for his camera to capture an image, discovers the battery has now completely drained and dead. At the waterfall it had been charged. Annoyed, he pockets the camera and takes a mental image.

“That’s bizarre.” He questions the perverse trees.

Taking another look at the scorched patches suddenly wondered if the area had been contaminated with nuclear material from the soviet occupation days.

“Shit! ... How could I be so careless?” Ned berates himself.

Examining his hands and brushes his clothing of any dust. As though it would help. If he had been exposed, he would know enough soon enough. Or when his skin broke out with strange rashes.

It was all a little too late to know better.

Pressing discouragingly forward he found his rhythm again. His mind not letting go of the hazardous thought. Was he sweating from the radiation? Or the heat of the day? Then a cool breeze brushed over him. His mind played out the medical diagnoses and prognoses. Nothing in his medical kit would remedy radiation. Ned accepted his fate with his usual catch phase.

“Oh well... I had a good run.” He chuckled.

His diagnostic mind rationalized the central tree was unaffected.

Perhaps there was more to the place than just radiation. And allowed the debilitating thoughts to fade as quickly as they had been roused.

Trekking down a valley of moss covered boulders and rambling streams, the temperature had dropped by a degree. He felt it on his skin. The sun would be setting in two hours. It would be dark within three. He had made good time and in the short lived life he had left calculated he could make the junction in another hour.

His thoughts shifted from the danger of the clearing to the abrupt awakening from the dream he had had that morning. It was like a memory he could not shake. A war of some kind. In a trench. There was machine gun fire and shouting and bursts of explosions about him. Muddied faced men in uniforms. Artillery fire. As though were standing next to the gun. Then a sudden flash of light and a numbness that came with dying. Only to

awaken that morning in a cold sweat on the train. He could smell the cordite in his nostrils. It all seemed so real.

He shakes himself back to forest and the sound of his heavy breathing. The sound of the forest was deafening quiet. Evident by the ringing in his ears. As if cicadas and crickets had taken up residency in his head and sang their incessant high pitched chorus. Shrouding the ambient sounds of the world. He had lived with the tacit ringing most of his life, but the ringing faded as other thoughts of the forest engulfed his mind.

Feet ached. Knees seconded the motion. And a motion was passed that he would make camp soon.

The junction laid just ahead.

Marked by a large boulder, that also served as a seat for weary hikers. A small stream divided a field of wild flowers from the forest proper. A narrow path followed the stream around the forest. Ned's eyes follow the path until he loses sight as it disappears into the long grasses. The route the Waiter suggested he should take. He imagined taking the flatter route. He stares into the darkened forest.

Inviting and cool. Shorter.

Sliding the pack from his shoulders, sits on the boulder radiating residual warmth of the sun. Pulling the map from a side pocket, studies the contours of the land. The path around would be at least three times longer than the path through the forest. Fingers measure the distances. The waiter's warning echoed in his ringing ears. What had he said?

'Bântuit... Bad things here... Mai rau... Go around here.' He visualizes the waiter's finger pointing to the *safer* path.

Recalling the fear in his voice. As though to plead with him to take the longer route. Ned looks at the path that led into the forest. And compared it to the nuclear wasteland he had crossed earlier.

'How much worse could it be?' He asked himself.

The thought of the twisted trees of the barren clearing told him there was something untoward about the place. Re-examining the map it showed no indication of any danger. Legends showed no keys for hauntings. Looking up at the sun for the amount of daylight he had left.

Hands clasp the edge of the stony seat as he enjoyed the moment. He feels a roughness beneath his fingertips. Curiosity got the better of him and he

looks down to see an etching of some kind now overgrown with moss and lichen that had found foothold. Crouching down, rubs the vegetation and dirt away to read an inscription...

'GO AROUND NED'

Ned laughs to himself.

Thinking that someone was playing a joke on him. And he looks about as though to catch the Waiter laughing at him. But sees no one. And how would the waiter know his name? He never told him. The etching appeared to have been made a long time ago. The weathering appeared to be old, like an old tomb stone. A century or two old, maybe more. Puzzled by the inscription, figured people back then must have had graffiti as they did today.

Ned was an ancient name, shortened from Edward. So it made sense someone called Ned may have been about a century or two before. But what to make of the warning? If it was a warning? Sparing some water from his bottle washes the citation. Only to make the warning stand out more. It was as though he could almost recognize the hand writing. Like the statute in the village square. It seemed familiar. But he could not place them.

Ned dismisses the ancient *warning* as that, *ancient*. Belonging in the past. For the *Ned back-then*. Treating it as no more than a coincidence, decides to take the path less taken. And lifted the pack onto his shoulders again. And followed the path into the forest in search of a suitable camp site.

The sun would soon be setting.

A short distance in he comes to two large boulders that would provide shelter from the unusually cold air now drifting down the mountain. A camp fire would counter the temperature change. Ears prick up and he thinks he can hear a child's laughter. A high pitched giggle, a squeal perhaps, coming from near the stream.

Peering through the trees to the stream next to the open field. And for a moment he thinks he sees two small children playing on the far bank of the stream. Moving closer the ghostly aberrations appear as shadows.

Another squeal echoes from the bank. Followed by the smashing of water and more squeals. Then the shadows and voices and squeals and splashes fade.

A rush of cold air pushes pass him as if someone had brushed into him. Feeling a hand on his back, looks about to see who had pushed him. No one.

'Bântuit... Haunted.' Ned recalled the warning in his mind.

A gust of wind rattles the tree tops creating a high pitched rustling sound. Ned looks up accepting the sound as the source of the voices and giggling.

“Nah... Don't be silly. No such things as ghosts... You've tired. The fading light is playing tricks on you.” He argued back to himself.

Shadows of the trees fell over the bank of the stream. He was more convinced now it was just an illusion conjured up by the trickery of nature. He filled his water bottle. It was back to rationed camp food now. Rice and dehydrated vegetables. The taste of bacon and eggs and fresh coffee now a distant memory. The mobile battery had mysteriously returned to full charge.

“What a bizarre place.” Tells himself and kills the mobile again.

A fine mist drifted down the mountain.

In the dying light of the day, unseen to Ned behind the thick of trees and boulders, the moon had risen over the Carpathians in the east. Faint red in color.

It howled a warning to Ned to leave. To go around.

Like many other trekkers before him, the unsolicited warning went unheeded. Ned looks up to the source of the howl. The camp fire would keep wolves and bears at bay. Thought of vampires and werewolves could not have been further from his mind.

Staring into the camp fire. Flames flickered and danced, radiating a warmth.

And the mist rolled down the mountain, over him and the camp site...

Chapter Four

“What have I told you two about playing in the forest?” Zahra asked her daughter and the blond headed urchin standing bright eyed beside her.

Sebastian looked up at her innocently with pale blue eyes. Oblivious to any dangers that laid within. A mouth covered with berry stains.

“The Overlord’s men are about. They’re after a poacher!” She warned them.

“We saw them!” Sebastian shouted out excitedly before Kristina could silence him.

“Did you now?” Zahra looks down at Sebastian to tell all.

“He ran away... In the forest... Horses chased him.” He confessed excitedly.

“What am I to do with you two? ...” Zahra reprimanded the children. “...Kristina... You should know better taking Sebastian into the forest.”

Zahra eye balled the two urchins their heads bowed.

“But Ma-ma.” She protested. Trying to say she was safer with Sebastian than without him.

“Stay out of the woods. It’s a dangerous place! ... There are Beasts in there that not even Sebastian can tame! ... You hear me?”

“But Ma-ma.” She pleaded again before being cut short again.

“Not another word. Go wash up! Food will be ready shortly.”

Turning her back on the two imps covered in dirt and leaves.

“You be off home Sebastian before your Aunt comes looking for you.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Kristina tickled him and he giggles a high pitched squeal. Before scurrying under the wagon from sight. Causing heads about the camp to look up wonder who had Sebastian in their grasps.

“Be off! ...” Zahra warns him a final time. “...Go wash up young lady!”

“Yes Ma-ma.” She responds hanging her head and dragging her feet.

Despondently she trudged over to a large metal bowl and cups her hands with water. Splashing her face reaches for a tired wash cloth and scrubs face with it. Removing what she could.

Life as a Romani was harsh, but simple.

As it had been for centuries. As it would be for centuries to come. Spring had returned and so had the caravan of itinerant wandering Gypsies. Peddling their crafts and potions. Considered to be stars scattered by the hand of God, adopting the religion of the region to avoid conflicts.

“Kristina!” Her mother calls out.

Kristina sniffs the air, steaming odors bubble from a large pot that her mother was stirring. A goulash of vegetables and game. Heaping a large spoonful onto a wooden bowl. An extra scoop of gravy to wash it down.

“What do we say?” Zahra looks down at her expecting an answer.

“Thank you God for the food we eat.” Repeating the grace she had been taught.

“Very good... Now eat.” Pushing the bowl towards her.

Heaping a large spoonful into another wooden bowl, takes her place on a stool beside Kristina.

Looking about the camp site Zahra sees others going about their chores and settling in for the evening. The days were getting longer and the sun creeping higher in the sky. The distant Carpathian Mountains to the south slowly losing their snowcapped peaks. She looks about as though in search of something.

The moon. Now raising just over the horizon.

Her mind counting down the days to the next blood moon. The Witch would know for certain. It was her way to know such things. A few days perhaps. Perhaps less. The monastery would take them in when the time came.

Hallow ground. And a blessing from the curse.

“Tell me about my father again.” Kristina asked curiously hoping to know more than before.

“I’ve told you a hundred times already... A traveler passing through these lands.” Her mother begins.

“I want to know more...” Shoveling a wooden spoon into her mouth. Her cheeks bulging as her jaws chewed steadily. Swallowing to ask, “... Where is he now?”

“Gone... Home. He had to leave suddenly.” Zahra laments his departure and the dark events of that evening.

He was never meant to stay. It had been spoken by the Witch. Events had transpired for him to arrive. Events had transpired for him to leave. It was all beyond Zahra’s control. Only the Witch knew these things.

“Why?” Kristina asked curiously.

“The Beasts came. We fought them off the best we could... Arthur managed to escape in time... To the train.”

“What’s a train?” Perplexed by the new word.

“It’s like a large iron wagon... The Ousters have them in their world.”

“My father was an Ouster?” Her eyes light up at the new fact.

“Yes he was. The Witch foretold of his arrival... He was chosen...” Zahra fell silent and recalled the first time she saw him in Budapest.

“Chosen for what?” Kristina dug deeper.

“To be your father.” Her mother explained simply.

“Oh?” She responded disappointedly wondering if that was all there was.

“You have a destiny Kristina. These things you must ask your Grandmother... Now eat before it gets cold.” She warns her hoping to deflect any more questions she had few answers to.

Kristina sat quiet and ate her meal. Numb with confusion, contemplating the mysterious revelations.

Her mind raced with curiosity.

At the age of five, she was a child beyond her years. A child out of place and time, she knew things before they happened. Things she could not make sense of. Dreams would unfold in her mind. Dreams of foreign places. Tall buildings and colored flashing lights. Strange music drifted to her mind.

“What’s the Curse Ma-ma?” She asked catching her mother off guard.

“Who told you about that?” Her mother asked surprised she had heard this from someone.

“Sebastian... He said Ousters are people from...” Kristina begins, searching for the right words.

“From where? ...” Zahra probes further wondering how much she knew.

“... From another time... Are they?” She asked fearing the answer.

“I don’t know...” Zahra lied. “...Your Grandmother knows all... I think it is time she talks to you about such things. We can leave tomorrow... How would you like that?”

“Okay.” She hesitantly agreed to the surprise proposal.

“Eat! You’ll need your strength for the climb.” Her mother insisted going to the pot for another helping, heaping a spoonful into Kristina’s bowl.

Somehow Kristina had lost her appetite. Playing with her food. Pushing from one side to the other. Her mind racing with unsolved riddles. And Sebastian.

“Can I go play?” She asked hoping to escape the watchful confinement of her mother.

“Okay. Stay away from the forest... Promise?” Zahra looked down at her.

“Promise.” Kristina lied, dashing away before her mother could change her mind.

Rushing over to Sebastian’s caravan hoping to find him, but discovering him no-where.

“He’s around back... Give him a moment.” His aunt advised clearing away a table of plates.

Sebastian squeals excitedly at seeing Kristina and rushes over to her. His belly filled with food and body charged with perpetual energy.

“Kristina!” Sebastian calls whipping his hands over his woven trousers. A berry stained cotton shirt hung half in half out of his pants.

“Don’t know what’s wrong with that boy. You would think he’d swallowed a feather.” His Aunt declared watching the urchins disappear towards of the forest.

With that statement Sebastian giggled again as though to confirm the affliction.

“Keep out of the forest!” His Aunt warns them too late.

Kristina darted off with Sebastian running behind trying to keep up. Halting just before a stream that divided the camp site from the wooded forest beyond. Sitting on the bank, her chin rested on her knees. Thinking about her Ouster father.

“What’s the matter?” He asked sensing something was upsetting her.

“Tomorrow... We’re going to visit the Witch.” She declared.

“Can I come too?” Sebastian was keen to see a real witch.

“Don’t think so... You wouldn’t be allowed.”

“Why not?” He asked annoyed.

“Girl stuff...” She tried to deter him further.

“Oh... Yuck.” Sebastian’s face contorted at the thought.

“Besides the Witches might want to eat you.” She warns him.

His eyes light up at the dreadful thought. Imagining himself held up by the ankles over a large boiling pot.

“Where she live?”

“In the mountains. Beyond the forest... A days’ walk from here.”

Kristina looks into the forest and thought she saw someone moving between the trees.

A dark shadow like an actual person. It stops and turns as though to look at them. A chill runs over her. Then the shadow moves on and disappears from view.

Sabastian squeals to gain her attention.

“What you looking at?” He asked seeing her focused on something inside the forest.

“Thought I saw someone. Just a shadow I suppose.”

“Maybe the poacher?” Sebastian searches the dark interior hoping to see the poacher.

“Nah... They wouldn’t come this close to camp. The dogs would bark... They can smell a poacher from miles.” She reminds him.

Sebastian sniffs the air attempting to make out a scent.

“You’re not a dog!” Laughs Kristina seeing him contort his nose about his face.

“Only one way to find out.” Sebastian jumps to his feet and runs across the stream creating a series of large smashes and squeals.

Kristina tries to dive out of the way to avoid being covered with water but is caught with a handful. Clambering down the bank into the stream to scoop water over him.

“I’ll get you for that.” She called out running after him.

Catching him on the other side of the stream she pins him to the ground. Giggling between the squeals of delight.

“Surrender!” Kristina challenges him.

“Never!” He responds defiantly.

Struggling against his restraints manages to push her off and to the ground.

“Surrender!” He challenges her.

“Never!” She cried out defiantly.

Suddenly he is distracted by something in the forest and he runs off in curiosity.

“Sebastian! ... We’re not allowed in there... Come back.” She calls out pleading for him to return.

“Hurry up! ...” A voice calls back from within. “...Find me if you can?”

Looking back towards the camp hoping her mother was not watching. She runs into the forest. Moments later there is a giggling noise resonating from a quivering scrub. Soon follow by a louder squeal and further giggling laughter.

“Surrender!” She seeks from her captive foe.

“Never!” A giggling voice responds to the challenge.

In the east raising slowly above the distant Carpathian Mountains a large moon ascended the heavens.

Tinged a faint red. Not enough to summon the Curse. Not enough summon the Beasts. A wolf howls. Causing heads about the camp to look up at the evening sky with concern. Stars were appearing. Peculiarly brighter than before.

Sebastian squealed loudly from within the woods. Causing people to resume to their activities...

Chapter Five

“My Lord I beseech you.” A fumbling cowering monk addresses the Overlord.

“You are in no position to beseech anyone... Remember your position Friar Talbot.” Nicholas retorts loudly upon the Franciscan Monk.

Talbot shrank before Nicholas’ feet. As though he were to about to kiss them. A heavy brown habit covering the feeble body of bones. Bowing submissively exposing the tonsure bald spot on his head. A sign of religious devotion and humility.

“Get up you fool... I have no time for your groveling.” Nicholas gestures for him to stand.

“Forgive me my Lord. The time is nigh when the Beasts will roam.” Talbot warns.

“You don’t need to remind me of something I am fully aware.” Nicolas spat back the Curse.

A large shaggy haired grey Irish wolfhound sat upright beside the throne. Eyeing Talbot over. Stirred by his master’s agitation. Unsure what to make of the morsel. Saliva dipped from its mouth and gathered into a puddle on the stone floor. A faint growl rumbled beneath its breath. Nicholas stroked the hound’s strong neck and large head. Soothing the canine Beast’s arousing temper.

Talbot eyes betraying his fears.

“Not today...” Said Nicholas patting the dog. “...Maybe later.”

The hound resumed its slumber beside its master. One eye on Talbot for any sudden movement.

“Father if I might be so bold to suggest... An offering.” Sigmund suggests.

“And who did you have in mind my son?” Asked Nicholas, looking down at Talbot speculating as to what his son was about to propose.

“The Romani have set camp on edge on our lands to the south. Beside the dark forest. Perhaps... One of them.” Suggests Sigmund.

“Why wasn’t I informed of their arrival?” Nicolas barks at his men standing nearby.

“They have only just arrived. We were hoping they will move on... But it seems they have made camp ‘til the autumn.” A man responds hesitantly.

“Perhaps you are right my son.” Tapping fingers together at the appealing sacrificial thought.

It would satisfy his immediate fears. The Beasts of the Mist would have their pound of flesh and leave him unscathed. Thinking out what would be required.

“Round up two or three of *these Romani*. Charge them with vagrancy. Whip them and brand them. Make them bleed. I want the Beasts to smell them a mile away... But not until the moon has risen. Understood... I want them alive. A dead Roma is of no use.” Nicolas grinned at the seditious thought.

“Yes my Lord.” Said the man bowing his head and walks backwards away from his master.

“Well done my son... You have the makings of a great leader one day.” Nicolas strokes his son’s malevolent impetuous ego.

“Thank you father.” Accepts Sigmund.

“But my Lord... I beseech you.” Talbot reproaches Nicolas with a concern look.

“Have we not had this conversation Friar Talbot?” Informed Nicholas looking sternly down at his religious counsel.

Talbot was the best the Monastery could provide, short of Mother Superior.

Despite being devout and pious, Talbot protected his own self-interest. Clinging closely to Nicholas enjoying the warm comforts and tasty foods of the Castle over the soggy porridge and stale breads of the drafty Monastery.

“My Lord. You cannot subject these holy people to a cruel death for which they have done no wrong.” Talbot pleads their innocence.

“Do not tell me what I *can* and *cannot* do... These people are vagrants and the law is the law.” Began Nicholas. “...And I am the law... Need I remind you of that? ... *Friar Talbot?*”

“No... My Lord.” Talbot whimpers, submitting to his benevolent master.

“As for Holy. I very much doubt that... They change their religion as often as you change your ... Loin cloth.”

Sigmund chuckles beside his father looking down on the diminutive monk looking frail and helpless.

‘Weak... Pathetic... What did God ever see in him?’ Thought Sigmund.

Thinking when he is Overlord he would have Talbot flogged and tied to a stake for the Beasts to devour. Assuming there was enough of him to devour. Wondering what flesh laid beneath the heavy robe. One day, when he was Overlord, King of the land. Ordained by the glorious Holy Roman Empire. But that day would never come while his father lived. The curse would ensure that. Unless something *happened* to his father. An accident perhaps.

One day. Sigmund grinned to himself. Then looked down at the helpless Talbot.

“Now go back to your Monastery and play with your Nuns... Or whatever that is you play with there...” Nicolas dismisses the monk coldly gesturing his hand that he be gone sooner than later.

Like a frightened brown rat Talbot scurries from the dark chamber, fearful of turning his back on Nicolas. The hound looks up to sense Talbot’s fear. Sniffing the air as though he had wet himself. A growl resonates from its belly. Salvia dips to the floor adding to the original puddle. Nicholas strokes the dog’s nozzle and head. Soothing it to stay.

“Not today Nero... Not today.” Nicholas chuckles watching the monk awkwardly remove himself from the chamber.

Turning at the last moment before the door. Talbot’s shaved skull patch stood out in the darkness. His submissive tenure ensured Nicolas’ charity to the Monastery. And his own comforts. He would inform Mother Superior of the Overlord’s decision, hoping she would find a way to change his mind.

Talbot hurried as fast as his short legs could carry him back to the monastery.

Modest stone buildings bathed in the midday sun. Fortified by high stone walls built to withstand itinerant invaders. Huns, Mongols and Ottoman. Now new invaders now stalked the land. Creatures of the night that ventured out when the blood moon summoned the mist. In search of blood.

To slaughter the enemy of the man that had uttered the curse on his dying breath.

Panting and sweating heavily Talbot pushes open the large wooden gates scared with crawl marks and stained with blood. Running across the vacant court yard rushes into the coolness of the darkened halls. The midday bell tolls loudly. Beckoning nuns and monks to prayer and supper. Brothers watch Talbot rush past them and through the refectory.

Brother Geoffrey looks up to see what was causing the tumult. Other brethren look up and then to the doors as though some danger was pursuing him. Talbot disappears through another door and collapses exhausted at the feet of the Mother Superior.

“What brings this intrusion Brother Talbot?” Staring down at the panting body of bones.

Wheezing for breath, Talbot tries to calm himself before speaking. Pulling himself to his feet he straightens his habit. Now covered with dust. Life slowly returned to his soulless body.

“Well? Speak Brother... Or does the Lord taketh your tongue?” Mother Superior pressed for the explanation to the unsolicited appearance.

“Nicolas...” Talbot began still panting and wheezing. “...The gypsies.”

“What about Nicolas and the gypsies?” Eyes open larger wanting to know more.

“He intends to offer them up to the Beasts... To keep them from his door.” Talbot delivers the lethal news.

“Does he now? Does he hold no Christian values? Are you not his counsel?”

“It was Sigmund’s idea.” Talbot ratted on him.

“I should have known. That boy was never baptized... The Devil got to him first.” Mother Superior breathed a heavy sigh.

She would need to warn the Romani. They had just arrived. Seasons were warming for an unknown reason. As though to protest their captivity

within the realm. Something was amiss. This was a time like no other before.

She could sense it.

“We don’t have much time. Go... Have your meal.” Said Mother Superior dismissing Talbot.

Returning to her desk. A large bible lays open before her. Pages adorned with colorful calligraphy. She examines the Latin text in search of an answer to her perpetual prayers. A prayer to release her from the bondage of this earth.

And a death long overdue.

Suicide was a mortal sin. Unforgiveable in the eyes of God. Martyrdom however was not. Perhaps she had an *out* after all.

“Parce mihi Deus.” She mutters under her breath at the immoral thought.

“I am pressed on four sides... The Empire to the north. Rome to the east. Moldavians to the west. And the Ottomans to the south... Praise the blessed Carpathians that hold the latter two back from my door... None of them I trust.” Nicolas counsels his son in the affairs of state.

“We have friends in Hungary to call upon.” Sigmund promotes the alliance.

“Ney I fear they would stab me in the back at first chance they had. As they did Vlad... Trust no one Sigmund. No one... Not even yourself.” Nichols warns, confusing his son further.

“We are safe in the bosoms of the Carpathians father. Challenge any foe to step foot within and they shall meet with cold and hunger before they lay a blade to my throat.” Sigmund boosts.

“You speak bravely son. But I fear the enemy within our lands... An enemy that keeps even our foes at bay... The *Beasts* of the *Blood Moon* and the *Mist*.”

Nichols stares out a window towards the dark forest. Then to the sky in search of the moon. Another evening of grace. Maybe two. Soon the moon would rise and howl. Summoning the Beasts to feast.

“We repel one Beast. Another takes root upon our soil. Allow me to take my men and defeat them. Today!” Sigmund stands to draw his sword.

“Brave but foolish words spoken from the innocence of youth...” Nicholas counsels his son. “...I love you dearly my son... But not all the King’s men could defeat the demons of the night... Lest they come but at a blood moon and be gone without stepping an evil paw within these castle walls.” Nicolas gestures with his hands at the dark interior of the chamber.

Through a portal window above a beam of sunlight projected a white disc onto the chamber’s floor.

Causing the two men to fixate on its temporal appearance before fading by a shrouding cloud.

“Hmm.” Nicolas catches himself drifting off.

The years were catching up with him. Yet he remained unchanged for the past fifty years ago. He longed for the perpetual sleep of death that would not come. To be with his beloved wife. Taken so many years ago on upon Sigmund’s birth. Finding himself incapable of sleep, as though he had been cheated of it, as he had been death. Walking the halls of the castle like a living ghost in search of a way out of his entombment.

“Father... Are you okay?” Sigmund catches his father drifting off in thought.

“Yes, yes. Of course my son... How are preparations for the... Ah...”

“Underway as we speak. My men are out scouring for the *unfortunates*.”

“Good. Good. Have them staked away from the castle... Assign men to watch to ensure the Romani don’t help them escape. They’re only good to us alive... Understood?”

“Understood my Lord. I’ll have archers at the ready... God help their souls if the Beasts get scent of them too.”

“You are to stay in the castle... That’s an order!” Nicolas ordered.

“Yes father.” Sigmund lied.

Sigmund was not afraid of the Beasts.

Youthful ignorance had not been expunged with the passing years.

“Find the *Heart* and we can end this *Curse*. And we can all die a peaceful death... I long my body to turn to the ashes from whence they came. I long for a sleep without fear of waking.” Nicolas’ mind was drifting again.

“No one knows where the Heart lays.” Reminds Sigmund.

“Someone knows... It can't have just disappeared. Someone is harboring it... And I think I know who.”

“Let me take my men to seize this person father. I will pull their tongue from their body to have them talk.” Sigmund boasted the counterproductive torture.

“I dare say she would pull yours first.” Nichols chuckles.

“Tis only a woman... I will go myself.” Scoffs Sigmund.

“Tis only the *Witch*... Be wary of what you say lest she hears you.” Nicholas warns his son.

“I am not afraid of an old woman.”

“You should be my son... You should be.”

Just then a gust of cold air flushes through the chamber and pushes Sigmund on the back. He looks behind to seeing no one there. And dismisses the intrusion as sudden draft.

“Find the Witch and you can find the Heart... Find the heart and we all can die in peace.” Nicholas mind drifts philosophically.

Sigmund had no intention of dying. Ever.

Eternal life on earth was ten-fold that of eternity in Heaven. Should his father die in his quest? Then let it be so. The heart would be his. With a large army the Beasts could be banished forever. Lest kept at bay. He would be Overlord, and as Overlord he would need a woman by his side. One had taken his fancy.

His father would disapprove of the union, less so if he were dead.

The woman in question was equally reluctant to be courted. She was gypsy. And his father despised gypsies. There was something about the gypsy woman that intrigued him. Perhaps it was because she was forbidden fruit. She had evaded his advances to date. All that would change. He had been making plans of his own. His father would find a death worthy of a King and he would have his queen. By force if need be. She would be made to kneel before him, and his thoughts wondered to the perverse.

Father and son sat quietly lost with their own thoughts.

Their eyes fixated on the orb of light on the chamber floor. Floating dust particles sparkled within. And swirled gracefully on the current of air. The hound lifted its head and saw the two men staring in silence at something. Then looking to where the two men were transfixed, but sees nothing. Curling up in a ball again to resume a dreams. Twitching a leg and growling under its breath. The morsel monk was within reach.

Then it pounced...

Chapter Six

Zahra tied off the finely embroidered scrawl about the loaf of bread and oat biscuits.

The sun beginning to break the horizon. She turns to awaken Kristina from her dreams.

“Kristina! It’s time.” She beckons her.

Kristina stirs momentarily and rolls over. Pulling the woolen blanket up to cover herself. A dream had pulled her to a place she found herself before. A field of wild flowers wavering in a summer breeze. Her grandmother standing at the center calling her closer. The scent of the flowers, the cool breeze and warmth of a sun suspended in a vibrant blue sky on her skin. Reluctant to leave the paradise and her grandmother letting go her hand.

“Kristina!” She hears her mother calling out as though from some great distance away.

Kristina finds herself drifting further away from her grandmother. She smiles knowing they will meet soon.

“See you soon...” Whispered her grandmother. Her words carried on the wind.

“See you soon Grandma-ma.” Kristina mutters as she begins to stir from the dream.

Green eyes begin to open and she feels a sting on the side of her neck. A birthmark. A legacy of her noble blood. Rubbing it with fingers hoping to annul the faint ache. Her mother watches her and sympathizes with the discomfort. And reaches for her own birthmark. Feeling it beneath her fingers. She looks out the opening of the wagon. Sensing the blood moon’s nearness.

‘Soon.’ She thinks to herself.

“Who you talking to?” Zahra asked curiously of her daughter’s the chatter.

“Grandma-ma.”

“How is she?” Zahra probes wondering how far Kristina had developed her abilities.

“She’s good... She’s expecting us.” Said Kristina struggling to sit upright and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“It’s almost time to leave. Eat this.” Passing her a large oat biscuit.

Crumbs falling over her chin onto her blankets. Chewing on the course biscuit she washes it down with a mouthful cow’s milk. Still warm, gulping sweet fatty mouthfuls.

“Put your shoes on... We need to get going if we want to be there before dark.”

“Yes Ma-ma.” Said Kristina in search of her shoes.

A giggle is heard coming from the door of the wagon. Sebastian pokes his head of blonde hair above the half door and giggles again.

“What are you doing up? Go back to bed Sebastian... If your Aunt catches you.” Zahra warns him.

Followed by a squeal as though to refute the warning.

“Can I come too? ...” Sebastian asks. “...My Aunt said I could.”

“I very much doubt that... Your nose will grow if you’re lying Sebastian!” She warns him.

He immediately pushes his hand against his nose to inhibit its sudden growth. Pale blue eyes dart about the wagon seeing Kristina pulling on her shoes. A half-eaten biscuit beside her.

“I’m hungry...” Cries out Sebastian.

“You are always hungry. Now be off with you... Witches Lairs are no places for delicious little boys like you.” She warns him.

Stepping closer she gently squeezes his forearm for tenderness.

“Hmm. Just right... Feel this Kristina.” Holding out Sebastian’s arm.

A confused look grows on Sebastian’s face. His eyes open wide at the groping of his arm. Kristina squeezes his arm playing along with her mother.

“Ohh... He’s just right... Licking lips to accentuate his savory predicament. “...Please come with us Sebastian.”

Sebastian eyes open wider in fearful of being eaten. Causing him to regurgitate a squeal.

“Never! ... You’ll never eat me!” He cries out running away.

Running back to his covered wagon scampering up the wooden steps. Closing the door quickly behind him. A crop of blond crop of hair and blue eyes peer over the opening hoping he had escaped the culinary fate. Squeezing his arm for tenderness found nothing but bone.

Zahra throws a red cap over Kristina's shoulders.

"You need to keep warm sweetie... The mountains are cooler than the plains... We better get going before Sebastian changes his mind."

Peering out the opening to see a small blond head peering back at her before bobbing from view.

The Witch lived a day's walk from the Gypsy camp.

Preferring to stay grounded while their itinerant Romani cousins migrated with the seasons. Their stone lair buried deep in the woods and protected by enchantments and spells. A cloak of invisibility shrouded the Lair. Visible only to those who believed.

Zahra knew the path well. Visiting her mother and half-sisters when times warranted for such calls. Today was such a day. It was time for Kristina to have the talk that she had had when she was a child. Kristina's would be different. Hers would be one of destiny.

And these words could only come from the Witch, her Grandmother. Daughter of Vlad Tepes.

The sun rose as reluctantly as Kristina had.

Her dream and sleepy steps slowing her down. A gust of cold air pushes her from behind.

"Keep up sweetie. We don't have all day." Zahra urges Kristina to pick up the pace.

"I'm hungry" Kristina protests.

"We'll stop soon. Not yet... Wait till the waterfall. You remember the waterfall?"

Kristina's face contorts as she tries to recall the waterfall from the previous year. Then registers a vision in her mind.

"I think so." She replies unsure if she did, or if it was just a dream she once had.

The sound of crickets and cicadas rang out a chorus among the sun drenched wild flowers and long brown grass.

A bull frog croaked beneath the undergrowth beside a rambling brook. Bushes rustled behind them unnoticed. The sound lost in the rustling wind that swept the long grasses. The overgrown trail winding its way up the slope becoming inconspicuously steeper with each step. Kristina looks up towards the mountains ahead. A thick dark forest lays between her and the snow covered peaks. Somewhere within a small stone moss covered cabin. With thatched roof and smokestack. A warm fire within.

“Are you a witch?” Asked Kristina innocently.

“Not that I am aware of?” Wondering what had caused the question.

“Am I a witch?” She asked hesitant of the answer.

“Those that chose the practice the dark art are witches... But beware those that chose the Left-Hand-Path...” Wondering if she had said too much.

“The Left-Hand-Path?” She asked curiously.

“There is a Left-Hand-Path and... A Right-Hand-Path.” Her mother begins to warn her.

“The Left is for evil... And the Right is for good.” Kristina guesses the meaning.

“That’s right... Very good.”

“What path did Grandma take?”

“She took the Right-Hand-Path... Of white magic.”

“And your sisters?” Kristina looks up at her mother.

“Hopefully they saw the light of their mother and chose the right path too. But...” Zahra offers a warning, “... Be careful around them nonetheless... Grandma will protect you more than I can. Be on your guard... Understand.”

“Yes Ma-ma.” Unsure what to make of her Aunties.

Fearing for Sebastian had he joined them.

Kristina kicks at a stone and dislodges it. Sending it flying into the stream. And a toad croaks a loudly in annoyance at being disturbed.

“Why do people hate witches?”

“Ignorance and superstition are cut from the same cloth.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means no more questions young lady... The Witch will explain all...” She tells her, “...We must be getting closer. I can hear water.”

Kristina’s ears prick up and she can detect the sound of crashing water over rocks.

“The waterfall!” She calls out rushing forward in search of it.

The sound of crashing water drowning out Kristina’s questioning thoughts. Standing with mouth open straining to look up the top. Mist fills the air. Zahra finds a large dry rock and unwraps the shawl. Kristina spies a sweet bun and reaches for it.

“What do we say?” Her mother reminds her.

“Thank you God for the food you give us.” Kristina parrots the words of thanks.

“Good girl.” Zahra strokes her long dark hair.

Much like her own. Same green eyes, and ears and nose. The birthmark on the side of her neck. A legacy from her Great Grandfather. The Witch would explain all to Kristina. To hear it from her and not as gossip and hearsay of the camp. One day she would to leave this land and see the outside world, as Zahra had. Only to return disappointed, as Zahra had.

Safer within the realm than outside. *Ousters* may live in a modern world of inventions. But it was also a world filled with death and starvation. Wars and destruction. Their apparent wealth could not appease their unending appetite to kill each other. In the realm she wanted for nothing. Other than shelter from the Beasts. And an eternal life while the heart still beat.

Protected by The Guardian, The Witch. Her Mother.

Zahra looks back along the track thinking there was someone following them. But dismisses it as the wind through the grass and trees. Bushes rustle and gust of wind reminds her they need to keep moving.

“We better get going if we want to make the cottage before sunset. There may be no Beasts about, but there are wolves.” She warns her.

Her eyes scan the immediate surrounding thinking she heard a creature moving about. A hand reaching for the hilt of a knife on her belt. She waits and watches. Nothing. A small flock of birds take flight startled by something rummaging beneath. Kristina played in the water.

“It’s time to go sweetie...” She tells Kristina. “...Get your shoes on.”

The terrain inclines and the path narrows again.

And a darkness descends about them as they venture deeper into the woods. Beams of sunlight pierce the upper canopy as cold air rolls off the mountain over them. Kristina pulls her cloak about her. Zahra leads the way listening to Kristina's panting breath and steps behind her. Eyes ever vigilant of wolves that could appear at any moment.

Pausing briefly to check on Kristina. She surveys the path ahead and the path behind. Thinking something was following them. She waits and watches for movement. Nothing. Looking ahead, they had not far to go.

"Just over the next ridge." She informs Kristina incensing her with a hope of an imminent arrival.

With those words Kristina races off ahead of her mother. Skipping in her steps with new found excitement.

"Wait up Kristina!" Her mother calls out trying to restrain the youthful burst of energy.

Kristina saw the small stone cottage in the distance. A thatched roof covered with moss and lichen. Nestled among the trees and scrubs it could go unnoticed if it were not for the chimney stack exhaling a faint trail of grey smoke.

A narrow path lead to the simple wooden door. Timbers held in place by large metal hinges. Voices and chants could be heard. Zahra knocks daintily as though not to disturb those within. A silence is heard and a face appears at the window to investigate.

And the door creaks open as Lamia appears surprised to see her.

"Zahra... My favorite sister... How good it is to see you." She lies.

"Likewise." Zahra lies.

"And who have you brought with you... Not Kristina?" Lamia smiles at the child.

She examines Kristina, sensing something special about her. And tries to hide her distain for her. The chosen child. Why her? Why not she?

"Where are my manners? Come into our humble abode dear sister... While I fetch some firewood." Said Lamia closing the door behind them.

The room was warm and candles lit the tiny space. More curious than afraid Kristina eyes the witch's lair. Shelves with small colorful glass bottles containing unusual items. Making out the odd inscriptions written across them.

'Bats Wing. Snake Venom.'

Then she spies her Grandmother bent over a large pot stirring it slowly.

"Grandma-ma!" She calls out excitably.

The Witch turns and smiles gesturing her to come closer.

"Hello sweet child. It is good to see you again. My how you have grown... Come stir this while I talk with your mother."

Placing her hand on Kristina's head and feels the energy glowing from within.

And kisses the top of her head. Smelling her hair as though it were a beautiful rose. Kristina takes the large wooden spoon and stirs the thick goulash. Smelling the tasty dish. She hoped it was their meal and not some magical potion.

"Zahra my dear child. It is good to see you too. Sit down... You must be wary after your long walk."

"Hello mother... I don't see Gello?"

"You're sister has taken flight. She has gone deeper into the woods with the *others*... Probably just as well..." Then enquires curiously. "... How is my sister?"

"She is well. You are in her prayers." Zahra replies.

"I need be in no one's prayers but my own... But each their own path. You look well. So much like your father..." The Witch reminisces. "... You should visit more often."

"A Witches Lair is no place for a young child." Zahra suggests.

"You say it as though it were a bad thing..." The Witch chuckles looking to Kristina holding the long wooden spoon with two hands. "... She is always welcome... She has the *light* in her."

The Witch smiles. Kristina listens on discreetly to the conversation. The warmth of the fire making her feel safe within the walls. The wagon at camp was cold and drafty. And she wondered why they never lived in a home of stone.

"One day you will..." Informs the Witch reading her thoughts.

"Time has come for her to know." Zahra advises the intentions of their visit.

The Witch looks again at Kristina. All but a child. Her green eyes sparkled in the fire light. Her grandchild looks back and is greeted with a

communion of thoughts.

“It *is* time... But after supper.” The Witch forestalls the evitable talk.

Outside the door there is a shriek.

As though a pig was caught in a trap. Then suddenly the door bursts open. Lamia stands in the door holding up a small fidgeting creature. Its face stained with berries.

“Look what I found for dinner! ... Ehk-ehk-ehk!” She cackles loudly as though to frighten her seized prey more.

“Sebastian! ... What are you doing here?” Zahra is surprised to see him.

“Can we eat him?” Lamia teases him.

Sebastian wriggles and fidgets about in Lamia’s grip. His arms flying about reaching out to take hold of a life line. Squealing frantically. Fearful of becoming supper.

“He’s not ripe. Give him another year... He’ll fatten up nicely.” Zahra teases him.

A thud sounds as Lamia drops him to the wooden floor. Unscathed, he gets to his feet and scurries to stand behind Zahra. Then spies Kristina stirring a big pot and she gestures for him to come closer. The three women scrutinize the uninvited blond headed boy. Unsure what to make of him. Unsure how he had made his way to the Lair by himself.

“Watch your steps young one else ye burn yourself.” Said the Witch pointing to the Pentacle outlined with salt on the floor.

Sebastian catches himself in time so as not to step into the amulet and walks carefully around it. Watchful, fearing it would come after him.

“What in the Lord’s name are you doing here?” Zahra asked annoyed, halting his steps.

He looks over to Zahra with puppy dog eyes.

“Don’t give me that look young man. I have every right to wallop your back-side to the gates of hell. I told you to stay behind! ... What will your Aunt be thinking when you don’t show tonight?”

But he had not thought that far ahead. And wondered if his Aunt would notice him gone.

Looking around the cottage his mind lost in fascination. Intriguing colorful bottles and bowls. Bat wings and dried toads. A large book, laid

open on a table. His imagination conjured its purpose. Dust covered most surfaces and spider webs hung from corners. A mortar and pestle. Dried herbs hung from the ceiling beams. Large melted candles flickered light through a large crystal ball at the table center.

A human skull with a tooth missing smiling back at him. Its dark hollow eye sockets followed his every move. Jars filled with pickled toads, snake venom and a large claw. Possibly from a Beast. His eyes open wider at the sight of it. He was in a Witches Lair and would live to tell the tale. At least for another year.

Just then something brushed up against him.

Startling him and causing him to jump. Then he giggled. Looking down to see a sleek black cat rubbing itself against his legs. A white rat scurried over to him. And he picks it up as though to talk with it. An owl hoots from an open cage announcing its presence. Sebastian hoots back and the Owl falls silent again.

“He has a way with animals that boy.” The Witch observes.

“Indeed... He is gifted with something...” Zahra watches on. “... Commonsense is not one of them.”

“Are you a Witch?” Sebastian asked.

“Don’t know... Maybe.” She responds stirring the pot.

“What’s that you’re stirring?” Intrigued by the smell.

“The last little boy that came too close.” She teases him.

He looks into the bubbling stew and thought he could make out an eye ball.

The onion disappeared below the surface leaving him wondering. Whatever it was, it smelt delicious. Squeezing his arm he wondered if he would smell that good.

“I’m hungry... I haven’t eaten all day but some berries.” Sebastian complained.

“Serves for right for disobeying me... Now go wash your hands both of you.” Instructed Zahra.

Gesturing to wooden bucket of water on the floor.

“We will talk after supper.” Informed her mother...

Chapter Seven

Ned awakens in a cold sweat and panting for breath, to the rising sun filtering through the tent's thin orange lining.

Exhausted from the previous days tramping. He had slept un-usually well, despite the hard ground and the strange recurring dream that had plagued him most of his adult life. Of a war. Helmets, trench coats and bolt action rifles. Of a night sky was filled with drifting artillery smoke and dreadful screams of men dying in pain. The air resonating stuttering machine guns. Spitting death. Deafening percussions exploding about him. Then a flash and sudden pain striking his body.

Sunlight penetrated the inner sanctum of the tent. Thinking heaven was orange before regaining his senses as to where he was. Hands feel his body for wounds that were not there. He tries to recollect the hallucination that seemed so real.

His nostrils could smell smoke.

On opening the tent discovers the camp fire smoldering as smoke fumes drifted over the tent.

"Hmm." Dismissing as the source of the smell.

Sounds of the forest greeted him.

Allowing the crisp mountain air to reinvigorate his senses. He stands and stretches out aching limbs. Kicking at the fire, hoping some embers were glowing beneath the charcoaled surface. Taking a stick exposed some smoldering embers and blew gently. A red glow flared. Throwing twigs and pine needles onto it. The fire ignited and resuscitated itself to flames. Suspending an aluminum pot over it to boil water. And stared at the pot and waited for it to boil. Chewing on a heavy muesli bar.

Packing away the tent and bed roll his mind charted out the day's journey. Looking about nothing seemed amiss. No ghosts or walking dead. Shaking his head that he had almost been fooled by the story of hauntings. The tranquil forest allaying the Waiter's warning.

“Ha.” Ned chuckles to himself.

Pouring the remnants of the tea onto the fire, it hissed back at him in protest at its execution. Stomping on the residual flames, treading heavily on it and kicking dirt over the embers. Satisfied the fire was out pulled the pack over his shoulders. And felt its weight press down on him. Legs refused to move, yet he managed to convince one of them to move. Then the other. Albeit small steps until they found their stride again. The path narrowed as scrubs encroached over the lane, making it almost impossible to see which way it went.

Ned pressed forward nonetheless.

Heading south was his main course. He could make corrections as he came across them. Pushing aside branches and bracken, forging his way deeper into the forest. Sunlight broke through the upper branches of the towering trees and illuminated the wonderland of tall sentries. Trunks appearing as pillars. The darkened canopy tops as hoods.

There was silence of the forest again.

Nothing but the sound of the ringing in his ears. It was too early for cicadas. They would sound their awaking when the sun had risen higher to warm their bodies to life. He allowed the sound to harmonize with the forest.

A waterfall could be heard some distance ahead. And he picks up the pace keen to see the extent of the falls. Entering a clearing to find a rush of cascading waters tumbling over rocks from high above to splash violently into a pool of water below. Remembering the waterfall he had seen the day before. The mist cool and refreshing.

Filling a half empty water bottle continued on his way.

He needed to keep moving if he wanted to make his next camp. Steps become shorter as the day lengthened. Checking his watch and compass. He seemed to be heading in the right direction. The path was over grown but still detectible. Pressing on reaffirms the direction with the sun.

Having made good progress since the waterfall he stops to catch his breath.

To one side of the path he makes out what he thinks is a pile of large stones. Overgrown with moss and ferns that had taken root. Moving closer makes out what could have been the remains of a small building of some

kind. The rectangular layout suggesting a small cottage of some kind. Long since fallen to ruin. An ancient wooden beam protrudes to attest it was made by man. A large pot half rusting with weather and time. And he wondered who had lived there. Kicking at a stone to dislodge it. Falling away to reveal a small colored glass jars. Empty. Picking one up to examine the strange colored vessel.

Curiously he kicks away another stone and discovers a skull with a tooth missing.

Fearing he had disturbed a grave replaces the stone and crosses himself. Imagining the events that may have occurred that had resulted in the demise of the poor sod beneath. He took another step back.

Then another.

Distancing himself from the burial site. He felt eyes were watching him. The place was eerie and goosebumps ran over his skin. A gust of cold air pushed at him. It felt like a hand. He turns about quickly hoping to catch who had pushed him from behind, only to see no one. He takes another step backwards.

The Waiter's warning ringing in his ears.

Returning to the track he pockets the small glass jar as a memento. A gust of cold air rushes past him again as though to warn him not to. Ned stops in his tracks. His subconscious was telling him something. His consciousness was telling him another. Confused he shook off the mental altercation and blindly stepped forward. The wind blustered again against him again. And all about him suddenly became dark and cold. As though a thick dark cloud had blocked the sun.

Standing perfectly still. Unsure of the bewitching wind that was battling against him. The tempest blew harder. Stirring up leaves and debris into the air. Leaning into it, he struggles to step forward, as though it was holding him back. The moment he stopped, the wind dropped. The moment he moved, it blew harder.

'What is this trickery?' Thought Ned puzzled by the manifestation.

Wondering now if the place really was haunted.

Feeling for the small glass jar in his pocket feels a twang of guilt. And images flash in his mind of an old witch-like woman. Returning to the pile

of stones places the glass jar back from whence he found it. Covering it with the rock that he had kicked away. Hoping he had left the site as he had found it.

Feeling he had disturbed the dead and trespassed their grave.

Then he hears a voice whispering in the wind.

“Thee not touch, what not belongs... Be gone, be gone this witch’s lair... Ehk-Ehk-Ehk!”

The voice chants as though casting a spell. Ned looks about trying to find the source of the voice that drifted on the wind about him. Or was it coming from inside his head. Stepping back from the pile of stones he crosses himself again.

“Your God will not save you here... Ehk-Ehk-Ehk!” The wind cackles a voice about him.

“What the...?” Ned cusses at the bewildering warning.

The swirling squall screeches louder wrapping its dark presence around him. Squeezing him in a grasp. Feeling a large hand holding him like a doll. Lifting him up and suspends him a foot above the ground.

“Hey?!” Ned exclaims struggling to break free from the invisible strong grip.

“When Blood Moon and Mist are at hand... Savage Beasts will roam this land... Ye have been warned... Ouster man... Ehk-Ehk-Ehk.” The cackling voice warns him.

The voice fades away, and with it the wind dies away. Releasing him from its grasp. And he falls to the ground in a heap. Shaken but unhurt, quickly stands and brushes off the debris of leaves and twigs. Eyes search between the trees. Thinking he saw a moving shadow. Sun light sifting through the tree tops, returning the forest to a tranquil paradise.

“Beasts, Moon... Mist?” Ned repeats words.

Was someone watching him? Looking among the trees for someone playing a joke on him? The forest was barren of all life but him. A wind begins to swirl gently about him. Nudging him. As though to suggest he should get moving. A gust of cold air slaps his face.

It felt like a hand. An old woman’s hand.

He reaches for his face to feel the glowing pain. Realizing now he should not have come this way and that he should have heeded the

Waiter's warning. Perhaps the other Ned had come this way and turned back. Etching a warning on stone for others. Goosebumps crept over his skin at the thought.

It was time to leave.

Walking away quickly from the pile of stones. The wind dies off with each step further from the Lair. Until finally a calmness returned about him, and the forest. Sunlight burst through the canopy brightening the forest floor. Signaling his escape and freedom from the haunted place.

Relieved he had survived. Looking up the path to where he was headed decided against venturing further. And retraced his steps to the camp from that morning.

Back at the waterfall, splashes his face with the cold water. Confused as to what had just happened. No one would believe him if they tried. The words of the old woman echoing in his ears louder than ever. Fearing another gust of cold air he hurried on his way.

Returning to the camp site again, pitched his tent.

Cold air rolled off the mountain. Over him and the camp. Bringing with it a fine undetectable mist. Rebuilding the fire, he sits staring into its flames. Content that he was now safe, away from the haunted place above him in the mountains. The day darkening by the moment and he felt the warmth of the fire growing on him as he sipped on a tea.

His appetite had been left up the mountain.

He looks to the darkened cloud covered heavens that concealed the raising red moon. Darkness fell and the fire lit the camp site. Distant words re-played over and over again in his head.

'Mist, Moon and Beasts? ...' He thought. *'...What does that mean? ... Be gone Ouster man?'*

"Ouster." He repeats the word aloud.

He had heard the woman use that word at the grocery store the day before. What did it mean?

"I'll tell you what it means..." He begins to lecture himself for turning back. "...It means its cost you a day you superstitious fool! ... What were you thinking? You should have pressed on... You've seen worse Beasts in

ER than here.” Shaking his head in disgust rebuking himself severely for his decision.

There was a howl. Distracting him from his vocal reprimand.

‘Wolves.’ He thinks, looking within the darkening forest.

But the wolves had long since left the area.

There were Beasts even they were afraid of. Leaving only the Blood Moon to howl. Dimly filtering through the cloud cover, hides the celestial warning. Feeling a chill in the air he throws a large log on the raging fire hoping to keep the wolves at bay.

Deciding he would get an early night and make up the lost time tomorrow. Climbing into his sleeping bag zipped the tent front. The flickering light of the fire danced on the thin orange fabric of the tent. And somewhere between the flickers he fell into a deep sleep. To connect to a former life. A life that would not let go of him. Or him of it.

Voices whispered upon the breeze as though to summon a thick mist to engulf the camp site.

Fingers stir eddies of fog that encircled the flimsy nylon tent. Shrouding it from Beasts that would walk the land that evening.

Watching over Ned. Watching over the Ouster...

Chapter Eight

Sebastian burped then giggled.

Causing witching eyes to turn and stare at him. The long walk, a full belly and the warmth of the cozy fire had made him sleepy. Zahra picks him up and laid him on a blanket before the fire.

“Sweet dreams little one.” She whispers to him kissing his cheek.

He whimpers like a puppy. A black cat curls up against him. Soon followed by the white rat about his head. The Witch watches on, pulling a woolen shawl over her shoulders as Zahra clears the plates away. Lamia watches on interested in what her mother would say.

“Why don’t you give us a moment Lamia? ... Help your sister with the washing up.” The Witch tells her daughter.

Reluctantly Lamia obeys. Her eyes staring down at Kristina as she moves away. Kristina’s eyes follow, then looks to her Grandmother.

“Hello sweetie.” The Witch catches her attention again.

“Hello Grandma-ma.” Kristina responds tentatively, feeling she had been left alone.

“You are growing so fast. Faster than the rest of us who are cursed.” The rethinks her choice of words.

Her ouster blood an anomaly in the realm. Displacing her in space and time.

“What curse?” Curiously leaning forward.

“Ahh... Where to begin?” The Witch goes silent in search of a beginning.

A beginning that would explain all around them, to an innocent child. It was not her guilt to carry, only to inherit. Sighing deeply, the Witch begins at the only place she could.

Vlad the Third. Kristina’s Great Grandfather. The Witch’s father.

“You have *his* eyes...” Recalling the times as a child she saw her father before his... Death.

She sighs at the nostalgic thought. Wishing he had he lived to die an old man and see his beloved Kristina. She would pull the stars from the heavens if that were possible lest it disturb him from his eternal sleep.

“Your Great Grand Father was of Nobel blood. The Order of the Dracul. The Dragon... As are you.”

“Ma-ma tells me of this. But people say he was a cruel man.” Looking over to her mother for confirmation.

“Not cruel...” She pauses for the right words, “...Merciful and beloved... Inflicting on his enemies only what they would have inflicted on him. He was a Savior of our land... The Father of our People.” The Witch falls silent pondering her father.

Kristina takes in the legend of her blood line.

Her ancestor’s noble blood flowing through her veins. She touches for the side of her neck. The birthmark that ached with the rising moon.

“You have his eyes and... His *mark*... Some would say it is his bite.”

Kristina’s fingers lightly feel for the inheritance. And smiles. Pleased she truly was of his blood. This noble man that people loved and adored.

“Enemies came for all sides to claim his throne... Tricking him and locking him away for years... Only to be freed. And defend his birthright. The Crown of Wallachia...” The Witch sighs momentarily reminiscing, “... But that was so many, many... *Many* years before you were born dear one.”

The Witch stared at her grandchild, taking in her youthful features.

Catching a semblance of her father. Kristina sat quiet and intrigued. Emerald green eyes sparkling in the fire light.

The Witch smiles and continues.

“One winter...” The Witch recalls the fatal time so long ago. “...On a battle field far, far from here. He suffered mortal wounds... Looking to the heavens... He sees a blood moon suspended above him... And he told his men that when he was dead to cut out his heart and place it in a wooded chest to be made of the wood of the Cross... And on his dying breath he uttered a curse on his enemies...”

“What was the curse Grandma-ma?” She asked inquisitively.

“That time stand still... And at every Blood Moon and Mist... *Beasts* to roam and slaughter his enemies... And with those dying words he passed

from us from this world and into the next.” The Witch envisions his soul leaving his body.

“Will the curse ever end?” She asked hoping there would be an end.

“Only when the Heart finds a new home... Innocent, and free from sin.” The Witch recalls.

“What does that mean?” She asks.

“Ah... Therein lays the mystery.” The Witch lies.

The Witch watches Kristina wondering if she understands the words spoken.

The legend was more than an adult could comprehend, less so a child. But somehow she knew Kristina was different. *His* blood flowed through her veins. She looks over to Sebastian asleep before the fire and smiles.

“What happened to the heart?” Kristina is intrigued by the events.

“Once the heart was placed inside the chest made of wood of the Cross of Christ Himself. It... It...” The Witch found it difficult to understand.

“It *what* Grandmother?”

“It began to beat. As though it lived again... And a terrible tremor shook the land. The curse had begun.”

A chill came over the Witch as though she had spoken of the dead. She recalled the day vividly.

“Where is the heart now?”

“Hidden from poison eyes and thorny fingers. There are those that believe that to possess it is to possess magical powers. And there are those that want to destroy it. To end the suffering of perpetual life.”

“Suffering?” Asked Kristina confused.

“You are too young to understand such pains of living beyond one’s time.” The Witch grins at her innocence.

So young so nimble. Unstained by old age. Her skin perfect, her eyes bright and her mind sharp.

“You have a gift Kristina... The gift of sight.” Remarks the Witch distracting her from the fearful story of her Great Grandfather.

“I know Grandma-ma... I can see you.” Kristina smiles.

“Not that kind of sight...” The Witch smiles. “... You can see what has yet to happen.”

“How is that a gift?” She asked innocently.

“You will come to understand in time.”

“Sometimes I have weird dreams. Like I am actually there... They seem so real. You are in them. I see you.” She looks curiously at her Grandmother.

“I know... I see you too. We will never be apart sweetie. No matter where you are, or where you go. Call for me... I will always come for you.”

“Am I a witch?”

“No... You are too beautiful to be a witch.” The Witch smiles.

There is a loud rattling of plates by Lamia who over heard the comment.

“Ignore her... She is jealous...” The Witch looks over to Lamina and frowns. “...Play nice with you niece Lamia.”

“Why does she have Sight and I do not? ...” Lamia protests submissively. “...Her father was an *Ouster*?” Spitting out the offensive word.

“He was chosen... Somethings are beyond our wishes Lamia. Accept this and be happy your niece has been chosen to save the world...” The Witch did not catch herself in time.

“To save the world? ... I am but a child.” Kristina asked hesitantly, taken back by the responsibility.

“A long time from now. In the future... Out there.” The Witch looks out the window into the distance of time.

“What’s an *Ouster*? ... Mother talks of them... Where are they?”

“When your Great Grandfather cursed these lands the outside lands beyond the mist were untouched. We live in a twilight world Kristina... A realm within the outside world. Only those of Ouster blood can come and go... During the Mist.”

“Can I come and go?”

“Of course... You have Ouster blood in your veins. But only through the Mist... And it is very dangerous time. The Beasts roam the lands in search of blood.”

“Sebastian cannot come?”

“Alas no... Sebastian will fade at the border... While you would carry on.”

The Witch looks again over to Sebastian content and asleep. What a morsel meal he would make if he had ventured on the wrong night. Such

stories are not meant for young boys of tender age.

“One day you will leave... You will meet a wise man... And together you will save the World.”

“Save it from what?” She asks.

“From Man of course...” The Witch responds, “... Who else?”

“And what of this world should the outside fall?”

“We will be safe.”

“Then why should we help them?”

“Because they cannot do it by themselves... God will not allow his Creation be destroyed by Power and Greed... Sometimes He sends his Angels to help those that are unwilling to help themselves.”

“Am I an Angel Grandma-ma?”

“You are to me... Now enough questions... It is time for sleep.”

And the Witch gestures for her to see her mother. Wondering if she had said enough, or too much. Watching Kristina walk over to her mother. So much alike. She will miss them when they were gone. Though never be far away, and on the whispering wind to guide them.

Kristina lays beside Sebastian on the blanket on the floor.

Her mother throws another blanket over both of them, covering the cat and rat in the process. Kristina’s mind racing with thoughts of battles and beating hearts in a wooden box. Of a mysterious man. Perhaps she would try to dream of him that evening and she closes her eyes.

The flames danced light against her eyelids and somewhere between the flickers she falls asleep.

“Time is nigh for her to leave this realm.” The Witch laments the prophecy.

“When?” Zahra probes.

“Soon.” The Witch confessed not willing to say more.

Events are best left unspoken lest they disturb their natural course. Interference could compromise Kristina’s fate. Endangering her further, and Sebastian’s. Looking over to him sleeping unaware of the dangers he too faced. Such things were beyond her control. Having seen all in her visions. She awaited the arrival of the Ouster. The very Ouster she had warned to leave.

A finger stirred before her on the table. Stirring up the mist around Ned's tent.

Outside the moon howled.

"The moon will be full tomorrow. But first the Mist descends. Leave first light to be back in time. Nay left the Beasts detect the scent of young blood." The Witch warns of the dangers.

"Will you be okay?"

"Lamia and I will be fine." Looking over to Lamia who smiles back at the prospect.

"They will not step on the hallow ground of a Witches Lair... Ehk-ehk-ehk." Lamia cackles at the prospect.

"And Gello... What of her?"

"She is with her own kind... I fear for the Beasts more than I fear for her... Get these two to the Monastery. Sanctuary for them and yourself."

"Thank you mother."

"What for?" The Witch asked wondering.

"For the Talk... She needed to hear it from you... To believe." Zahra watches the two children sleep before the fire.

"She will be fine... It is Sebastian I fear for." The Witch laments looking over to the wee urchin sleeping...

Chapter Nine

Ned awoke not to the morning light penetrating the thin fabric of the tent.

But to sensation of ground tremors.

Growing stronger as the thundering sound of heavy hooves pounding the earth grew closer. His mind stirs trying to reconcile the commotion of sounds. Was it part of his dream, or a riding troupe approaching?

Outside the tent he could hear loud abrupt voices coming from one direction, then the other. Encircled by horses, and men's voices shouting in a foreign language. Hearing someone rifling through his pack. Discovering a short metal object. Pushes the innocuous looking black button. Causing it to ignite with brilliance. Startling the man who drops the flashlight to the ground.

"What be this which craft?" A man cries out.

Stumping on it with the heel of his boot attempting to extinguish the flame of evil light.

"Nay witchcraft brother." Another suggests. He has seen these objects before. They came from another place and time.

Drawing the long blade of his sword sweeps it violently across the tent. Missing Ned's head by inches. Slashing a large opening and exposing him to the horsemen jeering loudly at the sight of the frail frighten individual staring back at them.

"*Ouster!* ..." The man shouts out to his men who laugh at the discovery. "...Our Lord will be pleased. An offering to keep the Beasts at bay."

"What of the Roma?" Another asks.

"Leave them be. They mean no harm... Our Lord will be pleased to have caught an Ouster!" The man declares the prize catch.

Another sweep of the long blade cuts away the remaining standing portion of the tent causing it to fall away completely.

Leaving Ned vulnerable and exposed. Only his sleeping bag to protect him from a heavy three foot blade. Surrounded by half a dozen horses panting heavily. Their heads bob up and down. Stumping their hooves in agitation. Stepping closer and closer. Ned backs away to avoid their encroaching hooves.

Confused as to who these men were. Perhaps he was trespassing? He was sure he had free rite of passage through the country. Maybe he had taken a wrong turn? Ned looks about for the leader. What was with the swords? The medieval customs? Was he on a movie set? Then looks about for cameras and sees nothing but scrubs and bushes. These men looked serious. Almost authentic. A horse stomps forward. Its head almost directly above Ned's. Its breath breathing down upon him. Fogging in the early morning air.

The smell of the horse's breath causes Ned to turn away.

A rider leans down as though to get a better look at Ned. Then sniffs the air as though to smell him.

"Who are you?" Asked Ned, fearful of the answer he does not wish to hear.

Suddenly, "*thud*", a large arrow lands inches from his side. Startling him. The thick wooden shaft telegraphing its lethal intent. Rousing a jovial laughter from the other horsemen.

"Nay you speak English man! ..." Warns the leader turning his horse about. "...Bring him!" He orders his men.

Two men climb down from their mounts and wrench Ned to his feet. Pulling at his feeble sleeping bag. Another goes through his pack. Coming across a medical kit curious to its contents.

"Hey... Don't touch that." Ned calls out.

Only to be greeted with a heavy blow from a gloved hand across his face. Dazing him momentarily. He reaches for his face feeling the swelling pain.

"Nay speak!" A man instructs him raising his hand intent for another blow.

Ned raises his hand as to say no more. He understood.

Another man finds a muesli bar. Ripping at the plastic wrapper then sniffs it strongly. Its sweet odor arousing him. Examining the roughness of the grainy treat takes a large bite and chews heavy with what teeth he had

left in his head before spitting the mouthful onto the ground in disgust. Re-examining the bar before feeding it to his horse.

“Horse grain! ... Muck!” The man protests while the others laugh at him.

A man examines Ned’s boots. The stitching and craftsmanship suggesting he must be a gypsy of some kind. Unlike one he seen before.

“Gypsy!” The calls out.

“Ney. I have seen his kind before... An Ouster who has wondered too far and forsaken the Witches warning.” The Leader looks back to the forest. “...Ye should have left when ye was told... Too late now. Leave his possessions here... They are of no use to him... Nor us.”

A man throws Ned his boots, followed by a shirt.

Gesturing he should put them on. Binding his hands and tethering him to a horse in front. Ned lunges forward as he is pulled abruptly by the rope. He looked back at his camp site and the remains of the processions. Leaving everything behind, he was heading in an unknown direction.

Uncertain where he was, and more uncertain *when* he was.

Abruptly the rope is jerked for him to keep up, else be dragged along. A whip cracked across his back. And he cries out with the sudden infliction of pain. The shirt no protection from the leather sting. His fitness a saving grace, and not having to carry a heavy pack.

But where was he heading?

It was a scene from the middle-ages. The men’s clothing. The horses. The swords and the arrow. It cannot be real he told himself reaching for some sanity in the madness unfolding about him. Expecting to awaken from this nightmare in a brilliant explosion that never eventuated. For an hour he kept up with the horse in front. Each staggering step. Rope jerking on his arms. The men on horseback surprised he was still standing. Most men would have succumb by now and fallen. Content to be dragged.

In the distance he saw a castle looming over the tree tops. On its turret stood men with crossbows. A flag flew on the upmost tower. But not one he recognized. A red-cross with what appeared to be flames raging from the ends of each bar. It’s white background offering little peace to his predicament.

Village like people came out and stared at him as though he were an alien. He stared back at them. Fearful of speaking lest he be whipped or beaten. Passing through the large Castle gates and into a court yard.

He had arrived. But where? But when?

Sebastian ran ahead and hid among bushes while Kristina tried to catch up.

Hearing a giggle from a nearby scrub giving away his location. Zahra keep a watchful eye on the mischievous pair as they darted about the path ahead.

“Stay close you two! ... I don’t want to have to explain to your aunt how you got eaten by wolves.” She calls out hoping to frighten him into slowing down.

But it had the opposite effect. And he darted off into the forest only to surprise Kristina from behind and pinning her down.

“Surrender!” He demands.

“Never!” She kicks him off and sends him trundling over several times.

‘God help the Ousters if Kristina is to save them.’ Zahra thinks to herself shaking her head.

She often wondered about the Ousters and their world.

And she felt an urge to venture into it. It was only by chance, or fate that Arthur had ventured into hers. Recalling the night the train mysteriously stopped by Gypsy camp. The camp fire raged into the misting evening sky as people danced to the ancient folk music. Taking Arthur by the hand she led him in a dance. A dance that would end in the consummation of a prophecy, Kristina. And as quietly as Arthur appeared, he left. The train moving from the Mist and into darkness of Transylvania.

That was the last she had ever seen of him.

As though a vessel for God’s purpose, Kristina was born nine months to the day. The Witch had always known Kristina would need to find her way to the outside world.

Suddenly Sebastian rushes into her pulling her from the distant thoughts.

“I’m hungry!” Sebastian complains.

“You... Are always hungry. Just a bit longer. We’ll stop at the waterfall.”

“What waterfall?” Exclaims Sebastian.

“Oh Lord. How did you ever find us?”

“I took a short cut.” He confessed.

“What short cut?”

“A fox showed me the way.” Said Sebastian truthfully.

“Good Lord... I fear for your Aunt’s sanity.” Zahra declared.

The sound of crashing water could be heard ahead.

Sebastian and Kristina rushed off before Zahra could warn them to slow down. The chill of the morning had burnt off and the morning sun had risen higher. Summer was near and she could smell it in the air. Crickets and cicadas sang out among the wild sun-flowers and long brown grass. A light breeze brushed its hand across the tops creating ripples.

Entering the clearing she discovers the two urchins naked and splashing each other with water. Sebastian stands under the waterfall allowing it to splash over his head. And giggles wildly at the crashing water over him.

“Okay you two... Out of there and put your cloths back on.” She orders them.

Sebastian takes his time, but curiosity got the better of him. And at the last moment dives back into the water and surfaces holding up a fish.

“Let it go! ... Bad enough you talk to the animals.”

Sebastian throws the fish in the air and it splashes back into the water to swim away. Then stands before Zahra expecting to be dried and clothed.

“I’m not your mother. You undressed yourself... You can dress yourself? ...” She reprimands him. “...Then you can eat.”

Laying out the buns and biscuits.

Sebastian returned with his pants on back to front and reaches for a sweet bun. Zahra caught him in time before he could shove it into his mouth.

“What do we say?” She looks at him.

Sebastian looks at Zahra. Then to Kristina. He had nothing. Kristina leans over and whispers into his wet ear.

“Thank you God for what I eat.” Sebastian looks up at the sky and shouts.

“I think God can hear you perfectly well... There be no need to shout. You know he can hear your every thought.” She informs him.

His eyes light up and he wonders what thoughts he may have had he should not have.

“But not so much little boy’s thoughts... But let that be a warning young man.” She consoled his baffled young mind.

With his belly stuffed with a large sweet bun Sebastian raced ahead and disappeared around a corner.

Moments later returning squealing holding a small metal rod. Zahra recognized it immediately. He looked into one end and pressed the small black button and a bright light blinded him. Dropping the mysterious device to the ground, rushes to stand behind Zahra clutching her leg as though that would protect him from the mysterious object.

Curious and unafraid Kristina picks up the metal rod and examines the strange metal object. Passing her hand over the front of it. Intrigued by the beam of light.

“What is it Ma-ma?” She asked curiously.

“It’s what the Ousters call a flashlight.”

“Flash-Light.” Kristina repeats the word slowly as though to commit the name to memory.

Sebastian rushes out and pulls it from her hands.

“Its mind... I saw it first!” Claiming its possession.

“It belongs to no one but the *Ouster*... Where did you find it?”

Sebastian looks to the corner.

“There’s other *stuff*.” Stuff he had no words for.

Zahra was in no rush to get there. She was always cautious where Ousters were about. There had been many who had been trapped in the realm. Few had ever returned. Claimed by the Beasts unaware of the Curse. Their possessions of little use to the realm that had no electricity to charge the *devices* they brought with them. Other items could find a use at the Gypsy camp. Clothing and fine fabric rare in these times.

Rounding the corner discovers a camp site now desecrated.

An orange tent lay shredded on the ground. The lack of blood and the presence of hoof marks on the ground suggested the Overlords men had gotten to the Ouster before the Beasts. Either way the Ouster was as good as dead.

“What’s this?” Sebastian hold up a piece of the orange tent fabric.

“It’s what left of the Ouster’s tent.” She explains.

Sebastian discards the colorful flimsy fabric.

“Collect what we can... We’ll take it back to camp.” She instructs the children.

“What’s this Ma-ma?” Kristina holds up a small black metal box with a white circle and red-cross on it.

“A medical box. Bring that... It will useful to us.”

Gathering what had been scattered by the men.

Recognizing a map and compass. Items overlooked by the Overlord’s ignorant heavy footed men. Packing what she could into the pack. She could smell the perfumed scents of the clothing.

“We best get away before the Overlords men return and find us here.” She looks over her shoulder in search of anyone watching on. “...Quick... No time to dally.”

The pack pressed heavily onto her shoulders. Wondering if she had been too greedy and taken too much.

The fate of the Ouster was another matter if they had fallen into the hands of the Overlord.

Rescued from the Beasts that would appear that evening. Only to held captive by someone equally as brutal. Nicholas Luxenberg was a ruthless man. His son Sigmund had not fallen far from the tree. She had evaded Sigmund’s clutches so far but for how much longer. The thought repulsed her, more so his father. On that they shared common ground.

Returning exhausted to the Gypsy camp, others gathered around her and recognized the pack as an Ouster’s.

“Dead?” They immediately ask.

“They live... From the hoof marks about his camp site the Overlord has him...” She proceeds to tell those keen to listen. “...Go through this and

take what you want... The Oyster has no need for them now.”

Sebastian’s Aunt appears and catches him by surprise.

“Where have you been young man?” Looking over to Zahra.

“He followed us to the Witch... They were about to eat him. Then we showed up.” Zahra lied.

“Good luck to them I say. Nothing but skin and bone on that boy... Now *get* inside before I decide to boil you up for nail soap.”

Sebastian scurries off squealing, up the steps of his wagon. Closing the half door quickly behind him, fearful his Aunt meant her words. A head of sun bleached blond hair peers over the opening. Pale blue eyes in search of his Aunt.

“I warned him before he came. But that boy a mind of his own.” Zahra tells her.

“Thanks for looking after him... How’s your mother?”

“She’s well, as is Lamia... Gello has gone into the forest with *others*.”

The inference needed no explanation. Gello was a dark force. Her magic was stronger than Lamia’s. She had out grown her mother’s abilities. It was time she found her own path. But what that path was, was still uncertain. Keeping to the inner woods, away from prying eyes. No one had seen or heard of her in months.

Rumors and hearsay drifted on wind. Some say she had taken the Left Path. Others said she was dead. Killed by the Beasts. Some say she had crossed over to the outside and walked among the Ousters.

“Take the wagons and horses to the Monastery before dark... Before the moon rises and mist descends...” She warns everyone about her, “...Pass the word.”

“Will they take us?” Sebastian’s Aunt asked suspiciously.

“Tonight they will.” Informs Zahra.

“Let’s hope so... There are some inside that are less Christian than the Beasts.”

“I know... But I know someone who will open the gates for us.”

Sebastian’s Aunt crosses herself.

“We’re leaving within the half hour!” Zahra calls out sounding the camp bell...

Chapter Ten

Armed men drag Ned through a series of dimly lit corridors.

Crashing their way through large wooden doors. Knocking his head in the process, his feet dragging on the stone floor. Incapable of standing after the pace of the march. Passing through an ornate pair of doors more stylish than the others Ned is ceremonially discarded to the floor at the foot of a throne.

Feeling a sharp kick in his side and a voice ordering to stand before the Overlord and Master. Groaning with the pain, he staggers to his feet. Legs straining to hold him upright. The midday sun shone through the portal window above creating a beam of light onto him. As though to put him under a spotlight. He squints and covers his eyes to shield the blinding light. He could sense others in the room. A dog growls his presence smelling fresh blood. It sits upright and awaits his master's words. Saliva drips onto the stone floor.

"Steady there Nero... Steady... Good boy." Nicholas strokes the large wolfhound's head.

There is deafly silence as those in the chamber take in the Ouster's appearance. They had not seen one for a year or so. This was a treat. Speculating his fate. Mused by the thought of an opportune offering to the Beasts.

"Where am I?" Asked Ned hoping to know the answer.

Without warning he is prodded hard into his back with the blunt end of a spear. Sending him to the ground flitching in pain. Grasping a rib fearing it had been broken. Staggering to his feet again.

"Nay speak 'til spoken to Ouster!" A man warns coarsely.

Ned falls silent.

His head bowed. Eyes growing accustomed to the dark chamber in which he found himself held captive. Primitive and cold. Taking in the room's features.. There was a smell about the place. The residual damp

smell of urine. Reluctantly he breathed the tainted air. Looking up to the throne. A well-dressed man in colored robes looks down at him. His appearance conflicting with the surrounding drab stone walls and grubby guards.

Nicholas examined Ned carefully and waited.

Taking in the Ouster's features. He had seen Ousters before. This one was no different, weak and pathetic. Whatever this outside realm of theirs was Nicholas wanted no part of it. Man had grown weak. Crossing over to his world. Proving no usefulness, than fodder for the Beasts. A saving grace to the feudal tenants that tilled his lands. Tapping his fingers on the heavy wooden arms of the throne, he spoke.

"From whence you come Ouster?"

"Ouster?" Ned parrots a question confused by the word. What did it mean?

This is greeted with another sudden heavy prod to his side by a nearby man. Ned buckles and almost falls to the ground grabbing his ribs and groaning with the sudden impact. Looking over man as to the reason for the vicious blow. Only to see him smirking with pleasure.

Nichols raises a hand to gesture for the guard to step away and let the crippled Ouster be. Silence ensued as he wondered how much the Ouster knew.

They never did. It was always a surprise to *them*.

Trespassing innocently into a land before their time. He was incapable of crossing into theirs. Trapped in the cursed realm. Unable to age. Unable to die. Lest by his own hand or that of another.

Sighing deeply, Nicholas continued.

"Outsider..." He repeats the question. "...From whence you come?"

"New York." Ned responds automatically, unsure if the man on the throne would understand.

"What is this place New York you speak? I hear this land before... Is it far?"

"Very, very far... Half a world away." Ned tries to explain.

"What is your name Ouster?"

"Ned..." Ned stops to correct himself. "...Ah, Edward Parffet."

“Welcome to my Castle Ned-Edward-Parffet....” Nicholas gestures with his hands the immediate extent of his domain. “...I am Nicholas Luxenberg... Overlord of these lands and all those who dwell in them... Including you... You will address me as *My Lord*... Failure to do so will result in your immediate death. You will bow your head in my presence... Understood?”

Nicholas glared down upon Ned imposing his authority and will on his new, but albeit short lived subject.

“Understood... *My Lord*...” Ned bows his head subserviently. “... Permission to speak? ... *My Lord*.” He asked hesitantly looking over his shoulder expecting another blow from behind that never came.

“Speak freely Ouster. You have nothing to fear... You are among friends.” Nicholas lied.

Guards grinned.

“Where am I? ... When am I? ... *My Lord*.” Lowering his eyes from Nicholas’ glare.

Suddenly Sigmund bursts through the doors having heard news of the new arrival. Keen to examine the merchandise his men had brought back with them.

“Ah... Sigmund. My son... You are just in time.” Nicholas begins his introductions.

Sigmund walks up to the Ned and stands before him. And sniffs him.

“They always smell so nice... Why is that?” Looking into Ned’s eyes for the answer.

They were about the same age and height.

Their eyes almost the exact shade of brown. Barring the color of their hair and their clothing they could well have been brothers. Sensing a rival suitor had arrived Sigmund punched Ned violently in the stomach. Buckling him over on to the ground.

“Play nice Sigmund... There will be time for blood later.” His words slipping before he could take them back.

Ned staggered to his feet and regained his balance. Seething with retribution in his eyes.

“Oh... We have a feisty one here father... Best we watch our backs.” Sigmund punches Ned again.

But he was ready for the blow and took it without falling. Sensing this was not the time to engage his rival. The two young bulls glared into the other's eyes before Ned lowered his head. He may not have been a fighter but he knew how the game was played.

"My Lord." Ned cowers obediently.

"This one learns fast. Shame..." Sigmund stops short.

Climbing the few steps to stand beside his father. The two men look down at Ned in silence as though reading the other's mind. The son a carbon copy of the father. There would be time for Sigmund to play with his food later. To soften him for the Beasts.

"Where was I before I was interrupted?" Nicholas turns to look at his son for the intrusion.

"Forgive me father. Please go on..." Sigmund apologizes weakly.

Nicholas sighs again to regain his thoughts and the question Ned has raised regarding his whereabouts.

"Hmm... Where are you? ... You are on the border of Transylvania and Wallachia. In some way a twilight zone between two great kingdoms..."

He hesitates to answer the second question.

"...As to when are is another matter..."

Nicholas looks at Ned unsure if he was following.

"You are in the year of our Lord 1477 Anno Domini."

"That's not possible..." Ned begins to dispute the year and quickly remembers. "... *My Lord.*"

"Tell me about this world of yours... Not of this?" Nicholas opens his hands gesturing his time.

"It's different to this time... We have motor vehicles and televisions and telephones and aero-planes that fly around the world and rockets that take man to the moon."

"Silence with this nonsense! ..." Protests Sigmund. "...It is a known fact the earth is flat else we all fall off the edge... And the oceans run dry... This world of yours is evil. Talk of taking man to the moon... Is impossible." Sigmund mocks Ned's delusional claims.

"Please forgive my son. He knows not of your world... There have been others. I hear this story many times I dare say it must be true..."

Nicholas reminisces those same words. "...What of Transylvania? ... Do the Ottoman take hold?"

"Ottomans? ..." Ned recalls the empire and history that went along with it. "...They were defeated in World War One... They choose the wrong side."

Nicholas spits on the ground at their name in disgust.

"There is a God after all." Nicholas grins at their demise.

"How many wars hath your world had if ye need to number them?"

"Only two so far... But give it time... *My Lord.*" Ned reflects.

"And of Transylvania? ...What becomes of this land?"

"Now part of Romania... My Lord."

"Never! ..." Shouts Nicholas. "... It will always be Hungary's!!"

A guard wallops Ned around the legs for the insult to his Master.

"Nay... Not his fault. He is but a messenger." Nicholas consoles Ned after the beating.

Hunched over, aching with pain, unsure where the next blow would come from.

Looking to either side. Guards with heavy shafted spears at the ready. Holding himself upright. It could not get any worse than this. They would have to free him once they know he meant them no harm.

"You speak of others? ... My Lord." Ned's enquires curiously.

"Many." Nicholas laments their sacrificial fate staring into space. Much like the one before him.

"Where are they?" Ned is greeted with a reminding blow across his back.

"Ye forget to who you speak Ouster!" A guard rebukes Ned and wallops him again across the back with his heavy shaft.

Expecting the blow Ned stands firm and takes it. Surprising the guard who readies himself for another. Only to have Nicholas raise his hand. Sigmund sniggers at the sudden infliction of pain on the Ouster. Watching him flinch with each successive blow.

"*My Lord...* Forgive me." Ned bows and apologies.

"You learn fast Ouster... Maybe too fast for my liking..." Nicholas saids suspiciously. "...There have *been* others. But they are not here now."

The inference was not lost on Ned and he let the question die, as no doubt had the Ousters.

“What trade you peddle say ye?”

“Doctor... Physician... A man of medicine... My Lord.” Ned tries to explain in words Nicholas could understand.

“Hmm.” Nicholas contemplates the answer, and carefully weighed the options.

The man before him was useless without his Ouster medicines. There was only one purpose left for him. Like the others before him.

“Mark him a vagabond.

Have him ready for the evening.” Nicholas ordered loudly for his guards to take the Ouster from his sight.

“I will see to that personally father.” Sigmund responds eagerly, looking forward to softening the Ouster up for the Beasts. Breaking Ned’s will to live. In the end he would wish the Beasts had gotten to him first.

“Don’t kill him... We need him alive.” Nicholas warns his son.

“Yes father.” Sigmund replies despondently.

Stolid heavy set guards seize Ned’s arms and drag him from the chamber.

Sigmund follows at the rear. Imagining the pain that would soon be inflicted on the Ouster that had stepped inside his lands...

Chapter Eleven

Creaking to and fro, the possession of ill matched wagons waltzed clumsily along the uneven road way that lead to the monastery.

An accordion played within one of the wagons. Whiffing Romanian music into the air. Pots and pans clattered against the rail boards. Reins slapped heavily on hind ends of horses that strained to pull the heavy caravan up the gradual incline. Sensing an urgency in the voices that called out for them to move faster. Sebastian and Kristina sat bouncing up and down on the board seat next to his Aunt. Giggling and laughing with each unexpected jolt.

Ahead Sebastian spies the Monastery's bell tower. Pointing to the top of the tree line. He jumps from the moving wagon before his Aunt could warn him to be careful. And he tumbles on the long grass. Rolling over several times before springing to his feet.

"I swear that boy has no brains." She said, shaking her head.

Kristina slips out the back of her wagon and catches up with him now running ahead of the caravan.

"Hold up you two!" Her mother calls out.

But it was too late.

Sebastian's squealing and giggles drowned out any warning Zahra offered as the caravan trudged warily closer to the gates. Only to find them closed. Desperately, Sebastian tries to climb the wall. Kristina watches in amusement, laughing each time he fell.

"Stop that Sebastian! ..." His Aunt calls out. "...Get over here now! Before I wallop your backside!"

Sebastian runs off squealing disappearing behind the wagon wheel and reappearing beside his Aunt as though nothing was amiss. Only to spy a passing butterfly and suddenly chases it through the long grass.

"Sebastian!" She calls out, but to no response.

Zahra looks to the sun. They had made good time and it would another hour before it would fall below the horizon. She climbs down and stands

before the gates. Stained with blood. Their arrival may have been notice by those inside. Picking up a rock she strikes the heavy wooden gates three times.

And waits.

She is greeted by silence. Again she strikes the heavy gates. Shaking them on their hinges.

Suddenly a small barred hatch door opens.

A dominative head, looking part-weasel part-human peers through back at Zahra and the Roma that stared back at him. Friar Talbot's eyes scan the group of gypsies and wagons judging them as trouble.

"What do you want?" The Friar spits out his disgust.

"Sanctuary for the evening. If you would be so kind." Zahra responds fearing the Friar had less mercy than the Beasts by the tone of his voice.

"You won't find it here. Now go away. Before I fetch the Shire Reeve." Talbot warns.

"I doubt you would have time." She looks to the sun, calling the Friar's bluff.

"You're lot are not welcome here." And he slams the hatch door abruptly in her face.

Undeterred she still had a final card to play.

She slams the rock seven times on the heavy wooden door.

Shaking it on its hinges and sending an ominous count on those listening inside. The hatch opens cautiously. Talbot examines her.

"Ye no cast no witches spell on these grounds. Be gone... No Roma are welcome here." Talbot warns about to close the hatch a final time.

Only to have a large stick shoved through it to prevent him from closing it.

"You may wish to tell my Aunt I wish to speak with her." Zahra speaks softly as though a dying wish.

"Certainly... And what pray tell is the Sister's name?" Talbot smirks.

"I think you call her by the name..." She hesitates momentarily.

"Well hurry up then... Who is the blessed Sister of which you speak?" Beseches Talbot becoming impatient.

“...Mother Superior... If you be so kind. Thank you Friar... I’m sorry... I didn’t catch your name?”

“Oh... Mother Superior... Why didn’t you say sooner? *Please*, just a moment.” Talbot grovels.

Heavy bolts sound their release. Followed by the sound of hinges squeaking almost as loud as Sebastian who had captured the butterfly and now was talking to it.

One by one the caravan of wagons slowly moved into the court yard. Horses protested with grunted neighs at being asked to move again. Sebastian came running through the gates just as they were about to close. Surprising Talbot at with his sudden appearance.

“Who are you?” Sebastian asked curious of the Friar dressed in a habit too big for him.

“I am Friar Talbot... And who might you be?” He asked looking down at the fair headed scrawny ragamuffin. “...Does your mother ever feed you?”

“Sebastian!” He squeals, deafening Talbot and frightening the nearby horses. Before running off with energetic legs in search of Kristina.

“Zahra is so good to see you... Thank the Lord you made it here in time... You are always welcome in the House of the Lord.” Mother Superior welcomes her.

Zahra looks over to Friar Talbot to sensing an awkwardness in his presence.

“As you are always welcome in ours.” Informed Zahra, still looking at Talbot.

“Where is Kristina?” Mother Superior looks about hoping to see her.

“Running about somewhere with Sebastian... I do not know where she finds the energy.”

“I know. I know... I swear by the Virgin Mary herself. The older I get the slower I move... Dare one day they will find me stationary.” Mother Superior stares in space at the thought.

“Likewise, someday I feel the same.”

“You are too young to feel old my favorite niece.”

“Don’t let Lamia hear you say that.” Warns Zahra.

“How are they? How is my sister?”

“They are well. My mother wishes you well.”

“As I do her. She is in my prayers.”

“So I informed her.” Responded Zahra leaving it there.

“Friar Talbot would please show my good niece her quarters.”

Talbot shuffled obediently forward.

“That won’t be no need. We are comfortable in the wagons. We don’t want to put you out more than we have already.” Zahra glared at Talbot.

“I understand... The Beasts won’t step on hallowed ground but it would give me piece of mind you were safe within the walls of this building.”

“As you wish... I will inform the others.”

Zahra was about to leave when she remembered the news.

“Have you had news of an Ouster being held by the Overlord?” Zahra enquires.

“No. Not of late... When you suppose?”

“This morning at dawn I say. We found a camp site... Shredded by swords nay by Beasts.”

“I see.... Friar Talbot you were up at the Castle this morning. Did you hear this news?”

“I am afraid not Mother Superior. I will enquire tomorrow.” Talbot presses his hands together and bows his head subserviently.

“Pray that Nicholas keeps them safe.” Mother Superior crosses herself.

Soon followed by Zahra and Talbot in unison. Kristina and Sebastian appear watching the three adults cross themselves. Sebastian mimics them only to have Talbot frown at him. Causing Sebastian to squeal with fright and run off into the Monastery’s dark doorway. Soon followed on his heels by Kristina.

Deeper and deeper Ned descended into the castle.

Escorted on either side by to large guards. To a dungeon where screams could not be heard. No light penetrated these sacred walls of fear. Torches hung from walls throwing out a bright flickering light and the rancid smell of burnt oil.

He looks about the medieval chamber. Instruments of torture lay on a table. A brazier fired white hot with a metal bar protruding from it. His

mind rapidly coming to a conclusion of his predicament. Struggling to free himself, he is greeted with a heavy blow to the head knocking him semi-conscious. Dazed, he is strapped to a table and watches on as guard laughed at him. They had seen it many times. Each time no less enjoyable.

A fat jailor sweating from the heat of the brazier guffaws as he welcomed his new tenant to his meager abode. Reaching for the iron bar from the fire now white hot, he spits on it. Making the other men laugh at the act. The tip of the bar was shaped with a large “V”, for *Vagabond*. Which would mark Ned as low-life and only one level above a slave. Punishment for being a Vagabond was death. These thoughts were beyond him now restrained by bindings to his legs and arms. Wondering where the next blow would strike. Bruised but not broken Ned withstood the punishing blows.

The jailor held out the branding iron before Ned, but inches from his face. And he felt the heat on his face.

“You can’t be fucken serious! Jesus Christ!” Ned protested loudly.

The blasphemy caused the laughter to immediately cease and deadly silence fall over the men. Taking the Lord’s name in vain was sacrilege and Ned was meet with another blow.

Knocking him thankfully unconscious.

Laughter erupted again as the solders anticipated the smell of burning human flesh. The jailor examined the glowing stencil. Blowing on it. Wishing for it to glow brighter. Inhaling the singeing smell of the iron deeply through nostrils, as though he were smelling the fragrance of a glowing flower.

His eyes hungry to see it buried into flesh.

“Get on with it fool, or ye be next!” Protested Sigmund.

Sigmund watched on disturbed that the Ouster had been knocked unconscious and was unable to enjoy the pleasure of the pain about to be inflicted.

“Why did you have to knock him out? ...” Sigmund abuses the guard for the untimely blow. “...Nay it matters... Get on with it.”

Unceremoniously, the branding iron is pressed into Ned’s chest.

His unconscious body flinched in reaction. Sigmund sniggered. Pleased that the Ouster had not gone unrewarded. The smell of burnt flesh drifted

in the air. Causing Sigmund's nostrils to twitch. Satisfied of a job well done he turned to the guards.

"What of his possessions?" He asks.

"We left them there... We did not think to bring them." A man begins to explain.

"Think?! Of course you did not think! You are not capable of thinking! ... You Imbeciles!" Sigmund spits out at the guard.

The insult lost on the men.

"Fetch them now before the Romani get wind of his arrival. There are treasures among them I desire." He ordered.

"But my Lord. The moon is to rise and the fog to fall... We won't make it back it time."

"Then I suggest you make haste! Either the Beasts kill you, or I. Which would you prefer?" He offers.

The man stands frozen indecisive at which would be a mercy killing.

"Get out of my sight man! You! ..." Sigmund points to the other man that had carried Ned to the dungeon, "... Go with him! And don't return without the Ouster's possession! ... Understood?"

"Yes my Lord." Responds the other man reluctantly.

The two men rush up the stairwell their swords banging against the walls. Hoping there was enough light in the day to ride to the camp site and back again. Sigmund stands over Ned. The brand still smoldering from his chest.

"Pathetic Ouster! ..." He spits on Ned and looks over to the jailor. "... Have him ready for the Beasts... You know what to do?"

"Yes my Lord." The jailor grunts.

"I have delicate matter to attend to." Sigmund grins walking away to his personal chamber.

Returning to his bedroom chamber finds the woman he had left tied to his bed.

"I thought you would have gone by now?" He mocks his lover.

"Very funny... I demand you untie me now, you wicked man!" The delicate woman fights her restraints.

"You are not in a position to demand anything."

“Perhaps you would like your servant man or father to find me here like this. What would they say of you?”

Sigmund pulls a knife from its sleeve and holds it to the woman’s throat. Dark thoughts briefly surface then subside.

“I dare you to.” She stares coldly into his eyes.

“Hmm... You’re no fun anymore.” And swiftly cuts the cords holding her in place.

“What kept you to leave me so exposed?”

“An Ouster was caught this morning. In the far lands. Branded and soon to be at the stake... To be offered up to the Beasts for supper.”

Sigmund’s mind drifts at the heinous thought, imagining the Ouster’s feeble body being torn apart by savage black Beasts.

“You are sick my Lord to treat them such way... Is there no Godliness in you to forsake this death?”

“No... None what so ever... We offer a sacrifice. As Abraham would his own son.” Sigmund spouted archaic scripture.

“But his son was spared by God.”

“Then we shall see if God will spare the Ouster! ...” Jest Sigmund, pleased with himself, “... Besides. It was not my decision... Tis my fathers.”

Sigmund distances himself from the Ouster’s fate. He looks over to the woman laying naked on the large royal bed.

“Best you be back before it gets dark, lest God has to choose who to spare.”

“Can’t I stay here?”

“As you say my dear Ruth, what if my servant or father were to find you here. Oh dear... I unfortunately have less of a reputation than you to lose my virtuous flower.”

“That’s Sister Ruth to you. And don’t you be forgetting it.” She warns him.

“You’re virginity is safe with me.”

“I doubt that... You have plucked more flowers than is physically possible... Nay your cock fall off from wear.”

“Leave my cock out of this.”

“On that we agree... Where are my clothes?” Ruth looks about the floor.

Sigmund hands Ruth a simple cotton dress and watches as her appetizing body disappears beneath it. Pushing her to the bed forcing himself on top of her.

“Off of me if I am to get back before dark... Mother Superior is already suspicious on my tardiness.”

“You can ride?”

“Is not womanly to ride a horse”

“But can you ride?”

“Of course.”

“Then take one of the horses out back. It will find its way back. If not... Then the Beasts can have it. Anything to ensure your safety my love.”

“Liar!” She kisses him quickly and pushes him aside.

Disappearing from the room without looking back.

Sigmund laid staring at the ceiling. Wondering what was to become of Ruth when the time came for him to take Zahra’s hand in holy matrimony as his Queen. His mind played out Ruth’s darkening misfortunes...

Chapter Twelve

“Where have you been?” Asked Sister Rebekah seeing Sister Ruth creeping suspiciously through the Juda door at the rear of the Monastery.

“Out for a walk. Taking in God’s creation.” She lies.

“That you need to enter through the rear gate my beloved Sister?” Rebekah teases Ruth knowing full well where she had been.

Rumors travel between tongues quicker than the spoken words of the bible. Ruth was lost for an excuse. Before she could utter a lie, Rebekah informed her of the arrivals at the monastery.

“The Gypsies have made camp out front. Zahra is here. And Kristina! ...” Eyes lit up with the exciting news, “...She said an Ouster may be held by the Overlord. We should go to the chapel and pray for his safety.”

“Alas no prayer will save this Ouster... Nicholas has plans to offer him to the Beasts this very evening.” Said Ruth pulling off her dress revealing scratch marks down her back.

Rebekah imagines their origin. Her eye fixate on the marks.

“What?” Asked Ruth turning about pulling her black nun’s habit over her head. Instantly transforming from wanton Jezebel to virginal Nun.

“Nothing... ” Rebekah drops the curious look. “...How do you know such things?”

“Villagers tell me.” She lies.

“Oh... We must inform Mother Superior. She will speak with Lord Nicholas.”

“There is no time. It will be dark within the hour. The Ouster’s fate is in God’s hand now.”

“Nonetheless she should be informed.” Rebekah insists.

“You go ahead... I will follow shortly.” Ruth lied, belying a confrontation with Mother Superior.

“What is it child?” Asked Mother Superior seeing Rebekah standing before her panting and head bowed before her.

“The Ouster Mother Superior...” She stops to catch her breath.

“What of the Ouster?” Mother Superior implores her to continue eager to know more.

“...The Overlord holds him... He is to be offered up to Beasts this evening.”

“Who told you this Sister?”

“Sister Ruth. She’s... Coming...” Rebekah looks behind her hoping to see her appear at any moment.

“And did Sister Rebekah hear such facts. I wonder? ...” Mother Superior had her suspicions and would not press further. Ruth’s digression would be addressed another day, “... Hmm, it will be dark within the hour.”

She looks to the sky and setting sun nearing the peaks of the Carpathians to the West. The mist would soon roll down from the foothills and blanket the lands. Thick as pea soup. Looking to the East to see the Blood Moon’s crown begin to rise.

“There will be no time for talk. And what talk there is, will be with God... Pray the Ouster dies a quick death.”

“Aunt! ...” Zahra exclaims in horror listening on, “...You can’t do nothing! We still have time!” She pleads for a chance to save the Ouster.

“These gates will stay closed until the sun rises tomorrow morning... No one shall pass through until then. I am sorry child, but there nothing that can be done to save him.”

Placing her hand on Zahra’s shoulder, as though to decree her decision as final. Then turns to walk away to the chapel for prayer. Sister Rebekah follows quietly in her wake. Head bowed and hands clasped in front of her. Fingers clutching rosemary beads and wooden cross.

“You can join us if you wish?” Mother Superior turns briefly to Zahra.

“I must find Kristina and Sebastian.” Zahra lies.

“Friar Geoffrey! ... Put Sebastian down!” Zahra orders seeing the boy squealing and giggling being held by his ankles.

A soft thud sounds as Sebastian hit the turf. Unscathed, he quickly stands and brushes off the impact before rushing off giggling.

“Friar Geoffrey. Don’t go.” Zahra catches him.

“What is it Zahra?” Geoffrey spoke quietly.

“I seek a favor. And ye can say no.” Zahra looked about for prying ears.

“I fear ye will still proceed if I do.”

There was a silence to confirm his suspicions.

“Hmm... What troubles you child? Ye have my ear for now. Words will not pass beyond us.”

“Thank you Brother Geoffrey.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. Now what trouble you?” He asked hesitantly.

“The Ouster... Within these walls ye are safe. Beasts cannot step on hallowed ground. But out there...” Zahra looks beyond the walls. “...The Ouster is for surely dead if left unsaved. I need your help.”

“Ye cannot be serious. To venture into the mist, with Beasts in search of blood. I will not step a foot from these grounds.”

Geoffrey shakes his head and is about to walk away when Zahra grabs him by the arm.

“Not you... I.” She said bravely.

“You? What can you do?” Looking at her femininity.

“Try.”

“Ye are brave child. Albeit a foolish one... Then what of I do you seek?”

“Man the gate for our return. Be ready at any hour... I will knock three times with a rock. Just be there to open the gates... That’s all I ask.”

“You are foolish to think you can save this Ouster. My prayers will be with you child... And what of Kristina if you nay return?”

“Sebastian’s Aunt will care for her. Nay I have her locked up in a Monastery all her life.”

“You make it sound as though it were a bad thing.” Responds Geoffrey.

“Or maybe I should leave her here...” Zahra warns him. “... Granddaughter of a Witch... Great granddaughter of Vlad Tepes himself.”

“No, no... Best she stay with her own *kind*.” Geoffrey backs off not wanting to press the issue further.

“Be at the gates. That’s all I ask of ye... And not a word to Mother Superior.”

“My lips are sealed.” Geoffrey vows.

“When do you intend to leave?”

“Now.”

“Now?” Catching him by surprise.

“Close the gate behind me.” Zahra beckons him.

Standing in the darkening shadows Talbot overhears every word of the foolhardy plan.

One he could not allow to eventuate. His Master Nicholas would be displeased if the Ouster escaped at the hands of a Gypsy. A gypsy harbored by the Monastery. It was too late to warn Nicholas of the hatched plan to save the Ouster. The loss of a Roma and an Ouster a double blessing. Talbot had a plan of his own and steps back deeper into the shadows.

Darkness descended the lands and Mist cascaded over the walls, filling the courtyard.

Kristina and Sebastian ran playfully in it. Creating swirling pathways in their wake. Oblivious of the danger it foretold. Taking one last look at her daughter Zahra steps quickly through the door in the main gate, and into the thick sea of fog. Hearing the sound of heavy bolts slamming into place behind her. She was on her own. Protected by the grace of God and a long bladed knife concealed beneath her apron. She looked to the raising blood moon.

As though it were watching her. Foreboding her plan, it would not be denied the sacrifice.

Which way? Cut through the forest and risk confronting a Beast? Or take the longer route of the road up to the Castle? Time was precious and there was only one answer. She knew the forest path well and ran as fast as she could. Pulling the long dress up from flapping against her legs, she ran swiftly through the long grass creating as little noise in the still night air. Only her panting breath and light footsteps giving her away.

Sounds resonated around her.

The Monastery bell abruptly sounds as though by someone giving her a bearing. Penetrating deeper into threateningly dark forest unsure of what lay ahead. Was the Ouster already dead? She would worry about that when she got there.

She ran and she ran. And she ran.

Stopping intermittently behind trees listening for Beasts. Making out moving shadows and shapes. Swaying branches. Content the path was clear she continued on her way. Crouching and listening for anything

untoward. The dense mist making visibility almost impossible. The bell tolled again. Most distant.

She was close.

Arriving at the edge of the clearing she halts behind a tree.

Catching her breath. Feeling for the hilt of the knife at her side. Blinded by mist she hears a meek voice coming from within. Strange cries echoed in the air. Howls. Screams. It was hard to distinguish one from the other.

“Ouster?!” Zahra softly calls out in the direction of the groans some distance ahead.

“Help me!” Ned calls out in pain some distance still ahead of her.

Ropes restrain him. Binding him to a large stake struck deep into the ground.

“Quiet! ... Lest the Beasts to hear!” She calls out quietly hoping he had heard.

Crouching among the long grasses she made her way cautiously closer. The knife in hand and ready to lunge at anything that comes at her. A tall dark shape appears above her.

Then a voice.

“Help me.” Ned pleads weakly.

“Quiet Ouster!” Zahra looks up to see him half naked, and badly beaten.

His head drooped. Looking like Christ on the Cross. Swiftly she cuts through the ropes that fall away and he topples to the ground. Trying to lift him to his feet, the exhaustion and beating had taken their toll on him. From behind them she hears a noise moving through the grass towards them. In the near distance she can make out a wolf’s head. Its eyes red from the moon light. Crouched as though about to pounce.

Zahra holds the knife out.

Another noise comes from behind the wolf. Through the grass appears a small child.

“Sebastian what are doing here?” She calls out quietly unwilling to approach the wolf.

Sebastian crouched beside the wolf and patted it as though it were a pet. Putting his head against the wolf. The wolf sniffs the air and groaned a

growl in the direction behind of Zahra. Leaping to its feet rushes forward and pushes itself past her into the fog.

“Where’s the boy?” Noticing Sebastian had vanished.

“Sebastian!” She calls out softly. Her eyes trying to penetrate the thick mist for him.

Suddenly, vicious snarling and howls sounded some distance away. Wolf and Beast were in battle.

“We must make haste to the gate.” She tells him.

Grabbing his hand pulls him along behind her.

“Stay close else be lost in this mist from hell.”

“I can’t go back there!” Ned protests refusing to move.

“To the Monastery. Nay the Castle... You will be safe there.” She tells him.

Ahead of them, two wolves appear pushing their way through the long grass.

Heads appear, their teeth exposed and snarling angrily. Bolting directly at Ned. He lifts his arms to shield himself from the attack that never came. Before rushing past him to join the fight of their fellow wolf. Noises of thrashing and growling resonated within the murkiness. Suddenly a loud “yelp” cries out and crashing “thud” to the ground.

Zahra could only think that the Beast had gotten the better of one of the wolves.

“Quick before the other two fall.”

Zahra leads the way retracing her steps to the edge of the forest. Looking about for Sebastian only to see tall dark shadows of the trees trough the soft red haze of moon light.

“Can you run?”

“I think so.”

“Then run. Stay close... We don’t have much time.” She warned him.

Tripping over fallen branches, gathering himself to keep pace with Zahra.

Eyes becoming accustomed to the dim light filtering through the tree tops. Legs ached and his lungs burned. Those pains would be nothing compared to whatever the wolves were attacking. It was all too surreal for

him to understand. Like his dream of the trenches he just wanted to wake up from the nightmare about him.

The moon had risen higher and brighter. Glowing blood red through the mist. Searching for the Ouster. Searching for Zahra. It would not be denied its feast. Calling demons from their lairs. Beasts to roam the land in search of them.

Arriving at the path that lead down to the Monastery, she listens for sounds that gave away a Beast's heavy presence. Silence greeted then. Then a sound of a bell. The Monastery bell. Someone was looking out for them. Talbot looks up to the bell tower in disgust.

'The Beasts would have heard it too', she thought.

"This way. We don't have much time before they be upon us." Zahra beckons Ned to follow.

'Who was this woman that risks her life for me? ... Where are the others? It cannot just be her? And the boy? ...' Ned asked himself.

"Where's the boy?" Looking about the mist for him.

"He'll be fine... It's us we should be worried about." She warns him to keep going.

Geoffrey waits anxiously inside the gates.

Looking to the belfry and wonders who could have rung the bell at such an odd hour. Waking sleeping brethren and causing lamps begin to be lit. He thinks he hears a noise behind him. Before he had time to look around he is struck with a heavy blow to the back of his head and tumbles to the gravel path unconscious. Blood bleeding profusely from the open wound.

"The Gypsies! The Gypsies! ... They've attacked Brother Geoffrey! ... Someone help me bring him inside. Oh poor Brother Geoffrey... The Gypsies!" Talbot rants woefully to anyone who would believe him.

"Go with Brother Talbot and bring Brother Geoffrey to the infirmary. Quick now!" Mother Superior orders another Brother to assist.

The two Brothers struggled to carry the heavier Geoffrey. A trail of blood inked a path to the infirmary.

"Poor Brother Geoffrey... Oh Lord save our beloved Brother." Talbot bellows on.

"Sister Rebekah. Attend to the wound."

Mother Superior looked to Talbot.

“A word outside Brother Talbot.” She sternly ordered him to follow.

Looking anxiously about as though for an escape route Talbot stands before Mother Superior.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I found Brother Talbot by the gate. He... He... Had been attacked... By the Gypsies!”

“What makes you so certain it was the Romani?”

Mother Superior watched as Talbot squirmed.

But was met with silence. There was something in his cowardly demeanor that suggested he was not telling the whole truth.

“What was he doing at the gates at this late hour? ... What were you?” She asked probing further.

“I heard the bell. And went to investigate... Poor Brother Geoffrey.”

“Yes, yes poor Brother Geoffrey... If his skull is as thick as his stomach I doubt he has lost as much blood as he has appetite... Now go to the Chapel and pray for Brother Geoffrey.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes. At this hour... Off you be!” She orders him.

“Sister Esther. Find me Zahra. Bring her to me now.”

“Yes Mother Superior.” And disappears in search of her.

Returning shortly soon after with the news that she was not about.

Kristina stands beside the Sister and looks up at Mother Superior.

“Where your mother Kristina?”

“I don’t know. I truly don’t.” Kristina looked up at her Great Aunt with honest green eyes.

She was telling the truth.

“Your mother better not be what I think she is doing.” Mother Superior speculates a very real possibility “...Go be with Sebastian and await her return.”

“Sebastian is not here. I have not seen him since Ma-ma’s disappearance.”

“Mercy be with God. Something strange is a foot with this evening. I will need to prayer... Come with me Kristina.” She takes Kristina by the hand and leads her to her private chapel.

“Has your mother taught you how to prayer sweet thing?”

“Of course.” She replies surprising her Aunt.

“Then let us pray together that your mother and Sebastian return in one piece.”

Kristina kneels and places her hands together before her and bows her head. Nips move in silence as she utters a prayer for their return. Mother Superior watches on. More convince than ever that Romani had nothing to do with Brother Geoffrey’s battering.

Zahra reaches the monastery and knocks on gate with a rock.

Hoping to hear the unbolting of the locks. Nothing. She knocks again. Peering through a crack she sees lamps lit but no life about. She cannot risk knocking again or calling out else she attracts the Beasts. She looks about. Sounds resonate from within the woods towards them. A Beast had followed them. Howls came from within the mist. A heavy body crashes recklessly through the bushes, and was getting closer.

“This way.” A small voice calls out from the side.

“Sebastian?” Zahra hears his voice coming from the side somewhere.

A small hand appears briefly through the mist and gestures for them to follow. Squeezing between two walls they shuffle their way further and further down the narrowing ally. Suddenly a snarling groan sounds behind them. A Beast had their scent. Unable to force its way between the walls. Frustrated its path was blocked.

And suddenly disappeared.

“Almost there.” Said Sebastian.

The sound of a Beast grew closer again. Sebastian crouches and opens a small door at the base of the wall.

“Through here!” He instructs.

“You first Sebastian. Quick before I ... Tell your Aunt!” She tries to frighten him.

Sebastian scurried through the small gate way like a rat and onto the hallow turf of the Monastery.

“You Ouster... Through there... Else be supper.” She warns him.

Ned crouched and crawled quickly through the small opening. Followed swiftly by Zahra with knife still in hand. Closing the door suddenly behind her with her foot. The latch catching in time. A loud evil

roar sounded on the other side of the wall. Crawls sound scratching against the small wooden door. Its heavy hinges and bolt keeping it shut. The Beast pounds its fists against the wall and howls to moon for retribution.

Denied its prey, tonight it would go hungry.

Zahra pushes herself away from the opening. And stares at the small door expecting it to burst open at any time. Shaking, the knife in her hand quivering. Ned sees how frighten she is and reaches over to calm her. In fright or reflex, she turns and points the blade at him as though he were a Beast about to attack.

“Ssh... It’s okay... It’s only me.” He says calmly.

His hand touching her arm gently. Hoping she would lower her guard. She drops the knife and shakes. Ned puts his arm around her to comfort her.

“Let’s get you inside.” He tells her.

She yields to his caring voice.

Lifting her exhausted body and carries her towards an entrance lit with a single lamp. Looking about for the small mysterious boy with blond hair.

Now nowhere to be seen...

Chapter Thirteen

“Can this night get any stranger?” Said Mother Superior.

Seeing a wary half-naked man carrying Zahra through the door way.

“Put her down here Ouster... Have ye both been bitten?”

Seeing the welt of the recent branding on his chest.

“No... Exhausted from the running.”

Ned places Zahra’s frail body onto a table. And begins to examine her. Feeling her pulse and opening an eye lid.

“What are you doing Ouster? Nay touch a woman... Know your place.” Mother Superior warns Ned.

“I’m sorry. I’m a doctor... I can help her.” He offers standing back.

“Maybe in your world. Nay touch a woman in this... If you want to help. Help Brother Geoffrey in the infirmary... Sister Esther take the Ouster to him. Be quick about you now!” Mother Superior snaps.

“Yes Mother Superior.” She responds bowing her head rushing off with Ned following closely in her wake.

Following Sister Esther through a series of darkened hallways Ned comes to a simple room furnished with simple wooden cots. Lit with lamps. Ned finds Geoffrey laid out, blood seeping through a piece of cloth wrapped about his head. Talbot eyes the Ned suspiciously. He had never seen an Ouster in the flesh.

They almost appeared human.

“Nay touch him Ouster!” Talbot rushes forward to restrain Ned from examining Geoffrey.

“Your... *Mother Superior* instructed me to see this man... *Geoffrey?*” Ned turns for confirmation from Sister Esther.

“That is so.” Sister Esther bows her head to Talbot.

“I forbid it!” Talbot calls out as though in charge.

Mother Superior walks into the room interrupting the commotion.

“You forbid what? ... Brother Talbot? Are you not supposed to be in the Chapel praying for your beloved brother’s recovery?” She reminds

him.

“But... But...” Talbot stutters but without an argument to support it.

“Be gone with you! ...” Orders Mother Superior burning a holy glare into him leaving the room. “... Pray that the Ouster can save Brother Geoffrey’s life.” She over dramatizes the injury causing Geoffrey to look up with concern. Eyes darting between Ned and Mother Superior.

Talbot scurries like a rat from the chamber towards the chapel.

But he would not be stopping there. He had another place he had to go first. To seek redemption. To find peace and salvation. And he disappears into the darkness of the hallway.

“Let’s have a look at the wound shall we...” Begins Ned forgetting his own painful injuries.

Looking up to Mother Superior as though to seek permission to touch Geoffrey.

She nods and Ned begins to unwind the blood soaked cloth.

“I need boiled water and a clean linen cloth.”

Sister Esther disappeared to the kitchen. Returning sometime later with a steaming bowl of water and fresh folded cloth.

“I guess that will have to do.” Ned examines the primitive medical supplies.

“So which are you? Crips or Blood?” Ned joked looking at the familiar wound.

The joke went over everybody’s heads.

“Tough audience eh? ... Okay.”

Geoffrey's eyes roll in their sockets. Dazed and woozy as to where he found himself and growing pain on the top of his head. And the strange man attending to him. Ned applied pressure to the open wound causing Geoffrey to moan with pain.

“It’s just a scratch... I’ve seen worse.” Ned played down the laceration still pulsing blood.

“It doesn’t feel like a scratch.” Geoffrey replies groggily reaching for the wound.

“Ah! No touching till tomorrow. I don’t want it any more infected than it probably already is... I wish I had my medical kit.”

“Do you mean this?” Says Kristina standing beside him holding out a small black box.

“And who might you be?” Surprised by the sudden appearance of the child standing before him.

“Kristina.”

“Hello Kristina. That’s a pretty name... I am Edward. But people call me Ned for short.” Ned plied his bed side manner.

“Hello *Ned*. Kristina replies smiling.

“Where did you find this? ...” But he quickly surmised they must have at the camp site, “...Who told what this was? ... Is there another *Ouster* here?” Looking about the room at the people watching on.

“I did? ...” Zahra appears now at the doorway feeling less exhausted. “... Help Brother Geoffrey... Then we talk.”

Ned swabbed the wound clean and examined the damage. Kristina leans in closer to get a better look.

“Why don't you hold this against this? Okay... You can be my nurse.” Ned instructs Kristina.

“What’s a nurse?” She asked curiously.

“Someone helps a doctor make people better.” He grins.

Kristina pressed the cloth against the wound while Ned searched the medical kit for what he was looking for.

“This may sting a little.” He informed, about to apply the anti-antiseptic.

“Jesus!” Geoffrey curses the sudden infliction of pain.

“Brother Geoffrey! ...Ye take the Lords name in vain... Prayer He forgives you!”

“Yes Mother Superior... Sorry Mother Superior.”

'At least some things haven't changed in five hundred years.' Ned thinks to himself.

“Be gentle with him Ouster. He may appear the size of an Ox... But he bruises easily.” Informed Mother Superior.

“Okay then... Let’s get you stitched up.”

Geoffrey’s eyes opened wider at the frightening procedure and leaned away from Ned.

“Either that or I let you die...” Ned lied. “...Now don’t be such a sook. This won’t hurt me a bit.”

Ned winks at Kristina causing her to giggle.

And went about suturing the wound neatly before applying a modern day Band-Aid to top of Geoffrey's ancient bald spot. Ned could not help notice that Sister Rebekah watched on with concern for Geoffrey than the others in the room.

'Interesting.' He thought to himself.

"You'll live. Get some rest... I'll check you in the morning okay?" He ordered him.

Appearing concussed, he checked Geoffrey's eyes and asked him what day it was.

Not that Ned knew what day, or year it was any more.

"You did a very good job Nurse Kristina. Thank you... I couldn't have done it without your help." he smiles and receives one in return.

"Off to bed you." Zahra orders Kristina.

Kristina skips merrily away and into the dimness of the corridor.

"Thanks for saving me... I owe you." Said Ned, unsure how he could ever repay her.

"You owe me nothing Ouster." Responds Zahra.

"How are you feeling?" Asked Ned.

"I'm fine... How are *you* feeling?" She asked seeing the freshly branded "V" on his chest.

Re-acquainting him with the pain.

Running finger tips over the ridges of the raw burnt skin. Swabbing it applied a cream from a small tube. Before dressing it with a large white bandage. Feeling his body for aches he wipes away the grime and sweat of the day.

"I'll live. Who are you?" Unsure if the Overlord's answers still held true.

"My name is Zahra... That was my daughter Kristina."

"I know... We've met."

"Say what be your name Ouster?"

"Ned... Ned Parffet." He responds.

"You are an Englishman on foreign land. You should have turned back when the Witch warned you."

“So I keep getting told... How did you know about that?”

“She warns all Ousters that step too far into the forest.”

“I never made it out in time... Where am I?” He asked wanting to vindicate what was happening.

“You are where you were yesterday. Just another time... So to speak.”

“What is this place?”

“A Monastery. We are safe here. The Beasts cannot step on hallowed ground.”

“What are these *Beasts* that everyone talks of?”

“We will talk more tomorrow. You will be safe from them here... You need to rest, *Ned Parffet*.” Zahra defers the question for another time.

“Sister Esther... Show Brother Ned to his room.” Commands Mother Superior.

“Yes Mother Superior.” Sister Esther bows her head to confirm the directive and leaves the room with Ned wondering if he should follow down a dimly lit hall.

“Sister Rebekah... Let Brother Geoffrey sleep... He has had enough excitement for today.”

“Yes Mother Superior.” Sister Rebekah bows her head and leaves to follow Sister Esther.

“He seems like a kindly man.” Mother Superior observes of Ned.

“So it seems.” Observes Zahra.

“What were you thinking Zahra? ...You could have been killed.” Mother Superior begins to reprimand Zahra.

“I did what any Christian would have done.”

“What of Kristina?”

“Then I know she would be in good hands. Nay that matters now. The Ouster is safe for now...”

“Nicholas will be wanting his pound of flesh... The Ouster was branded a *Vagabond*. He will not be happy once he discovers the ropes cut...” Mother Superior began.

“I know the law as well as thee. Romani bare its prejudice every day.” Said Zahra sourly.

“You were very brave saving that one Zahra... But think of Kristina next time.”

“Which reminds me... Have you seen Sebastian?”

“He should be in his bed.” Said Mother Superior.

“I very much doubt that.” Suggests Zahra.

Zahra leaves Mother Superior alone in the room with Brother Geoffrey cradling his sore head.

Quietly she opens the door to a small room containing two cots. In one lay Kristina now asleep and in the other, empty. Then hears a giggly snore come softly from Kristina’s bed. She pulls back the blanket and finds Sebastian fast asleep beside her. She stares in wonder at the small boy. Torn between slapping his backside, and hugging him.

The decision was easy.

“Thank you Sebastian.” She leans down and kisses him.

Brushing the blond hair from his face, pulls the blanket back up over them.

Climbing into the other cot her mind wandering between the events of the evening. It was far from over. What she had done was fool hardly. How had Friar Geoffrey come to suffer the wound? Who could have done such a thing and jeopardize her safety? Nothing made sense. Ned’s face appears in her mind. His kind eyes, and his soft healing hands.

Somewhere between the flickering images and exhaustion she succumbs to sleep.

Bruised and bloody, with scratches down the side of his face.

A single guard sits on a stool panting and exhausted. Looking as though he had been battle. Holding his arm as though he had been wounded by a blade. He had returned without the possessions Sigmund sort.

“Where’s the other man?” Sigmund shouts entering the dungeon having been informed of the man’s return.

“He didn’t make it... He fell... To the Beasts.” The man reports panting with pain and exhaustion having made it back to the Castle in haste.

“Yet you? ... You survived?” Asked Sigmund curiously, examining the man.

“Barely my Lord... As my wounds attest.”

“You’ve been bitten?” Sigmund stands back his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“Nay... Nay.” The Soldier lies.

“Where are Ouster’s possessions?” Sigmund enquires.

“Not to be found... Gypsies had cleared the ground bare... I swear my Lord.”

The man looks over his shoulder, clutching his arm. Hoping Sigmund would believe him.

“Cursed Gypsies...” He spits on the stone floor. “...Say ye not been bit but ye hold your arm so... Show me the wound you conceal! ... Show me!” He shouts at the man.

“Tis nothing my Lord.” The man cringes backwards.

“Jailor!” Sigmund orders the bulky jailor to rip the leather sleeve from this arm.

Tearing the sleeve away. His arm punctured by two fang marks still seeping with a yellow fluid. Sigmund stands back as does the Jailor from the leaching wounds. Fearful the man would *turn* at any moment.

“Nay fear... We shall seek ye help.” Sigmund lies sympathetically.

The man pulls his sleeve back over his shoulder and sighs momentarily. Sigmund placed a hand in the man's shoulder causing him to jump.

“Relax my friend... You are amongst friends.” He lied again.

“Thank you my Lord. You are too....” But the man never able finished his gratitude.

Without warning Sigmund violently trusts the lengthy blade of his dagger deep into the man's neck. Penetrating heart and lung. Gasping for his last breath. Gagging and gurgling on blood the man struggles with the encroaching certain death. Life seeping from his bones. His soul seeping from his body. And surrendered unwillingly to the futile fight.

A head slumps. A body falls limp. Removing the blade wipes the tainted blood on the man’s shoulder. Holds it over the brazier burning bright. Watching the flames sterilize the blade. Strange black fumes belched into the air. Sigmund blew them away lest he inhale them.

“Remove his head and burn it! ... I'll have no walking dead among us.” Sigmund orders the Jailor.

Dragging the flaccid body over to a long table the Jailor throws the dead man about like a piece of meat.

Reaching for a heavy meat cleaver raises it above his head before slamming it onto the man's neck. Severing the head in one massive blow. The head wobbles momentarily before rolling off the table and a sounding loud cracking thud as it strikes the stone floor. Grabbing locks of greasy hair throws the head into the raging brazier. Flames flared wildly as it consumed the melting flesh to the bone. Acrid black smoke billow into the air and with it the smell of singed hair. Aggregating Sigmund's nostrils.

"One less Beast to worry about." He boasts in proudly.

And one less soldier to man to his back. Sigmund covers his mouth with a cloth dare he breaths the contaminated vapors.

"Damn Roma! Thieves! Curse them! ... I want what is mine!" Sigmund hollers out as though he wanted them to hear.

Returning to his bed chamber to address a delicate matter he had tied up.

Unseen by all, the second man had found his way back to the castle.

Concealed under the blanket of the mist. Finding sanctuary in a darkened corner of a remote chamber. Having battled the Beast and survived. Savaged, but living. His companion having fled and leaving him for dead. He would have done the same to escape the horror. His body burning with fever. Bitten wounds aching and weeping yellow tears.

Crawling into the dark damp chamber forgotten by all but him. He looks up to a window above to the blood moon. Its beams reaching for him and wanting to possess him. Curling into a ball like a dog to sleep. Blood shot eyes rolled in their sockets. His mind drifting in and out of consciousness.

A voice within his mind howled...

Chapter Fourteen

Sunlight peeks over the Carpathians to the east.

Sunlit fingers crawl over the fields. One poked at the bell tower as it tolled for morning prayers. Ned is awoken abruptly by the loud sudden intrusion of noise. Unsure if it had been an detonation in his dream. Eyes open and he takes in the strange sleeping quarters he found himself. A stunted wooden cross hung above his cot. A coarse woolen blanket covered him, his head on a lumpy pillow. Confused with the events of the past twenty four hours.

Relieved he was still alive.

In his peripheral vision senses someone on the cot opposite and looks over to see a small boy with blond hair.

“And who might you be young man?” Ned asked curiously recognizing the boy from the previous evening.

“Sebastian... Who are you?” He asked curiously.

“Ned.”

“You an *Ouster*?”

“Apparently... And you?”

“*Gypsy*.” Sebastian said as a matter of fact.

“Well thank you Sebastian for saving me last night... Weren't you afraid?”

“I had friends.” He replies unaware of the danger, curiously observing Ned.

“Yeah... I could see that.”

Suddenly he runs off squealing as though being chased by a swarm of wild bees. Or the swarm was being chased by him.

“Interesting young fella.” Ned said to himself watching the boy disappear through the door.

Catching Zahra now appearing with a bowl of water and clean cloth.

“You're awake?” She states the obvious.

“Apparently... That’s one heck of an alarm bell you have there.” Ned looks up to ceiling and the belfry.

“Some say it can wake the dead.”

“Well it woke me.”

“Get dressed and come down stairs... You have been excused prayers.”

“See you soon.”

He watched her leave.

Ned goes to stand and feels the pain of the beatings announce their presence. Splashing water on his face from a bowl on a side table. He looks up at the wall expecting a mirror. But found a stone grey wall reflecting back at him.

‘Vanity was too much to ask for in a monastery I suppose?’ He thought.

Reminding himself he should be grateful to be alive. How close had he come to being savage to death by a Beast? Glad he had never seen it. Their savaging howls brought grotesque images of Ogres and Werewolves to mind.

Moving stiffly, he looks at a shirt that had been provided. One size fits all here and pulls the oversized garment over his head. Its length coming down to his knees. Unsure how to deal with it tucks the bulk of it into his trousers. Then peers his head into the corridor.

Noises were coming from the direction he came last evening. And decided to follow the sound now coming to a large mess hall now filled with two dozen Monks and Nuns.

‘It is a Monastery alright.’ He thinks to himself.

Spying Zahra, she gestures for him to come to sit at the front table. Heads turn to examine the Ouster among their midst. The one that had tended to Brother Geoffrey. Now seated among them proudly sporting a white clothed bandage about his head. Sister Rebekah sits nearby smiling. Brother Geoffrey nods quietly and Ned nods back. Arriving at the main table Mother Superior stands and rings a small bell.

Heads turn and silence fell upon the gathered brethren.

“As you can all see this morning we have a guest among us... An Ouster...” She looked about the small band of those that had taken holy orders.

All eyes turn to look at Ned now feeling he was being watched. Only Talbot with his head bowed refused to look at the Ouster.

“...Saved from the clutches of Satan himself... We give thanks for his healing hands and Friar Talbot’s prayers that Friar Geoffrey is still with us today... His name his Ned... Treat him as you would any Brother.” Mother Superior proclaims her wishes.

Eye’s turn to Brother Talbot in wonderment, and then to Brother Geoffrey in awe of his recovery.

Saved by Brother Talbot’s prayer and the healing hands of the Ouster. It was nothing less than a miracle. A hushed silence befell the group as eyes examined the new arrival. Few had ever seen an Ouster close up. Yet alone alive. Those they had seen had been mutilated by the Beasts. Caught in the twilight after dark.

“Let us pray.” Mother Superior asks. “...Perhaps the Brother Ned would be so kind.”

Putting him abruptly on the spot. Heads turn abruptly to stare at Ned, all wondering if he was capable.

‘Let the Ouster embarrass himself.’ Talbot chuckled to himself.

Ned stands nervously and bows his head. There is a long pause before he spoke. His mind struggling to recall the appropriate words.

“Lord hear our Prayers... Thank you for your abundance and the food before us... For your mercy and grace... Blessed are those that sacrifice themselves to save another...”

He turns momentarily and looks down at Zahra. Though her eyes were closed, her lips pursed betraying her gratitude.

“...We give you praise and thanks for what we are about to receive... Amen.”

An almighty “Amen” sounded around the tables.

“Well I must say Brother Ned... You surprise me.” Mother Superior acknowledges then turns to the famished faces looking up at her.

“One of the benefits of a Catholic Boarding School Education.” Ned laments his time there.

Mother Superior turns to the famished faces looking up at her.

“You may begin.” She announces.

Talbot sunk low on the bench seat.

Disturbed that the Ouster had won the heart of Mother Superior and those about him. Nicholas would need to be informed of his presence. He would leave once breakfast was over. His daily chores could wait, citing that the Overlord sought his religious counsel.

Wooden spoons rattled feverously against wooden bowls shoving food into hungry mouths. Ned takes his seat again in expectation of an appetizing meal. A bowl of thick sloppy porridge is placed in front of him. He looks at it. Then at Zahra.

“Are we still thankful Ouster?” Grinning.

“Have you thought about feeding this to the Beasts?” Ned responds.

“It’s too good for the Beasts... Hurry before it runs out.”

“Runs out?”

Looking over to Kristina and Sebastian seeing them shoveling the mouthfuls as though it was ice cream. Then looks back down at his bowl.

“When in Rome...” He told himself about to close his eyes and take a mouthful.

“Ye have been to Rome?” Mother Superior overhears the comment.

“It’s an expression we use... In the *Ouster* world Mother Superior.”

“Ye have strange ways of saying things Ouster.”

Taking a small mouthful, Ned chewed on it carefully. It was almost palatable. With the texture of cardboard and the taste of wallpaper paste. What he could not swallow stuck to the inside of his mouth. Looking about for milk. Spies a cup and pours it over the porridge. Eyes turn to watch him.

“It’s what we do in the *Ouster* world.” Ned defends himself, pouring it generously into his dish.

Others begin to follow suit and eyes light up with joy of the discovery.

“What have I started?” He said to himself watching the others eagerly shovel the milk laced slop into their mouths.

“We have your possessions... But I’m afraid much has already been distributed among the others.” Zahra advises breaking his attention from the brothers and nuns.

“That’s okay... Not much use to me here.” Taking another mouthful of the sticky porridge. “Hmmm...” He jokes with Zahra. “...Yummy!”

“Liar.” She calls him out.

“My Lord! My Lord!” A guard rushes into the Nicholas’ bed chamber and kneels.

“What is it man. Speak before I cut out ye tongue for disturbing me at such hour.

“The Ouster! The Ouster is gone!” The man stutters out.

“Of course he is gone you fool. The Beasts took him last night... God rest his wretched soul.” Nicholas crosses himself frivolously to dispatch the Ouster to his maker. And resumed grooming his beard.

Turning about to see the man still standing there.

“Be gone you fool I say!”

“My Lord. The ropes were cut nay by Beast.” The man cowers lower fearing an outburst from his Master.

“Cut? ... By who then?” Who would be so daring?

“A Roma. The Ouster has found refuge at the Monastery.”

“What?!”

“Gypsies... Someone hath saved the Ouster from the Beasts.”

“Saved? ... Choose your words carefully else lose your tongue.” He warns the man again. “...Have my horse ready within the hour.”

“Yes my Lord.”

“Get out of my sight man... Move!” Kicking the kneeling man.

Looking out across fields being worked by serfs in the rising sun.

Sees the belfry of the monastery piercing the tree tops in the distance. Becoming more convinced the Ouster was harbored there. Taken from his clasp. Nay, stolen from him. He would demand the Ouster’s return, or could he? Faced with the dilemma the Ouster had found sanctuary there. Now beyond his reach. Protected by Rome.

Words would be spoken with Mother Superior. Common ground found perhaps.

Ned found Zahra sitting quietly on a stone bench.

Watching on amusedly as Kristina and Sebastian ran about the small grassed quadrangle. The cloister offering some protecting from the sun’s brightness. She catches Ned approaching.

“Hey.” Ned breaks the silence.

“Hey.” She replies, resuming her watchful eye over the playing children.

“Surrender!” Sebastian calls out in the distance.

“Never!” Kristina tickles Sebastian and he falls over into a fit of squealing.

“How you feeling. You took a bit of beating.” Seeing his bruises.

“I’ll heal.” But wondering if he would.

“Time we had that *talk...*” She said, unsure where to begin. She now knew how the Witch must have felt telling Kristina, “...Where to begin?”

“Try the beginning. That always a good place.” Suggested Ned.

“But first I must ask you... I want you to *believe.*”

“Believe what?” He asks.

“To believe in things you cannot.”

“I’ll try.”

“This is not England Ned... This is Transylvania... Your ways... Are not our ways.”

“I understand.” He said.

Zahra took a deep breath and sighed.

Recalling what her mother had told Kristina. Slowly she narrated her family history and the curse of Grandfather. Ned quietly took it all in. His mind grappled with the possibility it could all be real. To believe what he could not. And that he was not going to awaken from a dream.

“I see.” Said Ned sitting back, but did he?

Caught in a twilight world. A realm where time had stood still. Where Beasts roamed every blood moon. A mist that transported Ousters through time. A curse muttered from the lips of her Grandfather.

“You have Ouster blood, as does Kristina... So why don’t you just leave here?” He asked simply.

“I have seen your world Ned... All that shines is not gold.”

“True...” He concedes, perhaps his world was no better than here.

“And there’s the danger of getting past the Beasts.”

Her mind drifts at the thought of the danger. How close she had come to the Beasts when she had left before and returned. Amazed she had not been taken. As though she was being watched over by someone.

As though she had an unfulfilled destiny.

She knew there would be a time when she would have to leave and not return. The Witch had told her so.

“You have been on the other side?” He asked probing deeper.

“Once or twice... More foolish than I was last night saving your life.”

“Why did you save me? You could have left me out there.”

“There is a destiny in all of us Ned. There is one in you... The Witch has foreseen these things.”

“The Witch?” He asked curiously.

“Yes... My mother... Speak kindly else lest she cast a spell over thee... She may well be listening now.”

She looks about as though to see her mother passing on the breeze. She thinks she sees a shadow moving along the wall. Suspiciously, she follows it with her eyes. Ned observes her closely. It was so real for her. Ned was still grappling with the impossibilities.

“And your Grandfather was... Dracula?”

“Of course...” Zahra runs her fingers over the blemish on her neck.

Ned now notices the faint birthday mark on her neck for the first time. The same that on Kristina’s he had seen the night before at the infirmary.

“You have his eyes.” He said surprising her.

“How do you know of his eyes?” She looks at him surprised.

“Only what I read about the man. There were described as an amazing green color... As are yours.” He begins, “...And his heart... Is it safe?”

“Only the Witch knows where it lays hid and she will take the secret to her grave should God ever grace her with death.”

“So while it beats... *This* continues in perpetuity... Forever.” Ned looks about the endless blue sky.

Zahra did not answer, her silence was loud enough for him to hear.

“Can the curse ever be lifted?” He asked the question.

“My Grandfather in his dying breath said... ‘*Only when the heart has a new home... Innocent and free from sin... Only then will the curse be raised, and the Beasts be gone.*’

“A new home? ... What is does that mean?”

“No one but the Witch knows... And she tell all when the time has come... And reveal its hiding place... There are those that seek to possess it. Thinking it will give them magical powers... They are but fools, chasing a shadow they cannot hold.”

“What is my destiny?” He asked.

“I do not know. But I have a feeling we are about to find out... The Witch does not reveal all lest we meddle with events.”

“Did you meddle last night when you saved me?”

“Perhaps... Perhaps I was meant to... You live don't you?”

Zahra watches the children playing in the distance. Running about like higgledy-piggledy. Falling over again and again. Elastic and energetic. She smiles at their youthfulness.

“Your mother is a Witch. Your Aunt is Mother Superior... How did that come about?” Asked Ned confused.

Zahra contemplates the question. She had never really dwelled on it before.

“After my mother found her Path...” She added hoping Ned understood. “...Her father sent his other daughter to a Monastery as if that would right the wrong with God.”

“And are you a witch?” He asked sensing Zahra had a foot in both camps.

“I am but a simple Gypsy woman ... What are any of us? ... But vessels for God's divine purpose.” She said philosophically.

“Another mile and I would have been free of this place.” Ned surmises how close he came to evading the mist.

“You were *never* meant to free *Ned Parffet* ... You were always meant to be here...” She ponders his purpose. “...We stay here one more night. Then it will be safe to wander until the next blood moon.”

She looks up at the sky as though to foretell its arrival.

“When will that be?”

“Six months... If we're lucky.” She speculates.

“Jesus! ...” Ned cusses. “...Sorry... I have to get back.”

“Do you?” She asked curiously.

Ned recollects the hectic bloody ER and long days.

A bedlam of gunshot and knife wounds. Gangs killing each other over turf and drugs. His body propped up by coffee. The sleep deprivation. They had survived this long without him. It was all beyond his control. What did he really have back *there*? Would anyone miss him? No family. No loved ones to speak of. Just the trauma team. That was his family. That was his home.

He wondered if he could truly fall off the face of the earth. Would anyone notice?

“... And then you have to make it past the Beasts.” Zahra stifles his escape plans and drawing him back to the quadrangle of green grass.

“You made it.” Suggests Ned.

“I was lucky. Our greatest danger now is keeping you safe... The Beasts may not be able to cross hallow ground... Another Beast can.”

“Who?” He feared to ask.

“The Overlord... For now you have sanctuary here. I cannot guarantee what happens once you step outside these walls.”

A commotion sounding from the front gates. Shouting and horses neighing loudly after a hard ride.

“That didn’t take long... Best you stay inside before Nicholas fires a bolt in your direction.” She warns him.

“What about you?”

“What of me?”

“Nicholas isn’t going to be too pleased knowing you cut me free.”

“How would he find out it was I? ... I am but a mere gypsy woman.”

“Someone belted Brother Geoffrey over the head last night... Someone who didn’t want me to be rescued... Or you to return.” Ned pointed out the facts, pondering who could have done such a thing to a monk.

“It had to be someone from within these walls.” He looks about the courtyard for wary individuals but saw only benign nuns walking peacefully about.

“I have my suspicions... But without proof I dare not point a finger.” Said Zahra keeping the name to herself.

Scurried footsteps on gravel could be heard approaching.

“*Speak of the devil...*” Said Zahra seeing Friar Talbot appearing before her, “...What is it Brother Talbot?”

“Come quickly. Your presence is commanded by the Overlord.” Talbot conceals his amusement.

“The Overlord has no command within these walls Friar Talbot... Only Rome... Lest you forget who your Master is.” She quickly reminds him of the Holy property on which he stood.

“Then perhaps you would come at Mother Superior’s request.” Stutters Talbot annoyed at being chided by a Gypsy.

“Why didn’t ye say in the first place Friar Talbot?” Responded Zahra following behind...

Chapter Fifteen

The man awakens from a bizarre dream.

Uncoiling himself from the tight ball he had knotted himself the evening before. The fever had broken. Muscles ached from agonizing seizures during the night. Trying to stand the man supports himself against the wall. Limbs responding as though they were not his own. He felt different, somehow stronger. Muscles flexed beneath the torn shirt. Confused as to how he had gotten to where he was. There was a familiarity of the place he found himself. Clothes tattered torn and bloody. Scars from fresh wounds now healed.

Extending an arms discovers they had grown longer. Now covered in black hair, or fur. Fingers had now become claws. Reaching for his face feels unfamiliar contours of a face, not his own. Trying to speak, manages a growling sound as if he had lost the ability. Frustrated, picks up an iron bar and bends it. And howls a loudly to the ceiling above. The sound resonates about the castle. Drifting along hallways like a cold draft. Sending a chill to men on guard as to who and where the howl had come.

His mind in delirium, the transformation all but complete. Throwing aside any semblance of being human. The man-now-Beast surrenders to a primal animal instinct.

Self-preservation.

Red eyes squinted against the violent intrusion of the mid-day sun spearing itself through the opening above. Something innate told him to be fearful of the shaft of light and he clings close to the darkened shadows. A nose twitches with the scent coming from down the hallway. Tilting its head as though to detect distant footsteps approaching. Two... No. Three it counts. Like an animal stalking its prey edges his way to the doorway and a dimly lit hallway. More palatable to the room the creature found itself. The sunlight could not reach it there.

Listening for the steps to get closer. They appear at the base of the stair well. Three guards in search of the source of the noise that had disturbed

them. They see the legs and tattered boots of someone or something standing alone at the other end of the hallway. Its features hidden from view. Shrouded in a dark shadows.

“What are you doing down here?” A guard shouts out to the man.

The words were grabbed and meaningless to the creature. Any semblance of being human or Godliness had been taken from the man the moment the Beast had bitten him. His soul sucked from his body leaving an empty vessel of the third watch.

“What say ye man! ... Speak!” The calls out loudly as though to order the man to speak.

Silence its only possible reply. That and a growing snarl beneath its salivating breath.

The man-Beast shuffles nearer. Its steps staggered as though it were wounded in battle.

“You two check upstairs... I’ll go with this man and check the cellars.” The guard orders the others to go.

Leaving him alone with the apparent man now nearly upon him and becoming more visible.

“What say wrong with you man? ...” Retorts the guard. “...Your gait?”

The man-Beast shuffles awkwardly forward, its steps becoming more coordinated. The guard makes out the man’s features now distorted by growths. Large yellow stained canine teeth exposed dripping with saliva. Its breath taints the chill of the cellar’s air. A snarl erupts beneath the fogging mist. Breaking through the darkness and now appearing into the light.

“What the?” The guard exclaims unable to draw his sword in time.

Suddenly the Beast lunges at the guard.

Knocking him to the floor. The short lived screams are silenced. And a savage instinct overcomes the Beast. Tearing at the guard’s neck. Severed arteries spurted blood about the walls and floor. Ripping at the man’s throat. Shaking it violently as though to tear it out. It tasted sweet. Life was returning to the Beast. It knew what it had to do to survive.

The Beast dragged the mutilated cadaver behind it. Colored innards spilled from the man’s belly onto the floor, painting a trail of vivid red blood in its wake. Gorging itself until full. And returns to the corner in a

darkened chamber, crouches and closed its eyes. Ears alert to the slightest of sounds.

And waited for the sun to set when it could walk among its own.

Horses fidgeted as they waited the arrival of the Ouster.

Nicholas was a patient man, less so Sigmund who stares looks down at the gathered Gypsies from his horse. Eyes searching for his forbidden fruit. Seeing Sister Ruth he smiles momentarily and continues his gaze over the peasant faces. Then behind then sees Talbot leading the way. Zahra following a distance behind. His heart jumps a beat and something rouses in the saddle. Sister Ruth could sense it. She looks over to see Zahra approaching.

“Hmm.” She berates him under her breath, words would be had later.

‘How brave she had been to rescue the Ouster.’ Sigmund thinks of her chivalry.

As to why, was beyond him, perhaps it was her Christian way. She would make a fine Queen when the day came to poach her from the Romani. Wondering if she was as adventurous in bed. Looking over to Ruth imagining them together. The lustful thought pressed harder against his saddle.

Mother Superior stood atop the Refectory’s steps. Dark wooden doors behind her amplified her authority. Contrasting her white habit. Her eyes level with Nicholas sitting on horseback. She would only ever look up to one man.

And Nicholas was no Savior.

“Welcome Nicholas.” Mother Superior said graciously as though he were out for a Sunday ride.

“You forget to whom you speak Mother Superior?” Seeking obedience and subservience.

“You forget to who you address when you address me my Lord?” Mother Superior counters.

With Hungary tied to the Papal Throne as much as it was to the Holy Roman Empire, Nichols was treading on thin ice. Not wishing to crawl on hands and knees to Rome to kiss the Holy Ring like other rulers who had questioned Rome’s authority.

Or had crossed the Papal line.

“Forgive Mother Superior.” Nichols offers fake bow of the head.

Mother Superior raises her hand and with three fingers extended crosses the air as though to expunge his sins.

“You are forgiven my Nicholas... What brings you here in such haste?” She grins have won the first round.

“The Ouster! ...That incorrigible and dangerous rogue! Branded for Vagrancy... Under law he is to be executed without mercy!” Nichols demands.

“What of this Ouster that distresses you so Nichols? ...” Mother Superior plays along. “...Have you misplaced him? ... Nay?”

“You know very well you have him here under your *protection*... I want him back. He has been branded... He belongs to me.” Nicholas protests.

“No man, belongs to any man. But unto God... Are you *God* Nicholas?” Mother Superior’ glares at Nicholas.

“No... Of course not...” He answers, being put on the spot again, “... What say ye of the man I speak?”

Nicholas’s horse becomes agitated by his master’s abrupt voice. As though a battle was about to begin and charge. Stomping it foreleg into the gravel path. Sebastian looks up at the huge Beast of horse flesh and sooths its temperament.

“I cannot lie Nicholas... He seeks sanctuary here. Under Holy law.”

“I *demand* to see him.”

The demand is greeted with silence. And a smile. Mother Superior held the cards. Pope being the highest.

“I *wish* to see him.” Nicholas begins again.

“Of course. Why didn’t you say so? ... As you *wish*.” Mother Superior gestures to Sister Esther to step forward.

Whispering to her who then demurely walks to the darkness of the monastery halls. Moments later Ned appears framed by the massive doorway. Bruises about his face. A cut lip evident of injuries and abuse. A clean white shirt in contrast to the purple and red bruises. Nicholas turns to his son as though to question his methods.

“Know once ye step outside these grounds Ouster ye become mine again... Mother Superior won’t be able to protect you Ouster.” Nicholas advises with a smirk growing on his face.

Sigmund watches on. Seeing Zahra's concern for the man. If it was not just a Christian thing she had done to save the man. Perhaps there was more to this *affair*. Sensing he had a rival suitor to contend with. And reaches for his sword.

His father catching him in time.

"Put your sword away my son... Lest you forget where you are."

Gesturing for his son to sleeve his sword. Ned takes a step back. Zahra a step forward.

'*She loves the man.*' Sigmund thinks to himself. Eyes could not betray his jealousy.

Mother Superior corrects Nicholas' erroneous thoughts.

"Though ye thinking is correct... Lest ye forget that under your very law if a Vagrant is offered work he is permitted a free man." Mother Superior explained the cold facts of the Law to him.

"Who would give this man work? What trade does he ply worthy of work?"

"I will." A firm convincing voice spoke.

Heads turn and see Zahra stepping closer.

"You?" Asked Nicholas seeing a mere gypsy woman stepping forward.

Nicholas turns to Sigmund who nods to confirm she was the one.

"You are the one that ventured among the Beasts? ... To save this *Ouster*?" Nicholas asked disbelievingly.

"I did my Lord." Zahra stood defiantly still, unsure how the Overlord could have known her identity.

"If my men were half as brave as you we would banish these Beasts from this land once and for all."

"I believe so too..." She replies, "... *My Lord.*"

"And what trade will this man ply in your employment? ... Say ye gypsy woman."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Perhaps Nicholas would have his pound of flesh after all. Then she spoke.

"Physician my Lord."

"Physician? I see... And how ye know he is what he claims." Nicholas chuckles the challenge.

"Brother Geoffrey step forward please." Orders Mother Superior.

People stand aside allowing Geoffrey's rotund body through. His head heavily bandaged. Blood seeped through the white cloth.

"Tis trickery!" Protests Sigmund.

"Brother Ned if ye please." Mother Superior softly requests.

Unwrapping the bandages carefully. Ned lifts the dressing. Exposing the wound and several neat crisscrossed stitches. Sigmund reaches for the hilt of his sword but again dissuaded by his father's glare. Ned replaces the dressing and ties the bandage off neatly. Patting Geoffrey on the back to leave.

"Perhaps I was hasty to have to stake you out... With Ottoman raiding my lands I could well use you myself someday. Say who did this to you Friar? ... Who among you is cowardly to have struck a devout Monk?" Nicholas' eyes scour the people before him.

Each looking about each other innocently. All but one set of eyes. Looking down to the ground.

"Hm!" Grunts Nicholas making the tacit connection.

He needed eyes and ears and salvation and what none better than Talbot. As pathetic and cowardly as he is.

"But father! ... Ye cannot be serious!" Sigmund protests detecting his father's acceptance of the claim.

"Be silent my son. My word is final!" Nicholas commands loudly and agitating his horse.

Creating a chain reaction among other horses to stomp and neigh wildly.

"Thank you for your time Mother Superior... Our talks are always so *productive*."

"You are in my Prayers Nicholas." She lied.

"As you are in mine." Nicholas reciprocated the lie.

Aggressively, he turns his mount about and gallops through the Monastery gates. Sigmund and his men followed some distance behind. Detaching himself from his father's decision. Biding his time until the right moment. Ned would need to be eliminated. As would his father if he wished Zahra for his bride. No one would save the Ouster this time.

Whipping his horse to a gallop. Frothing at the bit the horse catches up with his father's mount. Father and Son rode as one. The King with the

Prince by his side. Any semblance of disharmony lost in Sigmund fake smile, and Nicholas' blind love of his only son.

“That went better than I thought.” Zahra said turning to Mother Superior.

“Nicholas is old and wise. He knows a good thing when he sees it...”

“But?” Zahra could sense there was more.

“... It is Sigmund we have to watch. He is young and impetuous... He wants everything now.” She warns seeing how he was looking at Zahra.

“He would fit well to the Ouster world... We have a generation of Sigmund's wanting instant gratification.” Ned chuckled the similarity.

The comparison passing over Zahra and Mother Superior's heads who stare at Ned with blank looks.

“You get to live another day Ouster... Few get to live this long.” Mother Superior warns killing the momentary victory.

And she walked away with Sister Esther shadowing in her wake.

“We need to find Kristina and Sebastian... The Good Lord help them if they have ventured into the forest again.” Sad Zahra looking about for them.

Ned looks out the gates to the dark forest. The very forest he had run for his life the previous evening. Memories of the thick mist and the hallowing howls and thrashing bushes. The wolves that had leaped to his rescue, all because of a small boy. Sebastian.

“How did you know which way to go?” He asked curiously.

“I didn't... Just the sound of the bell... And a *faith* that I would find you.”

“Faith?” Ned questions how close he came to dying.

“Faith is a powerful thing Ned Parffet ... It saved you didn't it?”

A screech and giggle sounded from an opening above them.

They both look up at the window. And turn to look at each other.

“I think we found them.” He informed her.

“Is there a cure for that?” She asked.

“Probably... But I wouldn't advise it... Has he ever been dropped on his head?” Asked Ned searching for an explanation.

“Not that I'm aware of.” Zahra lied.

Ned enters the room to find Kristina holding a small device with a smooth mirror like surface.

She was pulling faces and poking her tongue out. Sebastian watched on giggling at the sight. As he jumped up and down on the cot. Amused by Kristina's contorted face.

"What's this? I think it's broken." She asked curiously looking into the blackened mirror.

"It's a..." Ned searched for the right word.

But there was no word he could use that they would understand. So he called it as it was.

"... It's a mobile."

"What's a mo-bi-al?" She repeats the word slowly.

"It allows people talk to other people far, far away... Through the air."

"Oh like Magic... My Grandma-ma and I do that. But we don't use one of these." She confesses.

"Oh..." Said Ned, her words puzzling him. "...We need them in my world as we don't have Witches... Or none that I know of." Ned wondered if Harry Potter counted.

"It looks like a mirror." Kristina suggests its purpose.

"Some people actually use it as one. But it does other things too... Let me show you. See this tiny button... This turns the mobile on." He carefully explains.

"What's an *on*?"

"Makes it alive." Then realized his choice of words.

Kristina eyes light up and she stands back unsure what creature it would become. Sebastian's ears prick up and he draws closer.

"Does it have teeth?" She asks.

Sebastian stands behind Kristina waiting for a creature to appear.

"Not that sort of *alive*... Let me show you... Don't be frightened... Press that little button."

"*But-ton*." Words soaking into her young mind like a sponge.

A frightened look comes over her face as the mobile vibrates momentarily in her hands. And she smiles at the new sensation.

"It's okay... It's waking up." Ned plays along.

Holding the mobile as though holding a bird waking from a sleep.

Lights flashed like colorful feathers and the screen came to life. A visual symphony of fascinating swirling color. Small minds took it all in. Watching the electronic creature stir. Rousing from its slumber within the cage of the glass screen.

“Don’t worry... It can’t escape.” Ned assures them. “...Let me show you some pictures of the Ouster world... Would you like that?”

Two small heads nod in unison. Small eyes watched every move of his finger as it poked and swiped the glassy surface. It was a world he needed to see as well. If only to assure himself that it had once existed. That it was all not just a dream.

“Press that icon.” Said pointing to it.

“I-con.” Two small voices parrot simultaneously.

“Now use your finger and swipe that way.”

Ned gestures a swipe and two fingers mimic the action.

“Swi-pppe...” Said Kristina getting the hang of it. “...Swi-ipe.” She repeats.

“You’re very good.” He encourages her.

Suddenly a picture of New York appear. Tall sky scrapers and strange vehicles.

“Trains.” Said Kristina recognizing the metal wagons her mother told her about.

“Not quite... They’re call cars. They are...” He was stumped to explain in a way they could understand. Then it came to him. “... They are *Horseless Carriages.*”

“Oh...” Exclaims Kristina.

Sebastian searches for the horses. But sees none. Kristina is taken by the colors and multitude of people. Sebastian’s eyes lit up with excitement. Little finger swiped up and down left and right. Their young imaginations could not get enough.

Then she stops and stares at the screen.

At an innocuous street on East Side.

“What’s the matter?” Asked Ned thinking she had seen a ghost.

“I know of this place?” She stares at the image as though lost in thought.

“How could you... You haven’t been there.”

“In my dreams... One day I will.” She is transfixed by the image.

Ned was unsure what to make of the statement. Then has an idea.

“I know... Let’s take a video of you two. How would you like that?”

“What’s a *vid-e-o*?” Asked Kristina curiously.

“Like the pictures, but moving... It won’t hurt I promise.”

Two heads bob up and down. Curious eyes follow Ned’s fingers poking at the screen and icons.

“Okay you two rascals... Say cheese!” He directs them.

“Cheeeeeese!” Two voices sang back. One squealing.

“Nothing happened!” Squealed Sebastian disappointed, “... It’s broken.”

“Wait... Come here... Watch this...” He cajoles them to come closer to watch.

Ned turns the mobile around to reveal a clip of the two gargoyles staring back at themselves pulling faces and calling out ‘*cheeeese*’. Disbelieving eyes watch the moving images of themselves. Poking at the screen causing it to enlarge.

And Sebastian squeal again and run off.

“Magic?” She asked curiously.

“Sort of... We call it technology where I come from.”

“Tec-nol-oo-gee...” Kristina recites the word carefully to remember it. “... Tec-nol-oo-gee.”

“Very good Kristina... We’ll make an Ouster of you yet... As for you *squeeze box* there. It might take a little longer.” Looking over to Sebastian hiding behind the door wondering if it were possible.

“Would you like to listen to some music?”

“You have music in the Ouster world?”

“Of course... We’re not entirely barbarian.” Said Ned searching his play lists.

“Bar-bar-bear-eon.” Recites Sebastian.

“Very good Sebastian... Now we just have to work on that squeal.”

Ned reaches over to tickle him. Fidgeting, he rushes from the room to escape further torture.

“Here... Put these your ears Kristina...” Said Ned handing her ear pieces. “... Good?” He inquires.

Kristina nods with a smile.

“Press that one.” Ned indicates the play icon.

Suddenly Kristina’s eyes become as big as saucers. Stereo sound flooded her head. Unsure where the sound was coming from. She looks about the room as to the source of the music. Sebastian’s head poked around the doorway. But he could hear nothing.

“Broken!” He calls out.

A smile grew over Kristina face as she began to move to the familiar tune. A beam of sun light shone onto the terracotta floor. She allowed it to capture her. Twirling gracefully about on the spot. Her lips moving with the words she had sung a thousand times before today.

Ned smiled and laid back on his cot.

The events of the past twenty four hours had sapped him. And he drifted off. Hoping he would awake in the Ouster world. But something was telling he would not. He was trapped here. Wherever here was, for another six months. And he surrendered to the elongated stay. The sun blanketed him with a long forgotten peace.

Kristina danced about the room.

The sun followed her. Her visions were real. Ned’s magic pictures and music had proven that. To leave, would be to leave Sebastian behind. Without Ouster blood he was destined to remain behind in the realm. Her young mind was torn between staying and going. Somehow she knew everything would be fine. Twirling gracefully about took a final bow to unseen eyes. Bar two.

Sebastian giggled from the doorway watching on...

Chapter Sixteen

In a cellar, dark forgotten beneath the Monastery chapel.

Unworthy of any sunlight. A solitary candle clung to life. Weakly lighting on a three legged stool and the cellar's sole occupant. The candle flickered momentarily. Perhaps to say that God was listening. Perhaps to say it was dying.

Talbot kneels before a simple wooden cross laying on the floor. A cilice of course cloth lays folded beside it. Stained with drops of blood. The walls splattered with spots. Crying out in pain as the whip lashes his back. Beads of sweat and blood weep down his welted frail back. Skin broken with each successive blows. Darkness swallowed the screams. Talbot's cries for salvation. No one but God would hear the self-inflicted suffering.

If He was listening.

"Forgive Father... I have sinned." Talbot sort penance.

Eyes rolled to the unseen abyss above. Eternity was his if only God would heed his prayers. Another crack unleashes from the knotted leather whip of three tails. The trinity scourging him deeper. Splattering more blood over the walls. Gritting his teeth he readies himself for another blow. Grasping for breath and relief. He beseeches God to forgive him again.

And again he is answered with silence.

The candle flickers with every blow. As though it too felt the stinging pain. Wax bleed down its side. It too beseeched God to let it die. Another blow. Then another. Each more painful than the last as it cut deeper into Talbot's back.

"Who is your God?" A voice inside his head screams.

"You are! You are! Forgive me!" Talbot weeps soulfully with open raising hands upwards.

As though he were reaching for someone. Exhausted, he looks up. Visions of Christ appear. A bright halo of light about Him. He reaches to

the hallucination. Blood, sweats and tears ran over his face, collecting on his chin before dripping to a growing puddle on the floor. Gasping breaths fogged in the chilled air of the chamber.

Eyes roll in their sockets and eye lids flicker.

And he fell prostrate on the cold stone floor. His head striking the folded cilice. Eyes staring into a darkness. Wondering why God had forsaken him. And his mind slipped from this world and into another.

Time passed unobserved, a bell tolls.

Penetrating the darkness. Penetrating what the light could not. Waking Talbot from an unconsciousness. He was still alive. God had no mercy. His purpose on earth was not done. Bloody tired arms strained to lift his weakened body to its hands and knees. And then to his feet. Disoriented by the darkness. The candle now in the throes of death.

“I should be so lucky.” Talbot wishes seeing candle about to die.

Slowly strength returned to his body. Consciousness returned to his mind.

‘How long had I been out?’ He wondered.

Each time getting longer. One day the bell would not wake him. Grimacing he pulls the coarse cilice over his head. Feeling its fibers bite painfully into open clotting wounds. The pain from self-flagellation making his religious calling stronger. Christ had suffered it. And so shall he.

What brought him closer to Christ, brought him closer to God.

Adjusting his habit and ties it off the thick cord around his thin hips. Wiping the sweat and blood from his face with a damp cloth he had brought with him. He kneels one final time before the simple wooden cross on the floor. Crossing himself, gave thanks for the strength the Lord had given him. Blowing lightly on the dying candle the room darkens. Leaving it to smolder in the darkness.

Its soul leaving its body to join the light of God.

Feeling disoriented and alone.

The coldness and darkness was a comforting. Then quickly chastised himself harshly for the personal pleasure. Hurriedly crossing himself as if to expedite the forgiveness of the sin.

“Forgive me Lord.” Talbot prays woefully in shame.

Leaving the whip and cross on the floor where they lay. The candle’s soul now long departed. Few would venture to this room and those that did would understand the commitment required to undertake the ritual. Pulling a hood over his head peers along the hallway. Sandaled feet shuffled quickly along the darkened hall to a dimly lit stair well leading to an upper passage.

Re-appearing, composes himself as if he had returned from a wary afternoon stroll. Talbot joined the line of Nuns and Brothers entering the chapel for prayers before supper. His head bowed as if in prayer. The sun had lowered to the horizon. The blood moon would soon ascend and the curse would descend for a final evening. Bringing with it the howling blasts of the mist.

Feeling safe within the hallowed grounds of the Monastery.

The bell tolls again. Drawing Talbot’s guilt to the surface of his mind.

‘How much longer must this madness go on? ...’ He thinks to himself.
‘... Why did the Gypsy woman have to interfere?’

His plans had gone awry. The Ouster lives, and his master Nicholas was not pleased. The visit that afternoon had told him so. He would need to redeem himself before Nicholas, as he had before Christ.

“Brother Talbot... There you are... We were just wondering where you were?” Geoffrey asked approaching him.

“Ah... Brother Geoffrey. I have been out enjoying God’s creation. How be your head? Do ye know the coward who did this?”

“I was hoping you would know.” Asked Geoffrey catching Talbot by surprise.

An awkward silence filled the void between them. Talbot shuffled his feet. Looking for an escape.

“How so?”

“You were the one that found me. Were you not? ... Perhaps you saw the culprit run off?”

“Nay. It was dark... And I heard the bell, the bell.” Talbot fleshed out his alibi.

“Still I am blessed to have you appear when you did... Brother Ned says had I not been found when you had. I... I... I may well be with our

Lord in Heaven... I bless you Brother Talbot as God has blessed me.”
Geoffrey takes Talbot's hands and kisses his cheek.

‘This is must be what Judas felt.’ Talbot scolds himself.

“I know you would have done the same for me... We best be off to prayer before Mother Superior finds us dawdling.” Talbot instructs wishing to escape the inquisition.

“Your hands are cold Brother Talbot... Are you not well?” Asked Geoffrey.

“Perhaps a light fever. The sun is harsh today...” Talbot lies. “...Come, come now...”

Ushering Geoffrey towards the Chapel.

“...God waits for no man... Less so Mother Superior.”

“Indeed Brother Talbot... Indeed.” Said Brother Geoffrey cheerfully.

Chapter Seventeen

As dusk descended the evening sky began to glow red.

Intensifying as the moon rose higher and higher. Distant howls echoed from within the murky mist. And beyond. Creatures of the curse calling to gather. Calling to feast. Stirring the part-human part-Beast to awaken within the bowels of the castle. Sunlight that had kept it captive now below the horizon. A new sun shone in the heavens.

A cadaver lays nearby. Bloody and torn like a broken rag doll. Its entrails spewing from its side. The Beast reaches with crawl like fingers and grasps a kidney. Biting into it as though a plum. Juices run down its elongated jaws. Licking its elongated fingers with an elongated tongue. Before reaching for the other. Its nose sniffing the air for intruders.

From outside, a long deep howl reaches into the depths darkened chamber.

The Beast stops to look up. Red moon light leaked through the window above. As though to summon it. Heightened sensed eyes saw clearly in the darkness. A rat scurried along a far wall. Brethren. A scavenger of the night. A morsel at best.

The Beast wanted larger game. Human.

It was time to leave its hide away. Sniffing the air again and an ear twitches. Like a bat it knew the path it would take without seeing it. More thick black hair had sprouted while it slept. Tearing redundant clothes from its body throws these to the floor. Boots had torn apart at the stitching by the enlarged feet that resembled large paws.

A body no longer its own. A mind that was no longer its own. Thoughts of family and friends lost in the fog of madness that swirled inside its mind. A mind sharp with animal alertness. Sharp with animal instincts. A predator in search of prey.

It rushes in leaps and bounds from the chamber. Crashing through any door that inhibited its path. The sunlight no longer able to shackle it. Clambering stairs it crashes through a doorway into a mess hall of men

sitting about eating at large tables. Shielding its eyes with thick hairy forearms from the sudden brightness of the room. Its eyes quickly adjust to the artificial sunlight.

Men scream and shout as they each for their crossbows and swords to counter the Beast that had suddenly come from within. Startled and catching them unaware. Rushing towards another door the Beast is stuck in the hide by a bolt. Annoyed the Beast wrenches it out. Snapping it like a twig throws it back from whence it had come. Snarling insidiously at the man who had fired it.

Momentarily recognizing each other. And snarls again at the annoyance.

Men frantically load their crossbows and fire only to miss in their haste as the Beast darts about the mess hall. Frantically pushing aside tables as though they were nothing. Seeing a large window the Beast crashes through it to the ground below. Tumbling, its strong limbs absorb the impact. More arrows dart in quick succession only to miss their target again.

And dashes into the darkness of the forest. Stopping momentarily to howl back at the Castle before disappearing beneath the canopy of trees and mist. To find sanctuary among its own kind.

“What’s all the commotion?” Sigmund storms into the mess hall, his sword drawn ready to quell any riot.

Seeing tables overturned and arrows peppered across the walls. Looking to a man to inform of the events that had just taken place. A smashed window suggesting something had entered, or escaped. Men with cross bows aimed at the other door and window. Fearful another Beast would appear at any moment.

“A Beast my Lord!” The guard panted heavily regaining his breath.

“In here? How can that be? The gates are shut... Impossible!”

“Yes my Lord. It came from there. Escaping through there.” Pointing to the cellar door and shattered window into the darkness.

“Was any one bitten?” Looking about the fearful eyes checking themselves.

“No one my Lord.” A man responds.

“You know what you have to if you discover so?” Quietly of the guard before him.

“Yes my Lord.” Reaching for the hilt of his dagger.

“Good. Make it so them...” He orders. “...Go down there and find out if there are more of them nesting beneath these walls!”

“But my Lord...” The man hesitantly protests. Knowing death would come if he did not.

Cautiously the guard approaches the door. Hushed silence followed the man as he disappeared into the darkness of the stairwell. Men anticipating a scream at any moment. The hush continued longer.

Too long perhaps. Sometime later, steps could be heard shuffling up the stone steps.

A head appears at the door’s opening.

Held out by a bloody arm. And is immediately struck with a flurry of arrows and bolts. Striking it in the face and startling the man holding it to drop the head to the floor. Sounding a heavy thud as it bounces it lays sideways, staring back at the men. A purple swollen tongue protrudes from its mouth.

“Come out man... You are among friends here...” Sigmund lies. “... Bring *that* with you.”

The man steps out and picks up the mutilated head, holding it at arm’s length by the hair as though to avoid contamination.

“Who was this poor fellow?” Sigmund asked noticing the man’s hands covered with the blood.

“One of us...” A guard responds unsure if Sigmund was referring to the head, or the man holding it.

“Anymore down *there*?” Sigmund looks over the man’s shoulder.

“None... Just this and what hasn’t been eaten.” The man looks back to the stairwell.

“Take it to the dungeon and have the jailor burn it... Tell him I sent you...” He orders the man. “You... you go with him. Make sure it’s taken care of... Understood?”

Sigmund nods to other man.

“Yes my Lord.” The man acknowledges the unspoken execution order.

Men parted to let the two pass. Blood dripping to the floor leaving a dotted trail of its passage. The second man keeping his distance from the man holding the head. The jailor looks up at the man holding out a severed head. Then to the second man standing behind him. His hand on the hilt of his dagger. Subtly he nods his head to the jailor. And the executioner took his place.

“Sigmund sent *him*.” The second man acknowledges.

“Throw it into there.” The Jailor indicates the brazier.

The man holds the mutilated head over the raging brazier and drops it. Causing a sudden violent volcanic reaction. Belching black satanic smoke and hissing demonic screams in protest.

“Have a seat my friend... You have *served* the Lord well.” The second man instructs the first silently removing his dagger from its sleeve from behind him.

“*Served?*” The man speaks his last on this earth.

Death was swift as the dagger sank the full length of the blade into the man’s back. Shuttering briefly before falling loose by his sides. Bloodied arms fall flaccid to his sides.

Not to serve another day.

Holding the man’s head up by its long of greasy locks, the jailor swings the meat cleaver.

And severed it with in a single blow. Holding it up as though a prize. He laughs at the decapitated man’s face staring dumbly back at him. Before being tossing the head into the raging brazier beside that of the other. Frenzy flames blaze violently as oily hair and fatty tissue ignites. Two pairs of open eyes stare back at the two men looking on.

Satisfied that the dead would not walk among them...

Chapter Eighteen

Talbot lowers himself almost prostrate before Nicholas.

Sigmund stands beside his father looking amusedly down at Talbot groveling before his father.

“Get up! Get up you fool! ... Before you humiliate yourself any further than you have already!” Nicholas bellows down to him.

“Forgive me my Lord... I could not warn you in time of the Ouster’s escape...” He began apologizing, his head bowed unwilling to look Nicholas in the eye. “...I did what I could.”

“I am surprised a man of the cloth should take up the sword and strife his fellow brethren... Would ye be more comfortable in armor than a Habit perhaps?” Nicholas muses.

“It was a rock... Nay a sword my Lord. I would never harm Brother Geoffrey... I swear.” Talbot lies.

“Nay matter now... If the Gods wanted either of the men dead they would be...” Nicholas contemplates the Ouster’s purpose.

“*Gods?*” Talbot questions.

“Surely there is more to this Ouster than the others before him? ... He is surely one of Fortune’s Favorites to have survived... The Gypsy woman has more heart than all my men put together!” Nicholas scoffs looking to his guards standing nearby.

Eyes turn downwards to avoid their Master’s sanctioning.

“My Lord... We cannot have him among us. He does not belong here.” Talbot speaks as though the Ousters were evil, a demonic visitor, not of God’s creation.

“We? ... There is no *we* here Friar Talbot... Remember to whom you address before I have your tongue removed and have you staked out this very evening!” Nichols warns him.

Nicholas looks sternly down upon the diminutive Monk beginning to lowering himself again. Nero awakens from his sleep wondering what had aroused his master’s voice. Sniffing the air. The Monk had wet himself. A

growl grumbles beneath his breath. Ready to pounce at his master's word. Nicholas sensed Nero's willingness.

"Not today Nero... Not today..." He stroked the dog's large head. "... Later perhaps."

Nero slumps to the floor frustrated and resumed a dream.

"Get up you fool and go back to the Monastery and play with your Nuns, or... whoever it is you play with over there, oh... And *Friar Talbot?*"

"Yes my Lord." He looks up to Nicholas, appearing silhouetted in a halo of light from above. And he takes it as a sign God was listening? Embodied in Nicholas himself.

Talbot cowered again in the reverence.

"Keep me informed next time of the Ousters' movements... Don't be so tardy next time... Understood?" Nicholas instructs him.

"Yes my Lord." Talbot bows his head.

"He may be useful locating the *Heart*... The Gypsy woman seems to have taken a shine to the Ouster... I saw it in her eyes. Watch them both... Understood?"

"Yes my Lord." Talbot scurries from the chamber like a rat possessed back to the Monastery.

Sigmund waits for Talbot to be out of ear shot before speaking.

"He's a strange one that one..." Sigmund chuckles.

"Yes. Friar Talbot is one of life's *enigmas*... Perhaps the Devil understands his behavior."

"Can we trust him if he sleeps with the Devil?" Sigmund postulates Talbot's bigoted behavior.

"He is nothing but a pious rat... Let him scurry back to his nest... Perhaps he has a Nun in wait."

Nicholas muses the thought but soon dismisses the vulgarity. Sigmund however had his own nun tied to his bed.

She could wait.

"What news do you hear of the Ottoman? ... Do they camp nearby?" Asked Nicholas with concern.

"Nay... The Beasts keep them at bay for now. They gather grain and fatten their horses in Bulgaria... And camp beside the River Danube."

“Hmm... They will raid before the next blood moon. Tis what I would do... Have the scouts kept us informed of their camps dare they stray too close without warning... Secure our own supplies before they do... Understood?” Nicholas orders.

“Yes father. Preparations are underway as ye speak.” He lied to please his father.

“And what of the Beast that breached our walls from within last evening?”

Nicholas looks about as though one could appear through the door at any moment. Then to Nero sleeping in a patch of sun. Confident none were about lest he would have woken.

“It escaped... Perhaps a man that turned from within and was troubled by the moon... Some men say they recognized it as one of their own. I have dealt with it... There will nay be anymore turn on this ground.”

“Make sure of it... Inspect the men personally and dispose of those who do those who show signs... Or those that refuse.” Nicholas orders the death sentences.

“None would refuse father... If they wish to breathe another breath on this forsaken earth.” Sigmund suggests.

“Make it so.” Nicholas ordered dismissing his son from his sight.

Nicholas sat back on his throne.

Worn tired by endless years of rule. The throne had not faired any better. How many years had it been? He had lost count since the curse had descended upon his kingdom. Sighing heavily. His only hope to find the heart and possess. To kill it. To kill the curse. And free himself of the living hell. Allowing his to sleep with his beloved departed wife. He looks up to the unadorned ceiling.

A ceiling without stars. Wondering what laid beyond this world.

Ned had wandered into a cellar in search of Zahra.

Only to find Brother Geoffrey leaning over a large boiling pot suspended over a slow burning fire. Stirring it leisurely with a long wood spoon. Focused, as if it had captured him in a trance.

“How’s the head feeling?” Ned catches his attention.

“Oh... Hello Brother Ned... Much better. I must thank you for saving my life.”

“It’s nothing. I’ve seen worse in the Ouster world... Much worst.”
Calming Geoffrey’s concern.

“God has blessed you with healing hands Brother Ned... For that we give thanks to have you among us... What is it like your Ouster world?” He asked curiously.

“Much like this. But more people... We have devices that do things for us. I would show you but it seems Kristina has taken off with my *mobile*. *God* knows where Sebastian is... Sorry.” Ned doesn’t catch himself in time.

“That’s okay...” Geoffrey forgives him. “...Mobile?”

“A small device we use to talk to each other with... Over long distances... People at the other end have one.”

“Is that possible? ... Is it God’s will?”

“It seems so.” Ned assures him.

“Oh... And God?” Geoffrey asked hesitantly.

Hoping people had not abandoned Him for *mobiles*.

“Yes... He’s still sticking about... In America He’s been syndicated and Paid to View... But elsewhere in the world He still operates independently... We’re more tolerant of other religions... Sometimes.”

“Other religions? ... How many other Gods are there?” Geoffrey stops stirring looking over to Ned with apprehension.

“Still only one.” Ned grins.

“Oh...” Geoffrey smiles contently. “...And the Jews?”

“They’re a persistent lot... God bless their circumcised socks... They returned home.”

“That’s good?” Responds Geoffrey, unable to imagine a world without them.

“What you cooking up? ... Not Brussel Sprouts I hope?”

“What’s wrong with Brussel Sprouts?”

“Oh they’re my favorite... Can’t get enough of them.” Ned lies.

“I’ll inform Sister Rebekah.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Trying to retract his words.

“I insist... It’s the least I can do for you Brother Ned after what you have done.” Geoffrey smiles gleefully.

“What’s that you’re stirring?” Ned sniffs the sweet brew unsure of its purpose.

“Wort.” He responds carefully stirring as though there was an art to it.

“Wort?”

“To make beer. You have beer in Ouster world?”

“Sure do. Lots of it... I haven’t seen it being made first hand before.”

“Here... Stir this.” Geoffrey offers Ned the long wood spoon.

Taking it unwittingly, Ned begins to stir slowly as he had seen. Geoffrey broke a handful of dried leaves and scatters them over the surface before submersing beneath the surface.

“What’s that? ...”

“Hops and herbs... A sprinkle here... A pinch there... That should do it.” He said shaking his hands over the pot to complete the spell.

“How long does this take?”

“Only a few more hours... Keep stirring... Don’t let it settle, or it will burn.” Said Geoffrey about to disappear through the door.

“Hey wait up. I only came to...” Ned began to say only to find himself abandoned. “...You crafty bugger... Nothing wrong with your head.” Shaking his head for being so gullible.

Zahra appears sometime later at the door way.

“Oh there you are... I’ve been trying to find you.” She said.

“Seems Brother Geoffrey has disappeared.”

“Don’t worry... He’ll be back in a couple hours.”

“Couple of hours? ... What am I supposed to do?”

“I suggest you keep stirring.” She smiled reclining onto a soft bag of grain content to watch the Ned work for his keep.

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you?” Feeling he was being played.

“Of cos, aren’t you?” She smiled.

“Kind of.” Enjoying the chore.

“Kristina has your mobile you know. She’s taking pictures of everyone.”

“She’s a fast learner that one... It’s not much good to me here.”

“I suppose not.” Trying to penetrate Ned’s thoughts.

“Another night of Beasts and that’s it for another six months?” He asks.

“If we’re lucky.”

“How have you managed to *survive* for so long?”

“You have to. Otherwise...” She pauses, “...Monasteries give us sanctuary.”

“Can the curse ever be lifted?”

“Two ways... If the heart ever stops beating. All this ends and everyone becomes dust.”

“And how could the heart ever stop beating?” Ned feared the answer.

“A wooden stake.”

“Of course I should have known... And the other?” He began to ask knowing the answer. “...It finds a new home free from sin... Whatever that means.”

“That’s right... And *only* the *Witch* knows where it lays.” Adds Zahra.

“Why hasn’t Nicolas simply gotten the location out of her?”

Zahra chuckles as though amused by the thought.

“What so funny?”

“She’s a *Witch* remember... You do believe in Witches don’t you?”

“Not really... But after the past couple days I’m beginning to believe anything is possible.”

Ned stirs the wort slowly creating eddies on the surface.

Steaming a fragrance of hops and herds into the air. Zahra watched on. The sun crept through an upper widow and onto the bags of grain. Warming her and putting her at ease with Ned. There was something about him that made her trust him.

“Can you ride?” She asked inquisitively.

“Not really. Horses and I don’t seem to agree with each other.” Preferring a distant relationship with them.

“I’ll teach you... Unless you prefer to spend all day filtering that for Brother Geoffrey?”

“I guess I’m not going anywhere in a hurry. Why not... It should be interesting.” Contemplating the anxiety he had with horses, or they had of him.

“We can’t stay here forever. Gypsies like to keep moving. A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

“So the song goes.”

“Song? What song?”

“I’ll explain it one day...” Said Ned.

“Brother Geoffrey should back before the bell tolls for supper.” Zahra advises getting to her feet again.

“Should be? ...” Ned enquires. “...And if he’s not?”

“I’d keep stirring until he does...” She laughs leaving the cellar, “... He won’t let his precious beer be spoiled.”

Ned watched her leave. As if she was taunting him to watch her leave. There was something irritating him about her.

It was an irritation he found difficult to scratch...

Chapter Nineteen

Days passed into weeks as Ned settled into the life of the Romani.

And weeks rolled into months. Working his keep and learning to ride to pass the time as Sebastian sat in front to help calm the animal. A walk became a canter, and a canter became a gallop. Days drew longer and sun climbed higher. Thoughts of red moons and cold mists and roaming Beasts forgotten as gypsies went about their daily routine.

“Harvest time soon.” Informed Zahra handing him a goat skin bag of water.

“Harvest? You have crops somewhere?” Looking about for field of long grass.

“We help the locals to harvest their crops in return for some grain and supplies.”

“You’re welcome to join us.” She asked.

“Of course... Sounds like fun.” Excited by the prospect of working in the fields.

“We’ll see how you feel after your first day...” She chuckles taking a mouthful from the bottle, “...How do you fancy a ride tomorrow?”

“Where to?”

“Sighisoara.”

The name caught him by surprise.

“Sighisoara? ... What’s there?”

“Just a village... Thought I would pick up some supplies.”

“Oh, I see.” Contemplating what to expect.

“Anyway, it will give you a chance to practice you riding.”

“Why not. I could do with change from around here... No offense.”

“None taken. I was thinking the same. We’ll leave at first light if we want to be back before sun fall.”

“Is it safe? The Beasts?” He looks about the forest.

“It should be... But you never know. There might be one or two about.” She lies.

Ned catches a grin on her face forming.
“Liar!” He calls out watching her leave.

Laying his back against a wagon wheel, allowed the afternoon sun to bath him with a peace he had long since forgotten.

The outside world was... Out there... Somewhere. Beyond his reach. Or beyond his sight. Maybe Sighisoara would help him accept his fate. The reality that he was sandwiched in some kind of time warp. And that he had not wandered onto an abandoned movie set. The nightmare realm he had found himself was growing on him. Maybe, the outside world was the nightmare.

He watch on as Kristina and Sebastian run about. Frolicking about tickling each other. And he began to question himself, did he really *want* to go back? Did he *have* to go back? A cool zephyr breeze blew gently from the north. Ned closed his eyes and drifted to a deep sleep. And began to dream, back in the trenches...

... “Incoming!!” A man shouts out over the pandemonium of noise and explosions.

The night air fogged with smoke. Lungs burned with the thick smell of cordite. Feeling the sweat of the uniform clinging to his body.

Confused, Ned looks about the trench.

“Where am I?” He asked a passing soldier rushing pass him. Only to be ignored. Another man hurries the other way. Each following orders until they laid dead by a snipers bullet.

“Parffet! ... Get your arse over here before I have it court martialed!” Barks a Sergeant in a neat unstained uniform.

Caked in mud Ned clammers to his feet wondering how he had fallen. Someone trusts a heavy artillery shell into his hands and almost drops it. He falls to his knees at the weight.

“What’s the matter man? To your post! ... That an order!” The Sergeant continues to yells at him.

His face but inches from Ned’s. His breath and spit striking him. Wiping his face with a sleeve. Only to smear it with mud. Explosions reverberated about him. Flashes of light and deafening noise came from all sides. Men scrambling in chaotic directions. Projectiles whistled

through overhead, sounding their arrival. A sudden explosion shook the ground and air. Sending up earth and mud that showered heavily over crouching men like it was raining rocks.

Knocking him to the ground again.

“What was this? Hell?” He said to himself looing about more confused than ever.

“To your stations men!” The Sergeant shouted again over the perpetual bombardment. Standing steadfast as though nothing would budge him.

A dead soldier lays on top of Ned and he pushes the limp body away.

Shrapnel had removed half the man’s face. And Ned backs away from the poor sod.

“Where do you think you’re going Parffet?!!” An Officer yells at him eyeing his intention to run.

Ned looks up to the smoke stained night sky. Lit by explosions and spotlights. Machine guns stuttered and stammered. Spiting death at those who stepped into no man’s land. Relentless thunderous detonations deafen his ears. The earth beneath him shook violently again. Salvo after salvo after salvo crawled brass finger tips closer.

It was only a matter of time before one found its range.

“Parffet!!” The officer continues to scream at him through the deafening barrage.

Suddenly, there is a blinding bright flash of light.

Followed by a sudden deafening silence. A heavenly silence. Then as if time had caught up, his body throbs with agonizing pain. The light fades and he finds himself suspended above his body on a gurney. Being pushed frantically to a trauma theatre. *His* trauma team working frantically on him. Wires and tubes attached to monitors and dip bottles. Recognizing the attending doctors and nurses beneath their surgical masks.

“What the?” He exclaims looking about.

But no one hears him. His ethereal presence moving along with the dying corpus beneath.

“Shrapnel to the chest... Pupils are blown, BP’s falling” A nurse reads out his vitals.

“Give me an ABG. Chem Seven... And a coag panel.” A doctor calls out automatically. “...Don’t you die on me Ned! ... Not on *my* shift you *bastard!*”

Blood leaked from gapping shrapnel wounds. As one was stitched, another would bleed elsewhere.

“We’re losing him!” A medic calls out.

An incessant high pitch tone fills the room as a heart monitor sounded its death kneel. The medic thumps Ned’s chest, frantically counting off the compressions. Others rush about knowing what was required of them.

“Don’t you die on me you bastard! ... Paddles!” The medic calls out desperately.

A pair are thrust into his hands and he rubs them together.

“Clear!” The medic calls out.

A sudden jolt passes through Ned’s dying body. And through Ned watching on, sending sparkles through his vision.

“Again!” The medic calls out again.

“All clear! ...” The medic shouts out again. “...Come on Ned. Don’t die on me... Give me 300!”

The defibrillator beeps faster as it charges before singing out a continuous tone.

“Clear!” He shouts out a final time.

A massive charge is released through the cadaver and Ned above. Abruptly jolting him and the brilliant light appears again.

Wakening him from the dream.

Eyes opened violently and he gasps for breath. Hands reach for his chest and to feel for wounds. Only to find his heart racing and the sun setting. How long had he been out? Had he returned to the present time? Looking about the gypsy camp site that had been his home for the past months. In some way relieved he was still where he found himself.

A part of him reluctant to go back to the outside world. The camp bell sounded for supper.

“What news you bring me son?” Nicholas asked, looking down at his son.

“The heathen camp beyond the mountains a week’s ride.” Sigmund reports.

“Hmm....” Nicholas presses his fingers together forming a steeple anticipating their next move. “... And their numbers?”

“A few thousand at most.”

“A small force. I wonder what they are doing this far north? ... Does Mehmed ride with them?”

“He does not... Tis his son Ismael.” Sigmund informs his father.

Nicholas sits back in his throne and thinks. After a drawn-out silence he speaks.

“I fear not Ismael. He is young and brash... I suspect he is terrorizing the countryside proving his manhood to his father.”

Nicholas looks down again at Sigmund comparing him to Ismael.

“Let me take my men and defeat this heathen who dares to cross *our* lands.” Sigmund rises the challenge.

‘Perhaps I should allow him.’ Nicholas thinks to himself.

Two young bulls locking horns. Entertaining the thought momentarily only to allow it to slip through prudence. Fearing Ismael was better equipped and battle savvy.

“No my son... It wouldn’t be a fair fight.” Retorts Nicholas cryptically.

Reclining back again on the throne he sinks further in thought and strategy.

“But father, we should strike while he is weak...” Sigmund began before being cut by his father.

“Waste not your time or energy my son. Have him come to you... Let his horses and men grow wary... Battle him here on our ground for we know it better than him... Say even delay his ride and leave him for the Beasts to do our labor for his.” Nicholas smiles at the thought.

“As you say father.” Sigmund bows his head and steps back subserviently.

“Tis his father we should fear most... And he won’t attack with a few thousand men... His army will be in the tens of thousands. And when that time comes we will call upon our allies to attack from all sides... Within these mountains he is trapped. And we will have him by the balls.” Nicholas clasps his fists tight as though he were squeezing them.

Conceding his father’s wisdom, Sigmund nods his approval.

“Have the men ready nonetheless... Double the archery practice and sharpen the swords. I want no head left on a heathen’s shoulders...”

Understood?”

“Yes father.” He acknowledges the order and walks from the chamber.

“You still here?” Sigmund quips seeing Sister Ruth tied to his bed.

Her arms tied to bed end. Her legs splayed open.

“Untie me you bastard!” She cries out wriggly helplessly on the bed.

“I haven’t finished with you...” Undressing himself and lay on top of her. “...Now where was I?”

He tries to kiss her but she pushes her head to one side. Sigmund’s follows. Lips meet and tongues exchange an erotic dance. Breaths quicken and she gasps at a sudden intrusion.

“You bastard!” She curses him for the violation.

“Remember to who you speak.” He warns her.

“Remember of whom you fuck my Lord.”

“My apologies Sister Ruth. I didn’t see you there... Forgive me.” He chuckles.

Thrusting again her eyes roll in her head and she screams out in pleasure and in pain. The solid oak bed rocks and squeaks in rhythm with the passion being unleashed above. Heavy panting quickens and she struggles to free herself from Sigmund’s impalements. A convulsion rushes through her body.

“Oh Mother Mary of God! Forgive me!” She gasps for breaths between the spasms of pleasure running through her body.

Sigmund shuts to release a flood of pleasure into her and collapses beside her exhausted.

“You bastard!” Ruth pleads.

“You’re welcome.” He countered, tasting forbidden fruit suckling a ripe plump nipple.

“Untie me at once.” She demands.

“I’m not finished with you Sister Ruth.”

“They’ll be looking for me if I don’t return soon. The sun will soon be low.”

“Nay there be Beasts about for months.”

“Tis only one Beast I fear and that it hangs between your legs.” Her eyes searching for his stirring beast.

Sigmund growls like a Beasts and mounts her again.

“Oh my God...” Ruth gasps at another intrusion of her virtue...

Chapter Twenty

Perched atop of a wagon, a cock crowed loudly.

Unceremoniously awakening Ned from his sleep and a warm seductive dream. His head resting on a soft bag of grain. Sweet earthy fragrances anesthetizing him back to sleep. A voice called out and it was not coming from his dream. Eyes squint open to see Zahra silhouetted in early morning light.

“It’s time to get going if we want to make it back before sunset.” Zahra advises.

“What time is it?” He inquires, sitting upright half a sleep.

“Day time.” Informs Zahra.

Cupping hands, he splashes cold water over his face, hoping away the residual tiredness.

As Sebastian watches on chewing on a large grainy biscuit.

“You want to come?” Ned asked him.

Sebastian nods his head enthusiastically. No one had ever asked him to come with them before.

“I guess we better invite the other one... They in separable...” Suggested Zahra looking about for her. “...Go find her.” She instructs Sebastian.

Handing Ned a large coarse oat biscuit.

“You better eat this before you go. You’ll need something in your stomach.”

“Thanks.”

Ned examines the coarse biscuit and bit into it.

“Hmm. Not bad.” He lied.

“I’ll get the horses.” Zahra disappears leaving him with his breakfast at hand.

Reappearing sometime later with two large horses.

Sebastian atop of one. Kristina the other.

“Probably best Sebastian rides with you... He’ll keep the horse calm for you.”

“I can handle the horse.” Said Ned putting on a brave face.

Seeing Sebastian smiling down at him from atop the horse, wondering what the hesitation was about mounting it.

“We’ll see.” Zahra smiles back, pulling herself into the saddle.

Ned pushes a foot into a stirrup and pulls himself up behind Sebastian. Taking the reins kicks the horse’s flanks with heels to follow Zahra heading down a familiar track.

Retracing the steps he had made on foot.

The sun rose unhurried, and he found himself rocking with the horses steps. Sebastian squealed whenever he saw something that caught his attention. A butterfly, or wood pigeon that would fly by and he would jump off expectantly from the horse to chase it. Kristina not be far behind.

“I don’t know where they find the energy.” Said Zahra.

“I know what you mean.” Said Ned at watching them spring about effortlessly.

Mid-morning and the sound of crashing water could be heard ahead. Sebastian and Kristina run off to investigate. By the time the horses had arrived the two urchins had become naked and were splashing about the pond of water.

“Oh well... We can rest here until these two dry off.”

“How much further?”

“About the same distance again.” Zahra surmises looking into the distance.

She lays back on the warm rock. Ned lays down by her allowing the day wash over him. Their bodies close. Ned still feeling the rocking of the horse as though he were still riding it. Joints ached and he was relieved to take the weight off his back-side.

“You miss... Out there?” She asked curiously.

“I thought I would but... Now I’m not so sure... I think I see why you want to stay.” He reflects.

“You have to go back you know... You can’t stay here.” She informs him.

“You want me to go?”

There was an awkward silence between them. Not betraying the words spoken by the Witch Zahra lied.

“No... I mean... It’s up to you.” She responded.

“Oh... We’ll see... I’m getting quite fond of the simple pleasures in life... Though the Beasts may take some taming... And then there’s Sigmund.” Ned broached the subject.

“Sigmund? What of him?” She asked unaware of the concern.

“I could see the way he looked at you that day. Be careful around him... I don’t trust him for a moment.”

“I know...” She pauses for thought. “...You would fight for my honor?”

“I took an oath to heal, not fight... But when it comes to that creep I might make an exception. You did save my life. The least I can do is save your ...” Pausing momentarily for the word he felt reluctant to say. “... Virtue.”

“My *virtue*? ...” She smiles at the thought. “... Don’t worry about my virtue... I can handle myself.”

“I am sure you can... I’ve seen that first hand.” Said Ned about to stand.

Reaching for her hand he pulls Zahra to her feet. Standing close, as though they could kiss at any moment. Eyes trying to read the other’s thoughts.

“We best get going... We still have a while to go.” Said Zahra blinking first.

“What’s a virtue?” Asked Sebastian overhearing the conversation.

“A virtue is what a Beast will bite off if you don’t put your pants on.” She warns him.

Quickly Sebastian presses his knees together as though it would protect his *virtue*. Darting eyes search the forest floor for Beasts. His nose sniffs the air keenly like an animal.

“Hurry up before I wallop your backside... And the Beasts will be the least of your worries young man!”

“I’m hungry!” Sebastian complains rushing off.

“You are always hungry... Does your aunt ever feed you?” She asked him, but was met with silence.

Balancing on one foot struggling to push the other down a knotted pants leg before toppling to the ground. Sebastian squeals in frustration. Kristina giggles hysterically watching him tumbling to the ground.

“You too missy!” Warns her mother.

Meandering along overgrown trails.

Ned rocked in the saddle causing Sebastian to lean back and snooze between Ned’s arms. Zahra looks over and sees them bonded. Wondering what kind of man he was beneath the surface. Her mind drifted, fantasizing the person he could be. Strong. Caring. Loving. She caught herself as Ned caught her watching.

“What’s up?” Catching her looking.

“Nothing... I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Nothing...” She lies. “...We almost there.”

And gently kicks her heels into the horse’s side. Causing it to canter. Not to be let unchallenged Ned does likewise wakening Sebastian who squeals to like by the sudden jolting. Kristina holds the horse’s mane with both hands.

Small heels egging the horse to go faster.

“If it’s a race you want. It’s a race you’ll get! ... Come on Sebastian!” He calls out.

Sebastian grabs hold of the mane and leans forward and whispers to the horse’s ear. The horse suddenly bolts. Almost sending Ned tumbling over the hind quarters by the surprise.

“We can’t let these *girls* beat us!” He encourages him.

Thunderous hooves pounded the turf across an open field.

Leaning forward. Wondering how much longer he could maintain the insanity he found himself. Torn between being excited, or terrified. Both states pumped adrenaline through his body. Sebastian’s intermittent squeals distracting him from the fear of falling.

Zahra pulls her horse up and waits for the boys to catch up. Cantering her mount to the edge of a forest.

A forest of warped trees.

“What took you so long?” Rubbing the defeat into Ned’s male pride.

“You had a head start. It wasn’t fair.” He offers his defense.

“The *girl’s* beat us!” Sebastian declares innocently.

“Something you better get used to Sebastian.” Conceded Ned.

“Oh...” Said Sebastian sliding from the mount and ran off to chase a colorful fluttering butterfly. With Kristina in close pursuit.

“I remember passing through here... What is this place?” Asked Ned seeing the twisted trunks.

Zahra remained silent as though words were forbidden. Dismounting they lead the mounts by their reins. Horse’s ears prick and point about as though hearing whispering ghostly voices calling out. The air was cool, damp and stale. And made their way through the tortured trees, leaning in one direction.

There was something eerie about the place and Ned wondered if he should have returned. As they neared the edge a circular clearing, the day light grew brighter. A solitary tree stood erect at the center. Straight and alone. As though pining for others to join it.

But they would not come.

“This is land of the lights.” Zahra now speaks.

Wondering how she could begin to explain the place.

“Bântuit.” Said Ned unexpectedly.

Sebastian’s ear prick up at the word and runs to stand beside Zahra clutch her leg to protect himself.

“Haunted... Some say that...” Zahra contemplates the possibility, “... Nothing grows here. But grass... And even that.”

“What are the dark markings?” Seeing the uniform blacken patches.

“The lights.” She drifts in her thoughts.

“The lights? ... What Lights?”

“From the sky...” She looks up in search of them. “...Even the Witch fears to lay foot on this ground. Some mysteries are beyond her. There are voices even she cannot speak to... Tis the wrong Path.”

“Path?” He asked.

But Zahra remains silent. Somethings are beyond Ned’s understanding.

“UFO’s if you ask me.” Ned postulates.

“What’s a UFO?” Asked Sebastian’s curious mind.

“Aliens from outer space... From the stars.”

Ned looks up to the sky and Sebastian's eyes follow.

"Star people... With space crafts... Rockets that burn the grass as they land." He reconciles the deformed landscape.

"Star people from the stars? ..." Sebastian's mind racing with bizarre images of creatures from another world. "... Ousters!"

"That's right... *Ousters*... Sometimes you need to believe... To believe in things you can't." Informed Ned, looking over to Zahra.

"Perhaps." She lies, stepping around the dark patches.

Moving hesitantly forward. As though each step could be into quicksand. The horses refuse to move another foot. Sebastian soothed them with incoherent words, placing his forehead against the horses. Hesitantly the horse lifts a hoof and steps forward.

Ned watches on in wonder.

Tentatively they trespassed the waste land. A gust of wind rushes of them carrying a voice calling out words from another time. They all hear it. The horses abruptly halt pulling against the leading reins.

"It's okay." Sooths Sebastian stroking their flanks.

The horses quieten as the gust passes behind them. Kristina stands close to her mother clutching her apron as the mysterious wind swirled about them. This was not the Witch. There were other forces at play here. Arriving at the central tree and they stand beneath its perfect form.

"What makes this one different?" Asked Ned.

Looking about the perimeter at the other trees that were buckled and bent over. As though their roots were holding them back from joining the one at the center. Chained to the earth.

"Maybe your *star people* made it that way?" Zahra teases him.

"Perhaps..." Ned lies. "... But it gives me the creeps."

"Creeps!" Sebastian parrots out, easing the ghoulish atmosphere.

"I'll creep you in a moment... Come here!" Reaching out to tickle him.

Sebastian runs off with Kristina not far behind. Finding a patch of the sunlight that had broken through the cloud begins to twirl gracefully.

"The innocence of youth... What happened to ours?" He reflects.

"I don't know about yours, but I've still got all mine..." Zahra smiles about to remount her horse. "...Not far now."

"I'll be glad to see the back of this place."

“Don’t get too use to it. You’ll be coming back this way later.” She reminds him.

“Thanks for the thought.” Not relishing their return...

Chapter Twenty One

A towering white church steeple of the church peered over the tree tops.

As if it were spying on their imminent arrival. A worn earth track led to the village. Overhung with branches of elms and oak trees. Sun filtering through creating a medley of green leaves, blue bells and wild flowers. Unchanged from the when Ned had walked it. Years into the future.

The sun had reached its zenith. Sebastian ran ahead while Kristina was content to ride with her mother. The unhurried pace rocking her gently in the saddle. Allowing the village to come to her. She had visited on occasions. Unlike Sebastian, who rushed ahead to would warn the villagers of his impending arrival.

Villagers stopped momentarily from working fields to gauge the passing trio. Sensing them as harmless, resumed laboring. Rounding a corner, the square came into view. The cenotaph was no longer there. Ned took in the old familiar buildings. Thinking not much had changed in five hundred years.

Then his eyes catches the church. Its steeple and cross reaching towards the heavens. What surprised him most was not so much the steeple, but the man standing on the top step.

Dressed in black. Looking directly at him.

“It can’t be.” He said to himself recognizing him as the same man that was there when he left.

“What’s that?” Zahra asks.

“That man there. On the steps.” Indicating the man to her.

“What of him?”

“I thought I saw him here when I left this place. The other... day...” He begins to wonder if it could be. “...Nah, can’t be?”

Zahra ignores the remark. Dismounting, ties her horse to a post outside a store. Ned does likewise. Kristina goes off in search of Sebastian. Following the squeals coming from behind the church. Looking back over his shoulder to the steps discovers the man in black had gone.

And he follows Zahra into the store. The very store he had bought his grocery items from. Familiar smells ruminated from the shelves and walls. A different old lady. Equally as podgy as the first stood behind the counter talking to another equally stodgy woman, discussing the arrival of the Ouster to the village.

The woman looks at him. Scrutinizing him from head to toe and back again.

“Ouster.” She whispers audibly to the other woman beside her.

“I’m right here... I can hear you.” He jokes knowing they would speak very little English. Then smiled as if to suggest he meant no harm.

Zahra had disappeared among the shelves and returned with a few items. Herbs and spices. But the woman is hesitant to serve Zahra. A Gypsy. Daughter of the Witch. A silence fell over the women. Just then Kristina races in with Sebastian chasing her squealing.

And breaking the impasse.

“Sssh! You two. Not go touching anything. You hear?” She warns the mischievous pair, placing coins onto the counter.

And waited for the podgy woman to accept them.

For a moment Ned thought the woman would ask them to leave, the tension was as thick as the mist.

Without warning, the woman reaches forward and pockets the coins without change. Sensing it was a good time to leave Ned opens the door and hears the small bell overhead.

“Hmm.” Recalling the salutation of the small bell.

The podgy stodgy women watch the Gypsy woman and Ouster leave. Observing the Ouster in tow. The news would make good gossip for the women of the village. Perhaps this one would stay. Perhaps this one would live. Time would tell. He had survived a blood moon.

Could he survive another?

Ned looks about the square. Stone buildings unchanged for centuries. Less weather and tired. All that was missing was the train station. A large hall occupied that site. Father Michael looks on from atop of the steps. Observing Ned.

Curiously got the better of Ned and walks towards the church. Over the spot where the cenotaph would be built. Goosebumps suddenly tingle over

him. Sending a chill through his body, as those he had trodden on a grave. He stops momentarily to stare at the spot.

Michael grins to himself.

Villagers about the Square stop and watch Ned. Ignoring their scrutiny, continued towards the church to see Michael descending the steps to greet him.

“Edward... It is so good to meet you.” He greets Ned extending his soft hands.

“How do you know who I am?” Ned asked hesitantly.

“News travel’s fast around hear of an *Ouster’s* arrival... Especially one that survives their first *moon*.”

“I’m hoping to survive a few more.” Proposes Ned.

Michael nods quietly. The corners of his mouth raise to give a happy grin.

Ned tries to profile Michael but the more he tried the less he could. He had one of those sort faces that lacked defining. A kindly face. Michael listens to Ned’s thoughts and allows him the conundrum.

“I thought I saw you at this church... In the future.” He tries to explain.

“Perhaps we all look the same.” Michael gestures the black robes.

“Perhaps... But I was sure it was you.” Now doubting himself.

Michael refused to lie. And so remained silent.

“Father Michael... It is good to see you... Do you keep well?” Appearing behind Ned.

“*Eternally* well thank you.” Smiling to Kristina, now sucking on a broken candy stick.

Michael looks down at her. An innocent child of destiny.

God’s chosen child.

“How be your mother?”

“She is well. However Gello has gone deeper into the forest with *others*.” She informs him.

“I will pray for her... That she does not wonder too far.”

“Thank you Father.”

“Give your mother my blessings.”

“I will Father. Thank you.” Zahra bows her head and crosses herself, as does Kristina.

Unsure what to do Ned rises his hand and gestures a farewell.

Just then Sebastian arrives hyperactive. Ned recognizes the symptoms but it was all a little too late.

“I’ll be seeing you again Sebastian. Have faith.” Michael informs the sticky candy faced urchin.

Sebastian squeals and runs off towards a water trough to submerge his head. Kristina chases him and holds his head under. Arms trash about splashing water over the two of them.

“Surrender!” Challenges him.

“Never!” A bubbling reply gurgled back.

“Let him go before you drown him... Though there’s an idea.” She thought aloud. “...Sorry Father.” She quickly crosses herself seeking absolution from the thought.

“It’s understandable.” Michael concedes.

Leaving Ned confused as to what kind Father, Michael was. The name was familiar, as though he had heard it before. Goosebumps tingle over him at the moment of the thought. He looks around to discover Michael had vanished as though into thin air.

Zahra notices Ned confusion.

“He has a habit of doing that... One minute he’s there and the next he’s not.”

The ride back was not much different to that to the village.

Trespassing the dead lands again, chilled Ned to the bone. Wavering between the star people or the ghosts that he feared most. He thought he heard the wind whispering his name. Reminding him of the Witches warning. But without the fingers gripping him. The wind fell silent when they reached the other side. Glad to see the back of it the clearing. He vowed never to return.

At the junction where the paths part, one leading through the forest. The other around. Ned spies the slab of stone on which he had sat. Somehow overlooking it when they had passed the first time.

“Hold up.” He calls out to Zahra.

“What’s up?”

Ned climbs off his mount as Sebastian held the reins watching on. The boulder now looking less weathered and not as over grown with moss and lichen than before. Examining it more closely he tries to find the etching he had read.

Finding nothing but a smooth untouched surface.

“What the? ...” He exclaims surprised.

“What’s the matter?” She asked curiously.

“There was a message here. A warning to *Go around... Ned.*” He said growing confused.

“So you didn’t heed your own warning... And you didn’t heed the Witch’s warning.” Zahra rubs salt into his wounded pride.

“*My* warning?” Ned asked inquisitively.

“You know anyone else around here named Ned?”

Stumped for an answer reaches for his pocket knife.

“Don’t take too long... I want to be back before sun down. The days are warm, but the evening can be cold... And nay we see the track.”

“Almost done.” Said Ned frantically etching and blowing away dust. Wiping it with his hand he stands back to view his master piece...

‘GO AROUND NED.’

“You know it won’t make any difference?” Declared Zahra looking at.

“I know... I’m still here.” He concedes, if only to rationalize his existence.

No matter what he wrote he would always be standing there. Giving the crude inscription a final wipe. Kissed his fingers and placed them against the etched warning as though to bless it.

“Suppose you’re right...” Accepted Ned closing the pocket knife. “... It’s worth a try.”

“Yeah.” Zahra lied...

Chapter Twenty Two

Summer days tumbled over each other and over again into months.

Ned labored days harvesting crops. Trading sweat for lodging and food, became accustomed to the simple Bohemian lifestyle. Skilled using a sickle as he was using a scalpel. Back-breaking work, what did not kill him only made him stronger. Tormented by the thought of staying and enjoying a peace lost by the world outside.

Unable to annul growing feelings that he had for Zahra. A fire burned inside and flames refused to be quenched. No matter how many cold showers he had to take. Swinging the sickle with hefty blows to release his frustrations.

“Be careful with that.” Warned Zahra, appearing from no-where holding out the goat skin.

“Sorry. I didn’t see you there.” Tossing the sickle to the ground, relieved for a break.

A taunt half naked dust covered body dripping with sweat. Not unnoticed by Zahra admiring unashamedly.

“What’s up?” Seeing her grinning.

“Nothing.” She lies.

Ned splashes water at her, catching her by surprise. She runs and he chases her like a child. Tackling playfully to the ground. He pins her down. Holding the water bottle above daring to pour it onto her.

“You wouldn’t?” She protested.

“Wouldn’t I? ... Surrender?” He challenges her.

“Never!” Pushes her knees into him and reverses their positions.

Straddling his sweating heaving body the water bottle above his head.

“You wouldn’t?” He warns her.

“Surrender Ouster.” She challenges pouring cold water over his face and chest.

“Okay...” Ned confesses softly, “... Okay, I surrender.”

Giving in easier than she had hoped.

Lured by his seductive surrender she lowers herself closer. Their lips an inch apart. Their breathing as one. Trying to read the other's mind. Neither were succeeding. Blinded with desires. Eyes peered into the other's soul. Loins burned and arched and she felt a beast stirring beneath her. With faces all but touching. She speaks.

"Tonight... We celebrate Summer Solstice."

"Oh." He looks to the sun then back to her face.

"You're welcome to join us." Searching for an answer in his face.

"Okay." He meekly replies surrendering to her will.

"I'll see you there." And she kisses him as to an appetizer of what was to come. Holding the kiss. Her eyes still staring into his.

An understanding passed between them. Groaning silently inside, frustrated at having lit a fire she could not extinguish.

"Okay." The meek voice accepts the invitation again.

"Good." She said getting to her feet.

Leaving Ned laying there.

Not exhausted. Not tired. But muddled. His mind racing as to what that had just happened. Confused by the sudden lustful invitation. The peace and stillness is broken by a giggling squeal leaking from between the long grass about him.

"Sebastian!? ..." Ned calls out. "... I can hear you."

The giggling squeal rushes through the long grass like a gust of wind. Ned follows the rascal's movements until it was lost in the distance.

"The Roma have their pagan festival... *Summer solstice*." Talbot spits on the floor at the unchristian ritual.

"Lest you forget Friar Talbot that you yourself celebrate Christmas at the winter solstice... If only to convert the Pagan's to your peddled religion."

"*Peddled?* ... My Lord? ... Have ye no faith in our Savior?" Talbot exclaims wondering Nicholas' beliefs.

"I have as much belief in Him and he does in me." Nicholas warns Talbot backing away.

"Forgive me my Lord." Talbot lowers himself and cowers backwards.

“Tis not my place to forgive... I will leave that to the Gods... I have affairs of state to attend to... On earth, as it is in Heaven...” Nicholas advises his religious counsel.

Sigmund watches from behind his father’s throne.

His chin resting on the upper edge as though he were about to be beheaded. Chuckling, amused at the sight of Talbot lowering himself before his father.

“Let them have their *celebration* to whatever God they want... I prefer have them wandering around as fodder for the Beasts than myself... But I fear they be more Christian than those within these walls.”

Recalling his men’s savage ways. Two men of his men would not make a whole Roma Christian. Dying on the battle field a martyr for their Lord, Nicholas. What chance had his men of seeing the Pearly Gates of Heaven?

Only to have Saint Peter turn them away to Hades.

“You could take a leaf from the Romani Bible Friar Talbot... Perhaps ye might learn from them.” Advised Nicholas deep in contemplation.

Talbot’s face grimaces at the thought.

“*Pagans*... What would they know of Christianity?” Talbot rebuts.

“Do not dare to argue with me Friar Talbot lest your tongue be cut from its root and feed to Beasts...Understood?” Nicholas glares down at him.

Nero sits upright. Prone and ready to pounce. Disturbed by his master’s rising voice. Sniffing the air for a familiar scent. Urine.

“Steady boy... Steady... Not yet.” Nicholas strokes the dog’s large grey head.

Nero lowers himself to the floor again, the cold stone floor offering some comfort to the heat outside.

“Forgive me My Lord.” Talbot grovels again.

Sigmund chuckles. His father gestures his hands for his son to cease.

“What brings you here today Friar Talbot? ... Hmm? Is there not a nun that requires your *servicing*?”

“Oh that reminds me... Excuse me father.” Interrupts Sigmund wishing to leave.

“You’re excused... How your cock has not fallen off defies me... Be gone with you.”

Nichols waves his son away to service his whoever he had tied to his bed that day.

“Friar Talbot? ... Speak!” Nicholas awaits news of the Monastery.

“We hear news of the Ottoman on the border... Is it true?”

“Tis true. But of no concern... Tis a small force of only a few thousand... Nothing my men cannot handle.”

“A few thousand?” Talbot gulps.

“Make preparations for an attack before the next blood moon... I have plans for these heathens... Ismael leads them. And though it may displease his father. It would please me no end to see his head on the end of a spike... Lest I fear it will invoke his father to attack... But I will face that when that time arises. We still have allies... Now if you have no news for me, go play with your nuns.” Waving Talbot to leave his presence.

An orgasmic scream echoes through the castles halls. Friar Talbot thinks he recognizes the voice. His mind struggling with the familiar tones.

“We are all grateful to you My Lord for ridding the earth of these heathens. I will inform Mother Superior immediately.”

“You do that Friar... Be gone with you...” Raising a hand and makes the sign of the cross over Talbot. “...Go in peace my son.” Nichols plays with him.

Then relishes the thought of being a Pope.

‘Oh what power that would bring with it.’ He thinks momentarily.

Nicholas allowed the enticing thought to wane from his mind. Talbot scurries from the chamber just as another scream is called out. Stopping to hear the voice clearer.

‘Ruth... That Jezzabel!’ Now identifying the voice.

Nicholas looks to the ceiling.

Wondering whose daughter he had tied to his bed today. Recalling his youthful day. So many, many years ago now. The thought tired him. Let Sigmund sow his wild oats. Maybe a grandson would make his peace of this earth more tolerable.

Preparations for Ismael’s imminent arrival had been underway for some time. His men were ready. Sword blade’s razor sharp. Arrow tips

dipped in poison. Walls fortified. It was now a waiting game. Perhaps the Gypsies would offer some amusement for them.

The monastery was well fortified. Though it offered no armed men. Perhaps he would send a troop to appease Mother Superior. It would be a *shame* if she were lost. He would be answerable to Rome. Kissing holy rings was a little below his station. He would rather face death at Mehmed's blade than to be excommunicated.

Mehmed's son was as impetuous as his own. With more wives than women Sigmund had had bedded.

'Not too unlike.' Mused Nicholas wondering where the similarities ended.

Visions of Ismael's head on a long spike surfaced in his mind. Swaying in the wind. Its purple tongue exuding from its mouth. Eyes bulging in fright. He would stake it at the border lands. A warning for all those who venture beyond their own lands.

The Hungarian empire was held together by fragile alliances. Alliances that would splinter and fracture the moment Mehmed fell. Perhaps having Mehmed alive would bind the alliance tighter. Vlad had fallen by Hungarian deceit. He would be treated no differently.

'Keep your friends close and your enemies' closer...' Nichols lamented the treacherous thought. *'...Trust no one... Lest they stab you while you sleep.'* ...

Chapter Twenty Three

Laying sunken atop a wagon laden with straw.

Rocking Ned gently side to side as wheels rode the uneven surface. The cool early evening air passing over him. The outside world could not have been further from his mind. It was bliss. It was heaven. Unsure what to expect of the evening festivities. Laying back he stares up at the stars now appearing above him. They seemed brighter. Closer. He could almost reach out and touch them.

Ahead, an accordion music played and he looks up to see people gather around a large glowing bonfire.

“The Solstice.” He tells himself trying to recall the ritual he had once read about.

Jumping down, finds Zahra had changed from her plain clothes to that of a colorful cotton dress. Accentuating her beauty beyond his imagination. Or perhaps he was tired, and the kiss had lingered longer than it should have.

“Wash up and change. I found some of your clothes.” She tells him.

“Thanks.”

Ned watches her disappear among the gypsies that seemed to have multiplied overnight.

“Where did these people all come from?” He asked Kristina appearing.

“Other camps nearby.” She tells him.

“Oh... Of course.” Watching the new faces looking at him strangely.

Washing away the day’s grime, Ned reappears looking somewhat different to the sweaty field hand he was earlier.

Feeling somewhat awkward in his old clothes. And goes in search of Zahra. But finds Brother Geoffrey standing quiet among the jubilant attendees. A wooden mug in his hand.

Sister Rebekah stood quietly behind him to one beside a wagon wheel, sipping on a goblet of wine. Sister Jillian, filling her goblet when no one

was looking. A strand of black curly hair leaked from beneath her plain white veil. Rebekah tapped her foot in time with the music. A small smile growing on her face. Now and again glances to Brother Geoffrey.

Not going unnoticed by Ned.

“Brother Geoffrey. What brings you here?” He asked catching him off guard.

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Lifting the mug in celebration.

“You allowed out after dark?” Asked Ned.

“Probably not... I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“My lips are sealed... You bring a date?” Ned nudges him.

“Date?” Geoffery sked confused.

“Sister Rebekah...” Gesturing his head towards her, “...I won’t tell if you don’t... I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“She does? ...” Responded Geoffrey, surprised by the revelation. “... Oh.” Now catching her illicit glances.

Rebekah’s smile grows wider as the wine takes its effect.

“I thinks she wants you to go over to her.” Ned played cupid.

“Oh... I don’t know anything about that.” He shyly responds.

“You’ll be fine...” Ned encourages him. “...I’ll be your *wing* man.”

“Wing man?” Looking to Ned’s back for wings.

And hesitated to move.

Another nudge from Ned gets him underway. Looking back for assurance, Ned nods to him. Gulping down the rest of the potent beer for courage, walks timidly over to Sister Rebekah. Sister Jillian made herself absent. In search of another goat skin of Gypsy wine.

Hers’ was empty and the evening was young.

“One down...” Cites Ned, “... Now if I can just save the rest of them...”

Leaving the forbidden couple in search of Zahra.

The sky had darkened quickly. Stars filled the Milky Way. Stretching from one horizon to the other. More than he had ever seen in his life. As if they had multiplied, as had the Gypsies.

“Star people.” A small voice speaks beside him.

Looking down to see Sebastian scrubbed and clean for a change. A chicken bone in one hand and cheeks bulging. Jaws chewing frantically as

though it were the last supper.

“Who are you? ... What have you done with Sebastian?” Ned jokes looking about as though in search of him.

“It’s me!” Sebastian squeals back.

“Let me check... Come here.”

Ned pokes his ribs and Sebastian lets out a piercing squeal, followed by a giggle.

“Yeah... It’s you alright... Have you seen Zahra?”

Sebastian points the chicken bone towards the fire. Hearing the squeals of other children he runs off in search of the vagrant competition.

Ned makes his way through the gypsies.

Faces stared back at him. They had all heard the stories of the Ouster. Few had seen one in the flesh, alive. He appeared almost human.

“*Ouster.*” A voice whispered as he passed nearby.

“Hi, I’m Ned...” Declared Ned to the whispering voice, “...Has anyone seen Zahra?”

Eyes turn towards the fire as though recognizing the name, but words could not answer his English tongue.

“Thanks.” And continues on his way leaving a chattering voices in his wake.

“*He’s the one...*” A voice whispers to another, “... *Tis been foretold.*”

Ned catches the remark, but ignores it. Gypsies had superstitions and somehow he was entangled in them. It was all beyond him. All his life Ned had dealt with cold hard facts. Not whispers and hearsay. Leaving the Gypsies to gossip among themselves. He was in search of one particular Gypsy.

Something more beautiful than the stars in the heaven that evening.

“There you are.” Ned calls out seeing Zahra laying out food.

“Have some food before Sebastian eats it all.”

“Thanks.” Taking a seat on the bench beside her.

A large wooden goblet is placed in front of him. A frothing brew splash about its sides.

“The beer you stirred the other month ago.” Advised Zahra seeing Ned’s hesitation.

“Really?” Sniffing the concoction.

A nose twitched at the hoppy fragrance. Nothing offended him enough not to take a small sip. Washing about his mouth. It agreed with him, and swallowed. Then took a much larger mouthful.

“Not bad, if I say so myself.” Declares proudly.

“You should tell Friar Geoffrey. He’s here somewhere.” She looks about for him.

“Perhaps later. I think he might be pre-occupied with... Sister Rebekah.” Disclosed Ned.

“Oh...” Zahra missing the romantic connection, before finally making it. “...*Ooh*_ I see...”

“You look nice. I mean... Beautiful.” Complemented Ned becoming tongue tied.

“Thanks. You look okay yourself.” Seeing him in different clothes.

“Where’s Kristina?” Ned asked scanning the tables for her.

“She’ll be out soon... She’s just getting ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

“You just have to be patient... Soon... It’s very special.” She tells him.

Smoke, music and clapping filled the air.

Voices sang in rhythmic harmony. The beer potent had the desired effect on him. Tensions unwinding as inhibitions lower. Zahra sipped on a red wine equally as strong. And leaned herself against him. Feeling his warmth against hers through the cotton dress she wore for this special evening.

Ned wrapped his arms around her. As though to claim her as his own. Hands reaching for his, as to say, *‘don’t let go.’* Eyes watched on. Pleased with her choice. She was young. He was strong. They would make a good family.

Old minds consent the match.

The music died and silence spilled over the entire camp.

No one spoke. Something special was about to happen. From a nearby tent Kristina appears wearing a red dress. Stitched with gold tassels and small silver bells. She takes a position on a large colorful rug. She bows to

the gathered people watching on in silence. Seeing Ned's arms around her mother. She smiles.

She bows to her mother. Zahra and Ned nod back.

The music begins to play softly and Ned thinks he recognizes the tune. The accordions catch the key notes of the tune Kristina had played to them.

"No way..." He whispers to Zahra.

"Sssh! I like this one." She said having heard her teaching the accordion player the tune.

"Who doesn't?" Kissing Zahra's head.

Kristina twirled and moved gracefully with the music. Enchanted eyes watched on through the haze of smoke as though she was working a stage. Captivated by her beauty and grace. Moving through smoke that spiraled into the starry heavens. Flickering flames danced with her, and as it came to an end it was as if the fire subsided with her. Silence befell those watching on.

Kristina bows gracefully.

People clapped and cheered in jubilation. Skipping to her mother to find her with Ned's arms around her. She smiles her approval by kissing Ned quickly on the cheek. Taking him by surprise, he smiled.

"That was beautiful sweetie." Said her mother.

A squeal resonates from within the wagons and she runs off in search of Sebastian. His Aunt had him suspended by the ankles. The accordion begins again and people gather around the fire in a circle. Joining hands they moved in unison and they twirl about much as Kristina had. Zahra pulls Ned to his feet. Reluctant to move.

"I don't dance." He said hoping to get out of it.

"You have to. It's part of the ritual... Otherwise it brings *bad luck* if you don't." She lies.

Ned hesitates, but eventually surrenders to fate not wishing to bring bad luck on them.

"Okay. Okay."

And is lead into the dance with two left feet.

Following Zahra's movements, moving awkwardly at first.

Ned succumbed the tranquil music filling the air and his senses. Music and flames danced on as though they were one, and spiraled in bliss to the heavens. To join the multitude of sparking stars. Silently she pulls him away from the fire and into a nearby tent.

Eyes follow their every move.

Music and light leaked into the tent, as if to spy on the lovers standing before each other. No words would be spoken. Pulling her close. Lips touch and breaths were exchanged. Then as if to read the other's thoughts, they kiss.

More passionate than the first time. Ned pulls the dress over her head to reveal her naked body. And removes his clothing and pulls her close. Bodies touching. And both surrender to their lustful longing. Breaths quickens as two heated bodies engage in the carnal art of love making. Before collapsing exhausted with panting breaths.

With her arm across him, gently presses her forehead against his. Quietly reading his thoughts. Visions appear in her mind. Events the Witch had foretold. Kristina was not the only one with the gift of sight. Somewhere in the drifting music outside, she found a peace and slept.

And began to dream...

...Finding herself in a large field of wild flowers stretching to an endless horizons.

Cresting with waves in the breeze. A bright brilliant orb shone in the vivid blue sky, but it was not a sun. It was something far more beautiful. At the center of field stands her mother. A young girl stands by her side holding her hand. A girl with long dark hair flowing in the wind, and emerald green eyes.

"Grandma-ma." She calls out for Zahra to come closer...

Chapter Twenty Four

“Double, double, toil and trouble... Fire burn and cauldron bubble.” The Witch recites the ancient spell.

Keen aged eyes watch the bubbling surface for a sign. Small bubbles burp and burst. Large bubbles swell from the volcanic mud pool before erupting, sending eddies of steam in the air. The light of the fire and a single candle book lit the small cabin. Lamia utters cadences of ancient unspoken words from an open book.

Known to few, spoken by fewer.

“Fillet of a fenny snake... In the cauldron boil and bake.” The Witch mutters softly over the boiling brew.

“Trouble is a foot...” Warns the Witch, her eyes glazed with vision among the steaming vapors.

“What do you see mother?” Lamia asked anxiously, peering into the pot but sees nothing but bubbling steam.

“The King’s men march this land... In search of the Heart.” The Witch cackles at the prospect.

“When?” Looking to the window.

“Soon... Perhaps this very day. But we are the least of his woes.”

“What is it?” Lamia leans over the pot, blind to the vivid visions of her mother.

The Witch’s mind now no longer of the physical plane about her. Eyes stare beyond the pot and into a future. She watches it unfold. Making out what she could. Interpreting what she could not.

“Ottoman ride before the next blood moon... Great battles ensues... The Beasts... The end is near. The end is near!” The Witch stands back with disbelieving eyes. “...It can’t be!”

Another vision appears in her distant gaze.

“No...” She gasps at the vision as if to deny it. “...No, no, please no!”

“What is it mother?” Lamia steps closer hoping to catch a vision that was beyond her. Before it disappeared.

“Sebastian... That wee sweet lad...” She cannot speak the unspeakable.

A tear comes to the Witch’s eyes and she wipes it away before Lamia could see. Another vision appears, then another.

“Of course... I should have known...” Her words fade with the steaming vapors.

Lest she smile and give away her secret.

She had already said too much.

“We should have eaten him when we had the chance.” Lamia jests.

“Perhaps... If only to save him the pain to come.” The Witch laments.

The vision fades leaving the Witch and daughter staring into the bubbling pot.

Michael stands quietly in the far corner watching on.

“Hssst!” Lamia feels a presence behind and sounds her annoyance.

“Let Him be...” The Witch warns her daughter. “...He brings no harm. He watches over all over us... Including you Lamia.”

“Perhaps *He* should watch over Gello... *Hssst!*” Lamia stares in to the darkened corner, darting eyes searching for him.

“Perhaps *He* does...” The Witch smiles. “...Hmm, perhaps *He* does.”

A brilliant flash of light fills the cabin.

“Is *He* gone? Looking about.

“He is gone... Why do you fear him so?” Her mother asked.

“I do not like what I cannot see... Or kill.” She responds.

The Witch chuckles at the thought.

“You cannot kill what cannot be killed daughter.” Her mother informs her.

“Where is the Heart hid mother?”

“Nay I tell you lest you be captive and squeal like a stuck pig.”

“Mother I swear upon my grandfather grave I would never tell.”

“You already have my sweet child. You already have...” The Witch informs her.

“You talk in riddles mother.” Lamia walks away from pot and returns to read a book of spells.

“There will come a time when I will *need* to tell... *Those* that *need* to know... Until that day my lips are stitched closed and I will take them that way to my grave.”

“And of these men that hunt us down like pests? ... *Hssst!*” Lamia hisses, looking to the window to the dawning day outside.

“Why, do not fear them my dear daughter? ... They have not found us in the past. Their hearts are false... They do not believe to see what is before their very eyes...” The Witch chuckles to herself, dismissing the imminent danger, “...They cannot see what they do not believe.” The Witch answers with another riddle.

“Are the men ready?” Sigmund yells at the soldier standing at chamber door.

“Provisions for three days and three nights. More than enough to find the Witch and her daughters.”

“We leave within the hour. Have my horse ready.” Sigmund barks the order to a guard.

“Yes my Lord.” The man bows his head and leaves not looking back.

“Really? ...” A restrained female voice speaks from his bed. “...I’m right here.”

“It’s nothing he hasn’t seen or shared before I suspect.” Sigmund chastises Ruth.

“What sort of woman do you think I am?” Trying to defend her honor.

“That I know... Tis the price I wonder?” He jests.

“What price would you pay to have me?” She asked curiously.

“Why pay... when I can pluck the fruit for free.”

Angered by the remark Ruth struggles at the cord tying her to the bed. And to avoid Sigmund’s groping hands. Squeezing and probing her bound naked body. Cords bruising her wrists and ankles as she fought against them.

“Does Mother Superior ever question your long absences?” Asked Sigmund curiously.

“She thinks I help the poor... In some ways I do.” She looks at him.

She gasps as Sigmund penetrates her un-expectantly. Then asked an equally unusual question.

“What ye tell me of Friar Talbot... Is he all of mind? Or does God withhold some?”

Looking into her eyes as he presses deeper with cock and questions.

“You ask me this now?” She gasps at the intrusion of her loins.

“Say ye?” He torts her, enjoying the game.

“He’s, a, pious, fool, at best... Incap-able, of, of, of hurting a, a, fly...”

Responded Ruth between the lost breaths.

“Hmm.” Sigmund groans as if satisfied, or as if unsure.

“Why, ye, ask?” Focusing her thoughts momentarily.

“He had no trouble beating Friar Geoffrey over the head.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh...” Her eyes glassing over.

“Does he dance with the Devil?”

“Per-haps!” She gasps again with a sudden jolt from Sigmund.

“Say ye more.”

“He, lash-es, him-self ... In a, secret, cham-ber, be-neath, the Altar... For, for, for, plea-sure... ah, ah, ah_” She cries out.

“Really?” Sigmund thrusts harder and shutters as though the news satisfied him.

Then collapses beside her.

“I love it when you talk dirty.” He whispers to Ruth’s ear.

“Untie me you brute!” She protests panting.

Sigmund pulls a knotted cord and releases her from the strangled bondage. Rubbing her wrists lacking circulation.

“Be off my lovely Sister. I have a Witch to catch.” Sigmund smacks Ruth backside with a hand and she cries out.

“You bastard!” She glares at him gathering her clothes.

“I do try to please... Be gone with you lest Mother Superior finds you here.” He warns.

Dressing, she heads from the chamber with the knowledge that Brother Talbot had struck Brother Geoffrey. Leverage she could use against him. He was not so pious after all. The information would serve her well if her corporal affair with Sigmund ever reached the Monastery.

She was Sigmund’s favorite. In time she would be Queen, forsaking her holy vows and a heaven that would never to come while the curse covered the land.

A woman can only tolerate being a virgin for so long.

Sigmund rode out the castle gates at pace, as though he were chasing the devil.

Followed frantically behind by a troupe of soldiers. Many hesitant to be hunting a witch, let alone be entering the dark forest. Lest they encounter a rogue Beast. They had heard stories. Stories of strange happenings. Wooden crosses beneath their chain mail vests. Protection if not from the Witch then Beasts that may still linger within.

“The Roma make camp is but a short ride from here my Lord... Say we torture one for the location of the Witch. Save us time searching these forsaken woods.” A man suggests.

“Something tells me none would talk... Kin will not betray kin... Even at pain of death.” Sigmund looks away from the direction of the camp in disgust.

“As ye say my Lord.” Accepts the man.

“Have your men spread out. Leave no rock unturned. Report anything suspicious... Understood? ... The Witch cloaks herself with an invisibility... She is there.”

Sigmund’s eyes penetrate the forest in search of a sign. A whiff of smoke. An aberration that might give her presence away.

“Go! ... I will join you shortly.” He orders his men.

“Yes my Lord... You not ride with us?” The man asked unsure why his Master was hesitant.

“I have to visit someone...” He looks about his men, “...You there! ...” Pointing to hefty man. “...Come with me.”

Sigmund turns his mount about and gallops in the direction of the gypsy camp. His loins ached for Zahra. The thought of her in someone else’s arms irritated him. She may be forbidden fruit, but she was ripe for the picking. Whipping his horse to a frenzied gallop. The man following tried to keep up. Engulfed in a cloud of dust being kicked up by his master’s mount.

Horsemen dismounted and entered the forest reluctantly.

Stepping cautiously, dare they break a branch and give their presence away. Uncertain of what laid ahead. A leader instructed the others to fan out.

“Stay within sight of each other...” He orders. “...Do nothing to disturb the Witch if you see her... Else she turn you to a toad...” He warns. “... Mark the spot and report to me... Understood?”

The men nod their heads and walk off to take their positions. The leader raises his sword to commence to step forward. An eerie chill came over the men and the forest. As though someone or something was watching them. The air had become suddenly cold and their breaths fogged before them.

She was there. But where?

Slowly the men stepped forward. Each looking over their shoulders to keep another soldier within sight, lest they separate from the others. Or be taken by surprise. A soldier steps on an unseen branch and it snaps. Sending aloud crack about him. A fox that lay in hiding, scurries away in fright. The man halts and regains his nerves. Watching the fox race away to be lost among the thicket and bracken.

Looking to his left the man sees no one.

In panic, he looks to the right. No one.

Reaching for the wooden cross grasps his hands around it. Closing his eyes he utters a prayer for protection.

“You’re God will not help you here... Ehk-ehk-ehk.” A voice warns him, carried on the wind rushing past the man.

Brushing against him.

Petrified, the man stands still. Incapable of moving even if he tried. Frantic eyes looking about for the source of the voice. Suddenly a massive gust of wind engulfs the man. Stirring up leaves and earth about him. Forming a hand in the encircling dark mass.

A woman’s hand. A Witch’s hand.

Long bony like fingers reach for the sole frightened figure quivering with fear. Gripping him and lifting from the ground. His legs kicking to free himself.

A deafening and violent the wind torments the suspended man.

“Dare you step on Witches Lair? ...” A whispering voice encircles him. *“...Ye last chance be gone from here... Ehk-ehk-ehk.”* The voice cackles around him.

Suddenly the howling wind ceases, followed by a deafening silence. The man falls helplessly to the ground. Staggering to his feet quickly lest another assault upon his person. Looks to his right and now sees a man, and then to his left and sees another man. Both unaware as to what that had

just happened. In denial he steps forward leaving whatever he had encountered behind him.

A gust of cold wind pushes from behind as though to help him on his way.

The man does not look back. Fearful of the forces at play. Grasping the wooden cross and utters thanks to unseen God sparing his life.

“Anything?” The leader to his right calls out to him.

“Nothing...” He lies “...You?”

“Nothing here... Keep looking. She is here somewhere... I can smell her.” The leader calls back.

The man sniffs the air and smells a faint whiff of smoke in the air. Suddenly another gust of air abruptly kicks his behind as if to help him ignore the scent.

“I’m leaving... I’m leaving.” The man mutters under his breath...

Chapter Twenty Five

Pulling hard on the reins for his mount to halt.

Sigmund dismounts. Soon followed by his guard. The Roma camp was just over the ridge. Tying the horses to a low hanging branch the two men crept to the top of ridge and peered into the camp. Roma going about their routine chores. Eyes searching for someone in particular. And he ponders the gypsy woman's where about.

Talbot would have informed him if Roma were at the monastery.

"This way." Sigmund orders the guard to follow him.

He had a hunch and if this hunch right he would be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams. Crouching they made their way unseen to another ridge overlooking a stream. Peering through the undergrowth he made out a woman bathing. His eyes lit up with delight. Momentarily taking in forbidden fruit. Sponging her body from head to toe. Eclipsing Ruth for beauty.

He would not be denied his loin's wanton desires.

"Go around." Whispers Sigmund to the man.

Gesturing with his hand the discreet direction the man should take.

"Seize the girl by surprise..." He orders the man. "...I'll be down after."

With voyeur eyes Sigmund watched Zahra bathed. Imagining how he would take her. If she fought against his demands he would kill her and no one would have her. He was answerable to no but his father. A father with little time for Roma. And the only good Roma was a dead Roma.

His father was but temporary in Sigmund's mind. He would deal with him when the time came. His mind formulating schemes that would make it appear as though an *accident*. Letting the seditious thought pass as he watched Zahra bath.

Unaware of his perverted intrusion.

Anxiously he watched the man crept up behind Zahra and grab her by surprise.

Screaming, she is met with a hefty blow about the face. Kicking and screaming, water splashes about in her effort to be free from the man's beastly grasp. Her screams now muffled by a hand over her mouth. She bites the hand and the man curses her and slaps her again.

But not before another shriek was hollered.

There was too much commotion for Sigmund's liking. The camp would be alerted by the yelling. And he waited and watched as to who would come running to help her. The man looks up to the hiding place and wonders why his Master had not appeared to help him with the struggling gypsy wench.

Zahra kicked and wriggled violently at the abduction. Fingers scratch down the man's face. He slaps her again almost knocking her senseless. If his Master were not to take her, then perhaps he should.

The man grinned at the thought.

Dragging her naked body from the stream lays Zahra on the bank. Semi-conscious, incapable to resist. Tugging at his pants the man kicks her legs apart. Excited by what he sees. He takes a final look back at Sigmund's position. Perhaps his Master liked what he saw and there was no signal to suggest he should halt.

Turning about, sees Ned running towards him. Hurriedly, the man stands and tries to secure his pants but not before he had time to knock him into the stream and laying a heavy fist into his face. The blow stuns the man, but has been hit harder by an enemy in battle.

Shaking the blow off, stands towers over Ned like a grizzly bear.

Ned was no match for the battle wary soldier. The man wrestles with him. Squeezing him with an overpowering grip, and the air out of him. Releasing him, Ned collapses to the water. About to get to his feet, the man presses a knee into his back. Holding him under the water. Ned struggles to free himself, but the force of the man was too much to overcome. He could only hold his breath for so long.

It seemed hopeless.

'This was it.' Ned thought to himself, too exhausted to fight back.

The man draws his dagger and raises it above his head and is about to strike the fatal blow.

“Do it! Do it! ...” Urges Sigmund watching on. “... Kill the Ouster!”

Suddenly, the man is struck heavily on the side of head by a rock. And topples over into the waters facedown. Dead. A ribbon of red blood leaches into the churning waters flowing downstream.

Zahra drops the bloodied rock to the water.

Rushing to Ned still submersed.

Dragging him from the stream and onto the bank. Gagging for breath. Coughing water from lungs. Unsure if he were dead or alive. Seeing the man lying face down in the water. Ned rushes over to him and grabs him. Instinctively trying to save him. Feeling for a pulse, begins compressions on his crest.

“What are you doing?” Zahra asked unsuredly.

“Saving him.” He exclaimed.

“He just tried to kill you!” She exclaimed unsure of his behavior.

Ned stops to look at Zahra. The dagger lying beside her where it had fallen. He looks down at the man. He had seen the wound a hundred times. The man was dead. And collapsed exhausted and half drowned beside the man. Only to feel a heavy boot kicked into his side.

Appearing from no-where, Sigmund stands over him.

Kicking Ned again, sending him sideways rolling over coughing and gasping for breath in agony. Looking up he see Sigmund with his sword drawn and pointing at his throat.

“Murderer! ...” Sigmund cries out. “...To kill a king’s man is punishable by death Ouster!”

“It was self-defense! ... He tried to rape her.” Ned pleaded.

“Liar! You killed him... I saw the whole thing... And still you continue to strangle him afterwards! ... I will see you hung Ouster!” Sigmund boosts victoriously.

To say otherwise would incriminate Zahra and Ned bit his tongue.

“To your feet Ouster... You have been nothing trouble since your arrival.”

Zahra gathers her clothes and covers her body from Sigmund’s sexual glare.

“We will find the witch! I have men search as I speak... And she will tell us where the heart lays. And I will end this curse your ancestor laid upon this lay... And you shall be mine!” Sigmund confesses his wanton desire.

“I will never be yours! ... My Lord.” Bowing her head, but not lowering her eyes.

“We’ll see about that... You! Ouster! ... March!” He shouts.

Poking the tip the blade at Ned’s welted scar on his chest causing it to open and bleed.

“Ahh!” Ned reels backward.

Zahra rushes forward and places herself between the blade and Ned.

“Oh I see... You protect *your man*.... How admirable... I would kill him myself here. But I am a law abiding man. He shall be given a fair trial... And then he shall be hung by the neck until he is dead... After I am finished with him, he would have wished the Beasts had gotten to him before you had... Ha-ha-ha!” Sigmund laughs dementedly.

Striking the flat side of the heavy blade against her side, she falls to the ground clutching her clothes covering her naked body.

“When I am finished with him... I will come back for you.” He looks down at her shivering.

“Your father would never permit such a union between Nobleman and Gypsy.” She warns him.

Zahra spits on the ground with disgust.

“I will deal with my father...” Said Sigmund declaring his intentions. “...His days are numbered.”

Turning his attention to Ned.

“I said move Ouster!” Sigmund yelled with pleasure.

“I will talk to Mother Superior... She know what to do.” Zahra calls out helplessly watching Ned being led away.

“Mother Superior won’t save you this time Ouster... Now march!” Sigmund rebukes the challenge.

Ned looks back wondering what kind of justice system they had in this time. Sigmund seem to be judge jury and executor. Hoping his father may not be so blind. Kristina and Sebastian run down the bank opposite to join her mother.

He could only imagine what was going through their young minds.

A knotted whip cracked across Ned's back, causing him to grimace with each hateful blow.

Arms splayed and stretched out. Joints straining under the tension. Teeth gritted as he awaited the next wave of assault. Bloodied sweat collects and runs down his body. Stinging open wounds. A body battered and bruised from a severe beating.

Agonizing with pain.

"Aah!" He cries out as it bites into him.

Another striking blow lashes his back marked with welts and bloodied lacerations.

"Is that the best you have you bastard?" Ned calls out again panting heavily.

Sigmund seem to be enjoying the show. The jailer was tiring. His strokes were becoming sloppy. And he gestures for him to hand him the whip. Feeling the weight of the whip in his hand unlashes three sharp blows.

Each devastatingly more painful than the last.

"Aaahh!" Wondering how much longer he can remain conscious.

Exhausted his head droops.

"What do you want you bastard?"

"*Bastard?* ... Really?"

Another blow. Ned flitches gritting his teeth.

"Cat got you tongue now?" Sigmund torments him.

Silence greeted the blow. It had become personal.

"I would cut out your tongue were it not that you give evidence to the murder of a King's man!"

"Fuck you!" Ned curses Sigmund, gesturing a middle finger at Sigmund.

The Latin insult goes undetected and Sigmund looks to the ceiling as to what the Ouster was pointing to.

But sees nothing. Another blow cracks its presence around the dungeon.

"I want a confession Ouster!"

“You heard me... Fuck you! ... You can shove it up your arse you sick bastard!”

Sigmund momentarily contemplates the strange accusation unsure what to make of it.

“No... As you say... Fukk you!”

“Aaah!” Ned scowls with pain, then grins.

“What is so funny? ... Say you enjoy this like Friar Talbot?”

“You dumb fuck!” He curses him.

Hanging limp. He could only image the damage his back had suffered. Sigmund handing the whip back to the Jailer.

“Why you live with the Roma? ... Do ye become one? ... Nay the Gypsy woman your whore perhaps?” Sigmund sniggers.

Flitching against restraints, Ned turns his head to face Sigmund’s but inches away.

“You touch her I swear I will kill you with my bare hands!” He spits out.

“You murdered a King’s man and now you threaten the King’s son... Ye hear that? ...” Sigmund scoffs turning to look at the jailer. “...You are in no position to threaten anyone Ouster... By sunset tomorrow you will hanging from the falls of this castle... And your Gypsy whore will be mine! ... ha-ha-ha!”

Ned struggles at the ropes holding back from killing him. A heavy punch strikes his stomach. Causing him to retch and vomit.

Sagging with exhaustion, he goes limp and faints.

“Finish with him and throw him in there!” Sigmund orders pointing a cell.

“With pleasure.”

“But don’t kill him... Not yet. You will have that pleasure tomorrow... I promise you.” Sigmund grins at the thought, turning back to Ned. “... Your woman won’t save you this time. My father is a just man. He will give you a fair trial... Then he will execute you.” As if it were a matter of fact.

The words were lost on Ned, now unconscious.

The whip lashes his back, but to no response. No flitch, or anguish. There was no fun lashing a man that could not feel the pain and the Jailer

takes him down. Ned's body slumps to the floor. The Jailer drags him to the cell and throws a bucket of dirty water over him, bringing him about to the grubby cell about him. Chains hung from the walls. A rat scurries about a dark corner, anticipating an early supper. Eyes, swollen and beaten peer into the darkness. Hungry and alone, every part of him throbbed with pain.

While there was breath in his body there was still hope. He thought he caught an ounce of caring in Nicholas' voice at the monastery. If only he could reason with man.

Knowing that even miracles required a prayer.

Ned uttered words beneath his breath. Calling in a favor with the big Guy. Uncertain if the lives he had saved at the ER counted. Or had denied Him souls. Either way, he had nothing to lose.

Fainting again. Exhaustion and pain left his body and mind. Leaving nothing but his soul.

"It is in God's hands my child." Mother Superior informs Zahra.

"But Aunt!" Zahra protests.

"My hands are bound by the laws of this land..." She insisted. "...In Church affairs I have authority... But this is of State... A Kings man lays dead..." She ponders the implications. "...This is serious."

"You must speak with Nicholas in person... Have him see reason. He will listen to you.... Nay an innocent man will hang..." Zahra continues to plead with her Aunt.

"He listens to no one... Nay God himself can speak with him I fear... But..."

"But?" Eyes light up with hope.

"I will *try*... *Tomorrow*... Tis late and to trouble him now will only disturb him further."

"Thank you Aunt... Thank you."

"For now, we pray for a miracle." Mother Superior crosses herself.

Kristina watches on confused. She had seen all. What was a child's voice among adults? Feeling pushed into the shadows. Helpless and alone.

"Stay here this evening. We will leave first light." Mother Superior tells her niece.

Friar Talbot stood back and listened intently to the conversation.

Restraining from grinning. Content that the Ouster would die a noble death and would soon be rid from the land he did not belong. That Nicholas would dispatch the Ouster to his maker. The devil.

“Amen.” He muttered under his breath.

“What was that Friar Talbot? ... Did you say something?” Asked Mother Superior looking over to him suspiciously.

“We must pray.” He quietly replies.

“Off you go then... Do what you do best... As you did for Brother Geoffrey... You seem to have God’s ear, where other’s do not.”

The diminutive devout rat scurried from the room. Not to the chapel. But to the chamber beneath the Alter. As if a voice was calling him. Summoning his presence. He would not be denied the Ouster’s suffering and pain.

Zahra struggled to sleep that evening.

Her mind racing with thoughts of Ned in the dungeon. Hoping Sigmund was merciful enough not to kill him before his trial. Somewhere in the early hours of the morning, tiredness and sleep overcame her.

She awakens to light breaking through her window into her room. Fearing she had over slept she rushes to the hallway to find Mother Superior about to wake her.

“I thought you had left without me.” Panicked Zahra.

“I sent Brother Talbot to knock on your door... I wonder what kept him.” Looking about the hall thinking he would appear at any moment.

Kristina approaches her mother. Harboring a secret she wished to share.

“Can I come? ... I need to speak with the King.” Pleading with her mother.

“Stay here. Courts are not a place for young girls.” She tells her daughter.

“But mother I must speak with the King!” She insists.

“Stay here and keep an eye on Sebastian. Understood? ... Where is he? ...” Zahra looks about the hallway. “...Go find him and keep him safe... I will be back soon...” She tells her, kissing her daughter on the head, “... ”

Everything will be okay. Ned is coming back... Okay?" She encouraged her.

"Okay." Kristina accepts reluctantly and runs off in search of Sebastian.

"We best be going if we want to have that word with Nicholas." Mother Superior warns.

"Pray our prayers have been answered." Responds Zahra.

"It is in God's hands now." Said Mother Superior, crossing herself...

Chapter Twenty Six

Delicate white lace swayed behind windows of the humble black carriage that made its way along the uneven path to the Castle.

Concealing Mother Superior from the outside world. Horses unwilling to move fast enough for Zahra who rode the saddle board. Slapping reins on the rear end of the animals to pick up the pace. Hitting a pot hole the wagon jolts the lone occupant. Only to resume its gentle rocking. Progressing the rise steadily to the closed castle gates.

A lone guard stands watch, about to question their visit. Upon seeing Mother Superior, grudgingly permits the carriage to pass inside. Large wheels turned slowly over the oyster shell courtyard. Before bringing the holy Black Mariah to a halt.

Mother Superior steps down, and steadies herself after the jostling journey. Relieved to have arrived. It had been years since her last visit. Strange how the tables had now turned. Finding herself having to kneel before Nicholas.

Such was God's Will, then so it shall be.

His divine purpose would not be questioned by her. Stepping inside the cold foreboding walls of the castle. Feeling a cold draft walk the hallways like a ghost. Sensing her divinity, the draft continues on its way to the throne room.

"We are here to speak with the Lord." Mother Superior informs an attendant sent to greet her.

"He's been expecting you... This way if you please." A guard gestures for her to follow.

Following behind the man walking at an unhurried pace, they arrived at a large chamber.

The throne room. Nicholas sat in high. Sigmund stood beside him and guards lined the walls. The midmorning sun sent a shaft of light into the chamber like a spear. Illuminating dust the particles suspended in the air.

Nero sits upright. Eyes examining those that who had just entered. Sniffing the air. Women. And laid down again disinterested beside the throne.

“Mother Superior. How good of you to come.” Nicholas teased her.

“I have come to speak to you... In private.” She asked.

“What you say to me can be said before my son... And heir.” A hand gestures Sigmund standing beside him.

“Very well then...” Collecting her thoughts. “...The *Ouster* you are about to try is *innocent*... I implore you to show mercy and set him free... Say he still *live*?”

A concerned look comes over her face.

Nicholas looks to his son. Sigmund shrugs his shoulders indifferently.

“He was alive time I saw him.” He smirks.

Nicholas chuckles quietly with his son, seeing the humorous side.

“He has killed a King’s man!” Nicholas began abruptly, setting the tone.

Taking Mother Superior by surprise.

“He must be given a trial and hung... In accordance to law... Rome cannot interfere here... Know your place.”

Mother Superior bows submissively.

Nicholas leans back on the throne and sighs. His hands were tied. An example had to be made.

“No man kills a King’s man and lives to walk away... Otherwise who would defend me in my hour of need? ... Who would defend you?” Nicholas asked.

“The man is innocent... Defending my niece’s honor... Would you yourself not do the same with your wife? ... God rest her soul.” Mother Superior crosses herself.

Nicholas leans forward at the mention of his beloved dead wife. She had died giving birth Sigmund. What he would have given to traded places. She had given him a fine son, at the price of her own life. Could a husband ask more of a wife?

“Nay speak of my beloved wife here Mother Superior! ... There is not a day passes I pray to be with her.” Nicholas laments her passing.

“Forgive me my Lord if I speak with haste.” Lowering her head with respect.

“The Ouster attacked my son’s man... Striking him on the head and then proceeded to strangle him to ensure he was dead... My son saw all... Swearing upon his mother’s grave it was the truth.”

“Tis all lies! ... I killed the man... He was about to kill the Ouster with his dagger... I could not let that happen.” Exclaims Zahra stepping forward.

“You? ... I recall you...” Recognizing the woman standing before him, “...The Gypsy woman who freed the Ouster from the Beasts... Are you not?”

“Yes my Lord.” Bowing her head, eyes never leaving Nicholas’.

“Now *you* claim you killed my Man? ... Perhaps I should try you both? Why do you keep protecting this Ouster? ... Tis he your man? ... Are ye wed?”

“He is my man...” Zahra stares at Sigmund with intent. “...But nay we are wed... My Lord.”

Nicholas sighs heavily sitting back on the throne.

“Tis the Gypsy way I suppose...” Dismissing the pagan affair, “... Bring the prisoner in! ...” He commands a guard. “... Let’s get this charade over and done with... The sooner he is hung the sooner I can eat!”

Nicholas’ gestures his hand to the guard to retrieve the prisoner from the cells.

Ned is dragged in and is thrown unceremoniously to the floor.

Broken and as scoured as Christ Himself. Barely able to see through swollen eyes. The wolf-hound sits upright excited by the smell of fresh blood. And snarls, disturbed by the agitation. Willing for Ned to make a false move.

“Steady boy... Not yet.” Nicholas pats the dog to pacify it.

Zahra gasps at the sight of Ned and rushes over to comfort him.

“Ned... It’s me.” She talks to him.

A painful grin appears on his bruised and bloody face. Eyes peer through the swelling and he makes out her face. A throbbing grin forms in the corner of his mouth. Nicolas looks to his son. A half wicked grin forming on the corner of his mouth.

Not one to question his son's interrogation methods.

"Could ye not wait until after I find the Ouster guilty?" Nicholas asked his son seeing the appalling condition of the broken prisoner before him.

"Afterwards, and he would wish to die to avoid the hangman's noose... Before, and he will cling to life with hope." Sigmund surmises his reasoning.

Nicholas nods his approval.

"You are a wise man my son... But nay lead them too close to hades door fear I deny this man a fair trial before his death."

"Forgive me father." Sigmund bows to his father's advice.

"Did you extract a signed confession my son?"

Sigmund remains silent.

Nicholas stares down at the broken man now supported upright by Zahra.

"Ouster we meet again... But alas I fear for the last time... Our friendship will be cut short by the hung man's loose... Let us begin... For I am hungry." Nicholas commands.

Guards pull Ned from Zahra's hold and throw him closer to Nicholas' feet. Ned squints at him through swollen eyes. Making out his silhouette as light shrouded him in a dark malevolent shadow. He could sense something vicious sitting beside him. Its panting and growl growing closer. Excited by the prospect of the chase. The hunt. A nose sniffs the air of the game before it. And awaited its master's voice. A low growl snarls from the dog's throat. Salvia drips to the floor in long stringy drools.

"The charge against you Ouster is murder of a King's man... How say ye?"

"I want my Lawyer." Ned insists, spitting out in blood stained saliva.

"*Lawyer?* ... What is this you call *Lawyer?*" Asked Nicholas, turning to Sigmund as though he knew.

Sigmund shrugs his shoulders. And resumes his glare upon Ned.

"Legal Counsel... Witnesses." He pants painfully through broken ribs.

"I am the law... Therefore I am your *Counsel.*" Nicholas chuckles. "... As to witnesses... Hmm... I will permit. If only to humor me... I ask ye one last time before I sentence you... How do you plead?"

"Not guilty... My Lord."

Nicholas nods. The Ouster had respect for him even in facing death. And he sighs heavily.

“I call a witness... My fair son Sigmund... He saw it all... How say ye my son?”

“Have him *swear!*” Ned interjects spitting out more blood than words.

“On what? ... He has already sworn on his dear mother’s grave.” Nicholas asked. The words cut deep for Nicholas. To be challenged by an Ouster questioning his authority.

“On the Bible! ... If I am to die an innocent man... Let him burn in Hell for perjury to God!”

Ned spat the words through the painful breaths.

“Grant a dying man his final wish... My Lord... Ye have nothing to lose.” Ned implores him. Ned’s head slumps with despair the words taking more from him than the beatings.

“I have a bible...” Mother Superior steps forward. “...If it pleases you my Lord Nicholas.”

Nicholas hesitates.

Feeling he was being pressured. A man happy to die for the sake of an oath on a bible. Or perhaps there was more than met the eye? He turns to look at his son with questioning eyes.

“Father you cannot be serious? My word is my bond... I has sworn on my mother’s grave ... Is that not enough?”

“And she is dead...” Responds Nicholas. “... Lest I remind you.”

‘...*Because of you.*’ Nicholas continued a thought to himself.

“Amuse me...” He gestures for Mother Superior to step forward.

“Father I protest at this sacrilege of my word!” Sigmund complains on deaf ears.

“A man’s life is at stake here... Lest he does the same for you... Now swear to God what you say is the truth.”

Sigmund places his hand on the bible. Two fingers crossed behind his back.

“I swear.” Sigmund whimpers.

“Louder, so God can hear you!” Asked Mother Superior glaring into his eyes, thinking she saw the devil squirming.

“*I SWEAR!*” Thunders Sigmund loudly.

“That’s better... I think even the Devil heard you.” She remarked.

Nicholas looks over to Talbot in a darkened corner.

“Don’t be shy Friar Talbot. Step into the light... Lest it does your soul good.”

Mother Superior turns to see Friar Talbot at court.

“What brings you here so early Brother Talbot? ...” Staring Talbot down. “...You have morning chores.”

“To bring comfort to Brother Ned in his hour of need.” Talbot lies bowing his head fearful of looking into Mother Superior’s eyes.

“So kind of you Brother Talbot... But you will find Brother Ned already being comforted... Return to the monastery and pray for his safe return... Be gone with you... Now.” Mother Superior glares a holy frown at Talbot.

“Yes Mother Superior... Sorry Mother Superior.” Talbot scurries off like a rat released from a trap.

Footsteps scrapping on the stones as the sounded down the hall.

“Now my son... In your own words... As God is your witness, tell us what happened.”

Sigmund’s dry throat choked on the truth. So he lied.

“Father... I came on the scene too late to save the man. To find the Ouster strangling my man... His head bloody from a blow by a rock laying nearby.” Sigmund recited the facts, surprised he had not lied.

“And what say ye the women’s honor... Who try to take it?” Nicholas asked curiously.

“Nay my man... To say my man intervened to save the wench from the Ouster’s foul intentions... At the cost to his own life... God rest his soul.”

Sigmund crosses himself, as does Mother Superior and Zahra watching on. No soul should be taken before its time, unless by the Will of God.

“What hath you go to the stream where this woman bath?” His father asked un-expectantly.

Sigmund fell silent. His mind reaching plausible alibi.

“The Witch! The Witch! ...” He ejaculated suddenly. “...While my men search the forest... My man and I searched the outer perimeter.”

“Liar!” Ned spats out in a sheathing breath.

The outburst is met with a swift strike across his back with a guard's rod. Causing him to topple forward.

Sigmund sniggers.

"Silence Ouster! ... Lest I have your tongue cut out and deny you a chance to speak before I hang you!" Nicholas beseeches him.

"My man came upon the Ouster forcing himself upon the wench... And a fight ensue." Sigmund continued, embellishing the lies further.

"Hmm..." Nicholas listened intently to the story unfolding freely from his son's tongue. It seemed almost plausible to be true.

"I captured him before he took flight and hid among the Roma." Sigmund looks at Zahra.

Zahra bit her lip and said nothing. Sieving beneath her breath. Words would only anger Nicholas further.

"Thank you my son... Was not so hard was it?" Nicholas asked his son stepping back his head bowed to his father, "... If there are no further witnesses?" Looking about wishing to get the trial and execution over with.

"I must speak my Lord." Zahra steps forward her head bowed eyes leveled at Nichols.

"Women have no say in a Court of Law! ... Be gone with you Roma wench. Have you not caused enough trouble among us? ... My man is dead... Because of you." Nicholas glared down on her hoping she would back off.

"My Lord... I beg of you. Say ye allow a condemn man *his* final words?" She pleaded for Ned to speak for himself.

"Father! ... Why ye waste time with this Roma wench?" Sigmund implores his father to end the charade sooner than later.

Nicholas raised his hand to silence his son, and he thought. The sooner the Ouster spoke the sooner he could hang him.

"Give him his *final words* on this earth.... Speak Ouster! Be quick... My stomach rumbles." Gesturing fingers to get on with it.

The dog sits upright agitated by the loud voices. Salivating drool to the floor. A low growl rumbles beneath its breath. Growing louder as Ned got to his feet. Eyes shifting to the buckled prisoner. Willing him to run.

"Steady Nero... Steady there." Stroking the large wolf hound's head.

Sigmund steps back disgruntled.

Frowning that the hearing had taken longer than planned. Sister Ruth would be becoming agitated. And a servant could walk in on her. His mind conjured perverted thoughts.

“Hmm...” He grins. She could wait.

Ned stands with Zahra’s support. Momentarily looks back to the guard behind him.

“Speak Ouster! ...Be quick about you... I have not got all day... The hangman waits for no one.”

“Have him swear to God too! ... Lest his soul burn in Hell for perjury.” Sigmund calls out smarting with contempt.

Nicholas nods seeing his son’s point.

“If it be good enough for my son... It be good enough for you Ouster... Swear!”

Ned looks to Mother Superior holding out the small black bible. And looks into her eyes. Michael stands beside Nicholas looking down upon the travesty of the trial. His hands bound by a greater power.

“I swear to God...” A tear comes to Ned’s eyes knowing it all came down to him pleading for his life, pleading for Nicholas to disbelieve his own son.

“Louder!” Jests Sigmund not wanting to go unnoticed alone.

Mother Superior glares at Sigmund for the interruption.

“Again!” Growls Nicholas, if it was good enough for his son, it would be good enough for the Ouster.

Ned thinks. If it an oath you want, it is an oath you will get. Recalling what he could remember.

“I swear the testimony I am about to give... Is the Truth... The whole Truth... And nothing but then Truth...” He painfully shouts out. “... So help me God.”

“I doubt your God will help you here Ouster... But you may begin...” Said Nicholas is taken back by the extent of the oath. Making a mental note to use it at future court hearings.

Mother Superior nods for Ned to continue.

“My Lord...” Ned begins, “...I heard a scream coming from the stream... I came running to find your man ... He was about to have his way

with...” He looks to Zahra. “...The Gypsy woman... There was a struggle... He held me under the water... I was to drown if it were not for the Gypsy woman ... She... She saved me ... My Lord.”

Then there was silence. Ned stepped back. He had said his piece. He had spoken the truth.

“This woman saves your life again Ouster? ...” Shaking his head. “... You let your woman do the fighting for you? ... And you Gypsy woman... You face down Beasts and you kill the king’s men as though it were a daily chore... I have heard enough of this nonsense!” Nicholas spits out.

“My Lord! ... Have mercy!” Zahra cries out.

Her pleas are met with a sharp blow from behind sending her to the ground.

“Be careful man... This *one* is dangerous... Fear her more than the Beasts that roam at night... For if it is true, she will take you down with a single blow.” Warns Sigmond.

Nicholas and Sigmond laugh hysterically.

A commotion of suddenly sounds begin to erupt outside the doorway.

Then a squeal.

Causing Ned to look toward and others to look towards the doorway. Kristina comes running in to stand beside her fallen mother. Soon followed by a guard holding Sebastian by his heels. Wriggling and fidgeting to be released. The hound lifts its head. Disturb from a lap. Sniffing the air it looks to see Sebastian suspended in their air and snarls at the guard.

“Put him down!” Nicholas gestures, sensing the dog's agitation at the appearance of the boy.

The guard releases his hold and Sebastian falls to the stone floor with a thud. Brushing himself off runs over to Zahra who takes him in her arms. The dog resumes its lap in a patch of warm sun that had leaked through the window.

“I told you to stay behind... Sorry my Lord.” Zahra looks up to Nicholas.

“What is the meaning of this interruption? First woman... Now children?” Nicholas bellows down from the throne. His day already lengthen beyond his tolerance.

Kristina approaches the throne and holds out her hand to Nicholas. She is holding Ned's mobile.

"What is that child?" His eyes focused on the curious small shiny device in her hands.

"Tech-nog-o-gee" She repeats the word she had heard earlier.

"Tech-nog-o-gee?" Nicholas speaks the strange word.

Nicholas' eyes the device with curiosity.

"Come closer... You are among friends." He beckons her.

"Father? ..." Sigmund interrupts the silence. "...Really?"

"Ssh!" He gestures abruptly to his son.

Kristina hands him the device. And indicates to place the ear piece in his ear. Nicholas sees a reflection of himself on the screen and thinks it is but a blackened mirror. Kristina's fingers press a buttons bringing the mobile to life.

Vibrating briefly startling Nicholas.

"It's okay..." She guides the man on the throne, "...Don't be afraid."

Swiping the screen. Presses a small triangle on the screen.

The screen comes to life with a smiling giggling squealing little boy pulling faces. Nichols looks to Sebastian now sitting beside the hound patting to it.

"Be careful boy. He bites..." He warns the Sebastian.

And as though to tell his master who really was in charge. The hound licks Sebastian face causing him to giggle wildly. Perturbed by the sudden playful relationship returns his focus to the strange device in his hands.

The image begins to move and take on a new view.

From behind the bushes where they had been playing. A scene unfolds of a man forcing himself upon the Gypsy woman. With disbelieving eyes he watches on. Sigmund stands back amused by his father being entertained by a little gypsy girl games.

As the truth unfolds and Nicholas sees the Ouster run to the help of the woman. His words coming to life on the small glass screen in his hands. A struggle ensues and the man draws his knife while the Ouster fights for breath held beneath the water. Only to be struck down by a blow to the head. Then to be dragged from the waters where it appeared the Ouster tries to strangle the man... His son now enters the moving pictures and

kicks the Ouster... But what he heard next disturbed him more, and he turns to his son with disbelieving ears.

“Again!” Nicholas orders.

The moving images are replayed. Each time Nicholas appearing more solemn.

“Again!” Nicholas orders a final time.

He wanted to make sure he heard correctly.

The son that had sworn to God he would speak the truth. But had lied to save himself. Lies, Nicholas could live with.

Treacherous words, he could not.

“Thank you sweet child... What say ye name?”

“Kristina... Kristina Tepes.” She added.

Nicholas nods and grins. And strokes Kristina’s hair.

“You have his eyes.” He sighs recalling her Great grandfather.

Kissing her forehead and releases her back to her mother.

“I have seen...” He sighs heavily, “... And heard enough today.”

“Let him hang before noon and we shall feast his death!” Sigmund implores an early verdict.

The words go unrewarded by Nicholas and smiles at his son’s impetuosity. Taking a deeper sigh than before. Releases it as though his last breathe on this earth.

“You try to strangle the man... What say ye?” Asked Nicholas curiously, confused by the testimony and the images.

“I tried to resuscitate him... Bring him back to life...” Ned meekly explains. Uncertain of what Nicholas had seen on the mobile. A video perhaps. “...I press on his chest... Nay his throat My Lord.”

“You try to save the man? ... Yet he has about to kill you... What foolish talk is this?”

“I am a doctor. A physician... I took an oath to save lives... Not take them.”

“An oath? To save lives? ...” Nicholas asked confused looking about the chamber, “...What this nonsense ye speak?”

“I could have saved him had your son not intervened when he did... My Lord.”

“Father he lies... Clearly he has killed a Kings man and must hang!” Sigmund rants his father’s ear.

Nicholas raises a hand to halt his son from impeaching himself further. And looks despondently to Mother Superior. A sustained silence hung in the air as Nicholas weighed intent of his son’s words.

Then he spoke.

“It seems God has granted you a miracle.” Nicholas accepts defeat gracefully.

There was a much larger issue at stake here than the life of a mere Ouster. He looks over to his son. Unaware of the forgotten impetuous words. Perhaps said in haste, but nonetheless said.

‘*Trust no one*’, Nicholas reminds himself looking back to the Ouster and those gather about him.

“It is *you* that has graced us with the miracle Nicholas...” She bows her head in gratitude. “...You are truly in our prayers.” She offers sincerely.

“Father I protest... A King’s man lays dead and you set the killer free... Have you gone mad?” Sigmund interjects, words again slipping from his lips before he could retract them.

Nicholas sieves heavily beneath his breath. Refraining not to draw his sword to end the perjury spewing forth from his son’s mouth. Raising a hand sharply to silence the interruption. He had seen what the Ouster had spoken and sworn as truth. And heard what his son had said, as lies.

The latter troubled him more than the former.

Staring into space contemplates his options. Breathing deeply in, he exhaled slowly before speaking to proclaim his will.

“Ouster you are hard to kill... As though you were not meant to die in this world. Ye women save you twice... They say it comes thrice... Ye have one life left... Use it well... Be gone from here before I change my mind.” Nicholas commanded.

Sigmund remained silent.

Unwilling to rile his father further. What had he seen? What had he heard to have him behave so coldly towards him? His eyes following Ned’s painful movements. His hand reaching for the hilt of his sword to end it all now. Only to be stifled by his father’s glare.

Bent and buckled, Ned staggered to his feet. And scuffled from the chamber supported by Mother Superior and Zahra. Confused as to what that had happened. Not looking back to question it. Throwing a blanket over Ned as he lay exhausted on carriage board at the rear of the carriage. Zahra was in no rush to return to the monastery.

Every jolt and bump in the road jarring Ned's bruised broken body.

"Tis magic they trick you with father." Sigmund speaks hoping his father's temper had cooled.

"Perhaps..." Nicolas lied again. "...You should have killed the Ouster when you had him at your sword and avoided all this... This *embarrassment*."

"Forgive me father... Next time I will." Sigmund bows his head.

Nicholas pressed his fingers together and thought.

An eye twitched as though something was troubling him. Silence rained down upon the pair. Saturating both father and son. One with revenge. The other with retribution.

"Are you still keen to face down Ismael?" Nicholas asked his son.

"Say the word and I shall ride today." Sigmund stepped impetuously forward. Puffing out his chest like a peacock as he did so.

"Ottoman's ride and we waste time quarrelling over an Ouster.. We must cut Ismael off at the pass... Take as many as you like... And *do not return*..."

"Father?" Exclaims Sigmund hesitantly.

"... Without Ismael's head at the end of your sword... Understood?"

"Thank you father... I will not disappoint you!" Sigmund exalted.

"I know my son... I know." Nicolas lied...

Chapter Twenty Seven

The creaking black carriage rocked gently through the monastery gates.

So as not to wake the sleeping dead laying on the carriage board. Coming to a halt beside the steps to the main doors. Talbot scurries out eager to greet Mother Superior. Seeing an apparent corpse laying on the carriage board. Crossing himself at the sight of the body.

Mother Superior steps from the carriage helped by her niece. Her head bowed, deep in thought.

Hearing a soft groan stirring from beneath the blanket Talbot sees Ned levering himself upright.

“He lives! ...” Talbot screams. “...Ekh!” Fearful of the walking dead, frantically crosses himself repeatedly at the sight of the resurrection.

“Yes he lives... Thanks to your prayers Friar Talbot...” Mother Superior teases him. “...Now help us get him inside.”

The blanket fell away from Ned revealing the extent of his lacerations. Talbot gasped and stepped back. Jealous of the wounds. He was not worthy to have suffer so. And reluctantly supports him to the infirmary.

Ned collapses onto a wooden stool.

“Water!” Zahra calls a Sister.

Pressing her head against his. There were no words she could speak that could take away the pain. He sighs. Relieved to be back at the monastery and not hanging from the castle walls.

“We have a saying in my world... *Physician heal thyself.*” Ned tries to laugh but it hurt.

The broken rib and gashes would heal. The mental torment would take longer.

“Kristina?” He asked looking about for her.

Kristina clings to her mother’s leg and peered at Ned with a growing smile.

“Thanks... If it weren't for you...” Unable to finish what he wanted to say.

“Let's get you cleaned up... Kristina, get me the medical box.” Her mother instructs her.

Moments later returning holding out the black box.

“I think you also have a saying... *This might sting a little...* If I recall?” Warned Zahra about to apply the antiseptic.

“Ahh! ... Oh Mother Mary, John, Paul... George and Ringo.” Ned cries out.

“I not know of these two disciples ye speak of.” Zahra asked confused.

“You will one day... Ahh!” Ned grimaces with the each drop of the antiseptic.

“Keep still... Ye make a better physician than patient... Would you rather the hangman's noose?” She warned him.

“Let me think about it.” Weighing his options.

Talbot watched on jealously as Ned flinched with pain.

And retreated to the shadows of the hall. Then to the cellar. Monastery bells rang out in jubilation of Ned's release. Faintly heard by Talbot in the cellar below, crying out with each infliction of the whip.

But no one hears him. God was at Prayers.

“Sigmund has ridden at his father's order to defeat Ismael before they can reach these walls...” Talbot informs Mother Superior of the fresh news from the Castle. “...Surely he will fell these heathens.”

“Perhaps... But we best make preparations otherwise. Have the others be ready.”

“Yes Mother Superior.” Talbot scurries off frantically scuffling sandaled feet.

“How long do we have?” Asked Zahra standing nearby. Ned listens on.

“Two weeks at most. Nicholas has struck early. Last word he was to wait 'til the Moon... Now he acts in haste for some reason.” She contemplates his thinking.

“And Sigmund fate?”

“I fear Sigmund will only forestall their evitable arrival... Have the Roma bring their wagons to the monastery.”

“What can I do?” Asked Ned feeling left out.

“You can heal... And when you are done you can supervise. Light duties until your ribs heal... Understood?” Instructs Mother Superior.

“I’ll talk with Brother Geoffrey and the others about the walls. I have an idea that should keep them at bay.”

“Nuns and Brothers will not fight. This is a house of God not an armory... We will halt the invader, but nay shall we raise a hand to slay him.”

“If I can't kill them can we at least frighten them?” Suggests Ned.

“What did you have in mind?”

“A little magic.” Says Ned twitching his fingers in the air to imitate casting a spell.

“Ye speak with my mother?”

“Better still... Technology.”

Kristina's ears prick up at the word.

“Tech-nog-oo-gee!” She recites the word as though it were a cure for all ills.

“I will need to talk to Brother Geoffrey about some *ingredients* first.”

“Ingredients?” Looking at Ned suspiciously, becoming more baffled by the moment.

“It’s a little ahead of its time... But why not?” Ned chuckled to Kristina curiously looking on as to what he had in mind.

Roma wagons made their way into the court yard.

Gypsy children ran wild and an accordion filled the air with joyful tunes. Dispelling the impending danger of Ismael’s arrival. Ned limped with the support of an improvised crutch inspecting fortifications. Shoring up walls and weaknesses. Nothing in his medical training and manuals could have prepared him for this. Imagining how he would breach the walls. They were high. With ladders it was another matter.

A monastery was only as strong as its weakest point. The wooden gates. They were sturdy enough but would they hold up to a constant barrage? Ned examines the large solid beam rests against a wall.

“That should hold it...” He thinks aloud. “... Could push a wagon against it as second defense.”

Arriving to where Geoffrey was turning a large make-shift mixer made from a barrel.

“How’s the mortar going?” Asked Ned watching on.

“Coming along.” Puffed Geoffrey wiping his sweating brow.

“Fill the holes in the wall once it’s ready. It should dry in time... Where is Brother Talbot? I thought he was supposed to be helping you?”

“At the castle consoling the Lord... His son has yet to return.” He responds.

Ned had mixed thoughts on Sigmund’s return. In many ways his death would be blessing for everyone concerned. None more so than Zahra. Knowing the lengths he would go to have Zahra as his wife, or whore. For Sigmund, there would be every little difference between the two.

“Did you find those *other* ingredients?” He asked Geoffrey optimistically.

“They’re in the cellar... What you want with niter is beyond me.”

“I’m not sure myself, but we’re going to find out.” He advises limping away.

Ned catches Kristina and Sebastian watching him from behind a tree. Labor, slaves at best.

“You want to see some *real* magic?”

Two heads nods in unison.

“Follow me.” He instructs his two urchin slaves.

Making their way to cellar to find a table laid out with three wooden buckets.

Each filled with charcoal, Sulphur and niter. Raw and crude they appeared inert. But when mixed in the right proportions they would prove explosive. If only Ned could recall the proportions. Cement was one thing. Black powder was another.

Sebastian’s nose turns up at the smell of the Sulphur and small fingers pinch his nostrils together.

“Was that you?” Asked Ned looking at Sebastian suspiciously.

Kristina pinches her nose at the smell of rotten eggs and looks over to Sebastian as though he had squeaked one out.

“Nooo_.” Giggled Sebastian his face screwing up at the foul smell.

Ned examine the buckets wondering where to begin. Large stone pestles and mortars nearby would help crush the charcoal to a power. Looking at the two energetic urchins as to who would enjoying breaking something more than the other.

“Sebastian... You look like a strong young fella. How would you to *break* something into little pieces?” Ned delivered the sales pitch to the eager young mind.

A head nods furiously in anticipation of assignment.

“You think you could do this for me?” Taking a piece of charcoal and striking it with the pestle.

Sebastian’s eyes light up like saucers. Handing him the pestle, begins to feverously crush the charcoal to dust.

“Very good.” Ned encourages him.

“What am I going to do?” Kristina asks.

“Somehow I think little young salve here will get tired and my number two slave will need to step up.”

“That’s me!” Kristina calls out keen to be part of the action.

“I’ll work on crushing this stuff. You keep an eye on Sebastian.”

Ned examines the Saltpeter for consistency.

“Once we work all these to a powder we can mix them together.”

“What for?” Kristina asked curiously.

“Ba-boom!” Said Ned suddenly, startling her and throwing his hands in the air.

Causing Sebastian to look up with excitement rekindling his energy. Eyes widen in anticipation.

“Baa-*boom*_! ...” Parrots Sebastian liking the sound of that word. “... Baa-*boom*_!”

A week passes with no news of the Ottoman.

Supplies stock piled and fornications strengthen. Ned’s limp had all but faded and walked freely about inspecting the monastery walls. Appearing more ornamental than dangerous, jagged broken bottles cemented atop of the walls. The fractured colored glass glistening in the sunlight. There was little more to do than to wait, and hope Sigmund would return the victor.

“Any word?” Ned asked.

“Nothing. These things take time... It could be another week before we hear anything.” Zahra replies.

“They’re attacked before?”

“A few times in the pass. We have always been held out. We have enough supplies to last beyond the moon... Between Nicholas and the Beasts I do not know which serves us best.”

“But this time it’s different?”

“Ismael rides with them. And he will be wanting victory in the name of his father... Sultan Mehmed.” Informs Zahra.

“*Mehmed*... I heard about him once. A great man in his own way... Much like your grandfather.”

“Strange how you speak of him as though a hero?” Asked Zahra looking strangely at him.

“I come from a time long past these feudal wars... But to say it does not end well for the Ottoman.”

“This is good to hear... When?”

“Maybe another four hundred years... Give or take...” Ned calculates.
“... Until then we must hold them out.”

Reaching for her hand, draws her close. And kisses her gently.

“We’ll get through this.” Looking into her eyes.

“I know.”

“You know? How?”

“Tomorrow we visit the Witch... She wants to speak with you.” She informs him.

“Speak with me? About what? ... When have you spoken with her?”

“In my dreams... You do dream, don’t you Ned?” She asked walking away grinning...

Chapter Twenty Eight

On the horizon, the enemy haven sent traces of smoke up into the air.

Sigmund watched from a distant hilltop. Behind him, his own encampment sending up their telltale presence. Making out a large number of tall pointed tents. Unwilling to conceal themselves below the tree line. Estimating over two thousand horsemen, archers, and pike-men. More if he counted whores and salves. A small exploratory force and not one to be taken lightly it was led by Ismael. Favored son of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. He would not want to return home defeated at the hands of the Hungarian army.

But that was exactly what Sigmund intended would happen.

“Trespass on my land will you?” Sigmund spits on the ground in disgust at the violation.

The sun would set in a few hours. He had seen enough. A strategy was forming in his mind. Turning his mount about to return to his own camp below the ridge.

A scout appears at the feet of Ismael on his knees before him.

“What have you to report? Speak lest I cut your tongue out and it can talk to me.” Ismael warns the man cowering here him.

“My Prince... Sigmund is camped but a few miles ride from here... Beyond the hills.” He utters in panting breath having run the distance on foot.

“*Sigmund?* ... His father sends a boy to do a man’s work.” Ismael scoffs at the thought.

Then reflects his own position. Maybe they were not so far unlike. This would test the other’s mettle. The greater son would be victorious. Perhaps he would take Sigmund captive and use him against his father to knell before his own father’s throne. To pay tributes. The thoughts pleases Ismael.

“What are we to do?” A janissary asked pulling the Prince back to the interior of the tent.

“As planned. Nothing changes... He will not attack until he has established his own camp... He has come too far to rush in.” Ismael claps his hands sharply for the man to go.

“As you wish.” The janissary bows lowly walking backwards.

The two prince adversaries had only ever heard stories of the other. Tomorrow one would live to tell their father of a great battle.

The other would be dead.

Ismael laughed and shook his head. The honey trap was set and the maggot had arrived to crawl into it. Clapping his hands sharply, a virtuous young wife appears and begins to dance for him as another begins to feed him sweet grapes. Lured by the seductive dancing his pride begins to swell and is willingly stroked by another favorite wife. Ismael reclines and allows himself to be pandered by the wives he had chosen to travel with him.

Riding back to camp Sigmund dismounts and men gathered around keen for news.

Hungry for battle, the day spent sharpening their weapons.

“They strike camp but miles from here. Post guards at the perimeter. Keep watch at all quarters... There are but a thousand.” He lied.

“When do we slaughter these heathens?” One soldier asks.

“Tomorrow... Now go feast. Fill your bellies and sharpen your blades... Recall past glories and dream of victory!” Riling his men’s enthusiasm to battle.

Men return to their tents and to fires that send up smoke, signaling their presence to the Turks. Both sides knew of the other’s whereabouts. The battle field would be the only common ground they would have for the other would die.

“Bring the prisoners we hold.” Sigmund orders a guard.

Moments later two ragged Turkish scouts appear. Captured unawares, trespassing beyond their range. Sigmund examines them carefully. Inspecting their robes and turbans. Gauging them for size. The two Turks eye’s follow Sigmund’s examination.

Fearful of his perverse intentions.

“They’ll do... Strip!” He shouts gesturing for them to disrobe immediately.

Their clothing falling to the ground leaving them with only their loin cloths. And looks at the two emaciated individuals and ordered the guard to take them away. His eyes telegraphing the men’s sentence.

They were dead weight. Soon they would be simply dead.

Their protests silenced as swords as ran through them and their bodies slumped thudding to the ground.

“Help me with these.” He orders the guard.

Removing his own clothing Sigmund pulls the filthy robes over his shoulders. And secures the turban about his head.

“How do I look?” He asked, looking and smelling the part, spreading his arms as though presenting himself.

Confused, the guard is unsure what to make of it and remains silent.

“Do I look like a Turk?” He prompts the man again.

“Too pale...” He responds honestly, uncertain if to speak lest to disappoint his master.

Sigmund rubs earth heavily over his face and hands.

“How’s that?”

The guard grunts and nods to say he would pass.

“You thinking of changing sides my Lord?” The guard asked hesitantly.

“*You* and I are going for a walk... Get changed.” Ordering the man to dress in the other robes.

Heads turned to see two apparent Turks emerge from the tent with daggers in their belts. Several reaching for the hilts of their swords. Expecting Sigmund to follow behind the two strange armed men.

“Steady men... Is only I.” Revealing his voice.

“My Lord... What is this trickery?” A guard asked unsurely.

“I going inside Ismael’s camp.”

“Are you mad? ... Forgive me my Lord I speak in haste.” A soldier bows his head.

“Perhaps I am... If this fools you, I can fool *them*.”

“Are you set to kill Ismael?”

“If I find him alone. But I suspect he will be surrounded... If not by guards, certainly by whores...”

Sigmund contemplates the erotic thought, and sighs, perhaps he would take his wives as slaves.

“I want to know more of his camp. Its weaknesses... We leave when it is dark. Hold camp until my return.” Sigmund orders the men.

“My Lord!” A manly chorus of voices respond.

A three quarter moon shone brightly in the evening sky.

A pinpricked ebony canvas allowing God’s light to shine through. A good sign thought Sigmund. Feasting with his men. Retelling tales of battles past fought. Addressing them with staunch voice, assessed his men as two kind. Those that would die bravely in battle with glory and honor. And those who would avenge the enemy heroically.

Heads nodded in agreeance to the warrior psalms.

They would not fall into the cruel hands of the enemy, there was no surrender. Sparks of the camp fire drifted upward into the dark night sky. Sparking and spitting their excitement of pending battle.

“Is time.” Sigmund advises, looking to the stars and the moon above.

The two Turkish imposters disappear into the darkness. In the distance the Turks camp fires peppered about their camp. Tents glowed with faint lamps. Their thin canvas giving little away as to the number of men inside.

Sigmund and his man pretend to having drunken something they should not have. Walking unpredictably, swaying from side to side. Holding each other up lest they fall or stumble.

“Hey you two! ... Where have you been? ...” A solitary watch calls out in Turk. “...You can’t be out at this hour!”

Sigmund raises a hand and waves away the strange foreign tongue. Then stops to relieve himself by the side of the road. Leaning backwards and almost toppling over in the act. The other man staggers and catches himself from falling.

The watchman laughs at the two pretenders clowning about.

“Get inside before the infidels capture you.” The watchman warns them.

Waving off the gibberish words Sigmund staggers closer leaning on the man beside him. His hand on a dagger on his belt. Without looking up, they swagger drunkenly past the watchmen and deeper into the camp.

Music could be heard coming from tents. Women danced and men laughed verbosely.

No one paid them any attention just as he had hoped.

Guards were lax and intoxicated. Several had collapsed where they had eaten. Goat skin bladders of wine laying empty at their sides. Heading to the center of the camp, spies a tent grander than the others about it. Bright lamps lit its interior. Music and giggling women screeched as though they were being molested. A guard kept watch outside.

Perhaps the only sober man in the entire camp barring him and his man.

Walking pass the tent as though disinterested, momentarily glancing inside the entrance to see Ismael reclined on a large cushion. Enchanted by a near naked woman dancing before him. Gyrating her body in time with a musical flute. Large men lay nearby watching on. Generals and Magi, their snakes charmed and no doubt being roused from their baskets.

'What foolishness to think battles were won by the stars.' Sigmund tells to himself.

"I've seen enough... Let's go." Sigmund muttered fearful of being detected.

The Turkish watchmen turns to see the two men approach again, and turns his back on them.

"I thought I told you two to stay inside... Aaah!" The watchman gasps a stifled last breath.

His mouth being covered in time by Sigmund's man. A head droops to see a lengthy blade extruding from his chest and he slumps. Dead. Dragging the body to a nearby ditch the man throws a branch over the body.

And the two imposters disappeared quietly into the darkness again from whence they had come.

Reappearing at their campsite sometime later.

Sigmund cautions his man to slow down lest they be seen as enemy approaching the camp.

"Tis only I." Sigmund calls out before an archer could get an arrow away.

"My Lord... Is you?" The guard calls back.

“Tis I.” Sigmund responds.

Two surrogate Turks walk boldly into the camp site. Men reached for their swords, anticipating a Turkish attack from the shrouded darkness. Tearing the filthy robes from their bodies, threw the rags onto the raging fire causing it to smoke excessively. Men moved away to avoid the bellowing fumes and stench.

Gathering about their Master, Sigmund informs them of the camp’s layout. Scratching a crude map into the earth before the flickering fire.

“We raid their camp? ... When?” A soldier asked eagerly.

“Tomorrow... Three hours after dark. They will be drunk and stupid. And not expecting us... The advantage will be ours. Get your rest... Tomorrow we will taste victory and Ismael head will be on the end of my sword!” Sigmund swears aloud.

A raucous cheer breaks out about the fire. Loud enough for Ismael to hear perhaps he thought. Nay it mattered, there would be no fighting this evening. There was a protocol when it came to battle. Rules of engagement passed down through the millennia.

All that was about to change. He had a cunning plan.

“Have torches prepared. We will need them.” Sigmund reveals the latent thought.

Ned looked hesitantly up to the mountain, his eyes betraying the feeling about the journey ahead.

Recalling the fearful place that had gripped and lifted him from the ground. Speaking eerie words of warning to leave. Only to be told he was never meant to leave.

A chill ran over his body. And it was not from the warm zephyr breeze that blew over them.

“What’s the matter?” Asked Zahra.

“Nothing.” He lied.

Spying Sebastian behind a tree.

“You coming?” He asked.

Eyes light up at the invitation, a small head nods and rushes to stand by Ned’s side. His number one slave had worked hard and crushed the charcoal to dust. The least he could do was to reward him with an adventure.

“We better get going... We will walk. The track is too narrow for horses... You up to it?” Looking to Ned.

“I’ll be fine... The exercise will do me good.”

“Exercise?” Asked Kristina.

“People run for fun in the Ouster world.”

“For *fun*?” Pulling a perplexed face.

Kristina looked to Sebastian and they giggle simultaneously. Their minds imagining adults running for fun. It made no sense.

The morning sun rose in the sky as they made their way along familiar tracks.

Stopping at a waterfall for a break. Sebastian strips and jumps in creating splash to cool off. Kristina watched as he disappeared beneath the water. Only surface with a fish in his hand. His mouth mimicking the fish’s.

“Let it go Sebastian and get dressed... Lest we leave you behind?” She warned him.

Sebastian emerges from the water and climbs into his pants. Tying a knot in a cord to secure in place. Then runs off having seen a wood pigeon.

“Hold up Sebastian.” Calls out Ned.

But it was too late. He had disappeared into the forest. Kristina followed behind.

“Will they be alright?” Looking about for them.

“Probably.” Unconcerned.

A squeal is heard soon followed by, “... Never!”

“They’ll be fine.” She re-assures him.

“Your mother... The Witch... What does she want with me?” He asked curiously.

“She wants you to believe.”

“Believe in what?” He asked curiously

“You’re the one.”

“The one what?”

Zahra kisses him as to say he should relax and he had nothing to worry about.

“Its best you hear it from her... She sees things I cannot speak of.”

She leads him by the hand for him to follow her.

The path narrows as children shrieks echo around the forest. Tall trees tower above them. Sun filters between the towering trunks. Like fingers reaching for them, poking at them. Pushing them along.

Kristina finds an open patch of grass. Wildflowers flourish on the perimeter. A ray of strong sunlight radiates through the drifting dust creating a beam beckoning her to dance. Captivated she rushes onto the glowing cloud of grass. Gracefully twirling and moving to the tune in her head. Her arms extend like a ballerina. Her dress raises up as he spins about and as the light fades with a passing cloud she takes a bow.

Ned applauds her performance.

“You should be a dancer one day Kristina.”

“I will be.” She said and rushes off in search of Sebastian.

A squeal comes from behind a tree as she finds him hiding. He rushes off to hide unsuccessfully again.

Zahra halts and allows Ned to take in the place.

“Why we’ve stop?”

“We’re here.” She informs him.

Ned looks about. It seemed familiar, as though he had been there before.

“I recall this place...” He looks about, the scene coming back to him, “...Over there... there were stones... Where are they? ...” His eyes unable to see the moss covered boulders. “...They were just over there.”

“They still are... You just have to believe.” She tells him.

Holding his hand as though to share her power.

“It’s right here... Ye have the sight Ned... Open not your eyes... But your mind... Stop trying to rationalize everything... Believe in things you cannot...” Speaking softly, letting her words drift on the breeze.

Closing his eyes, Ned allowed his others senses to detect a presence his eyes could not. Nostrils twitch at the scent of smoke. Faint, but it was there. He made out faint voices.

“*Ned Parffet.*” A voice whispers on the breeze brushing gently past his ears.

Women's voices coming from where he thought the stones had laid. Followed by a squeal, then a giggle.

Opening eyes to see Sebastian standing at the front door of a stone cottage.

Amused at watching Ned with his eyes closed. An old lady with long white hair stands behind him. Her hands resting on his shoulders. Another woman with long dark hair behind her eyeing Ned suspiciously.

"Oh." Ned responded to the aberration suddenly appearing before him. His mind not believing what his eyes could see.

"I thought I told you to stay away?" The Witch teases him.

"Sorry..." He tries to apologize, unsure if he were talking to a ghost. Recalling the woman's icy grip.

'That was you?' He thinks to himself.

The Witch nods and grins reading his thoughts.

"Come inside. You must be hungry." Invited the Witch.

"I'm hungry." Parroted Sebastian.

"You are always hungry." The Witch responds taking him by the hand inside...

Chapter Twenty Nine

“Are the men ready?” Ismael asked the General before him.

“They lay in wait... For you word.” The General reports.

“Very good... Keep them out of sight until my order... We will lure these Infidels in and draw about them like a net...” Ismael gestures with his arm. “...Then we pull it tight and crush them... I want Sigmund alive... Understood?”

“As you wish my Prince.” The General bows lowly backing away.

Pressing hands together, Ismael savors the thought of having Sigmund kneel before him. He would bring a greater prize as a hostage, than a dead corpse. Using him as leverage over his father Nicholas. Tributes, land and gold would flow the Sultan’s way. The thought was too appealing to let him evade his grasp.

Tasting victory as he could the sweet grape being feed to him from a beautiful wife.

Clicking fingers, a flute begins to play softly, and a young veiled woman stepped forward moving seductively to the rhythmic tune. Large brown eyes, her pout smile teased him further. Taking her by the hand encourages her onto the large soft cushion. Hands caressing her perfect form. Clicking fingers again the flute player hurried from the tent to leave the Sultan’s son alone with his two favorite wives.

Lifting the veil to reveal her youth face.

Perfect skin, bathed in milk. Running fingers over her body. She dared not resist and fall from favor. Undressing what little she was wearing, his pride swells. If he were to die in battle, lest his manhood would been satisfied. Looking beyond the opening of his tent. No one dare look in lest they lose their eyes and tongue. Their life. Resting a hand on his wife’s head, now rocking gently. The other wife feed him a grape. Teeth bite into the fruity flesh. Juices run over his chin.

Ismael grins with pleasure.

No man's land laid vacant. Neither side willing move.

Each going about preparation for a battle that would commence when their Masters were ready.

"We have them wait..." Sigmund advises his men. "...Have them think we attack tomorrow."

Men nod and grunt their acknowledgement. Eager to blood their swords and eradicate the heathens from their lands.

"Sharpen your swords well and pray God grants us a swift victory this evening." Raising a sword to the air.

Men raise their swords skyward and roar their approval. Drinking fortified wine to invigorate their courage further. They would need it. Having heard stories of the Turks, impalements of the captives. Lest they should die before that. With blood boiling in veins they swore an oath to the death. Leaving no head upon the heathens' shoulders, victory would be theirs!

Sigmund returns to the crest of the hill having riled his men's mettle. The setting sun drew sweat from his brow. Eyes scanning the horizon for anything untoward.

Then he saw it.

The faintest whiff of smoke a mile to the east on the horizon. A traveler's camp, he speculates. Too large. Perhaps another encampment? Maybe he had underestimated his foe?

Maybe his foe had underestimated him?

"Scout!" Sigmund calls out and waits impatiently.

"My Lord." One appears lowering himself.

"There..." Pointing to the direction of the smoke.

Eyes strained to detect it again... There it was.

"I see it." Confirms the scout with sharp eyes.

Without further words or instructions the man runs off. Disappearing into the bushes from view. He knew exactly what his master wanted to know. Losing sight of the man Sigmund returned his eyes to Ismael's camp. The numbers had suddenly mounted against him, more than he would have liked. To be out flanked would be a fatal. Playing out the battle in his mind.

Whatever the outcome, he was left wanting.

“Play me for a fool will you? ...” He asked Ismael from a distance. “... We’ll see who the fool is.”

The scout returned and confirms Sigmund’s suspicions.

That his adversary had laid a trap for him.

‘Devastate and retreat quickly before the second wave reveals itself.’
He hatched the incubated plan of attack.

Gathering men about him repeated his thoughts aloud of the attack. Warning them of the second encampment of heathens.

“But one mile or so to the east of the heathen’s camp lays a trap... A second camp in wait for us... I will not lie this time... But we are outnumbered.” He warned them.

“This time?” A man whispers to another.

“Ssh!” The other nudges him to be silent.

Heads nodding in agreeance.

“I came here to have Ismael head on this sword... Who is with me?”
Sigmund riles with fury to boisterous cheers.

Drawing his sword from its sleeve and slowly moves it across his men before him. Watchful eyes follow the tip of the blade fearful it should stop at them.

“Tonight... Three hours after dark when the heathens lay drunk and asleep... We strike swiftly... In and out! ...” Lunging his sword toward a man, startling him, before pulling it back as though from a bloody wound.

“Burn tents and supplies... Kill anything that moves! ... Horses, camels, whores and slaves!” Speaking softly lest Ismael’s scouts should hear his cunning plan, before growing to a tempest. “... Leave them nothing! ...Understood?” He shouted.

“What of the others to the east?” A man asks.

“We strike quickly and retreat before they outflank us... They will arrive to discover nothing but devastation. As they lay confused and lick their wounds... We strike again! ... And lay them all to waste.” He exalts loudly, rousing their conviction.

The fire roared its approval, fueled by Sigmund’s sermon. Veins pumping with adrenaline and testosterone, frenzied men raise swords in anger around the raging fire.

Growing brighter in the fading light.

“Light the fires bright tonight... Have them believe we stay here and await tomorrow.” Sigmund informs his men.

Ned enters the cottage to find Kristina stroking a black cat rubbing itself her leg.

Sebastian rushes over so as not to miss out on anything. A white rat scurries across the floor to greet him. An owl hoots at Sebastian’s arrival.

“Hsst!” Lamia growls to a corner sensing a presence.

Ned looks about and sees nothing.

“What is he doing here? ...” Lamia asked, disturbed by Michael’s visit. “...Hsst!” Snarling at the corner with annoyance.

“Watching over us... Let him be.” The Witch warns her daughter. “... Make us some tea my dear while I have words with Ned.”

Lamia stares at Ned. Detesting his presence in the Lair. Uninvited Ouster.

“*Ouster.*” She bites the word at him as she passed.

“Sit. Sit...” The Witch gestures to Ned. “...Ignore her.”

Ned watches Lamia preparing the tea. She looks back at him.

“*Ouster.*” She mouths the word again.

There is silence as the Witch looked at him. Then she looked over to Sebastian. A tear forms in her eye and she wipes it away.

“Sebastian. Sweet thing... Come here.” She asked kindly of him.

Carrying the rat in his hands. Lifting him onto her knee she wraps her arms around him.

“Are you going to eat me?” He asked the Witch, then looks over to Lamina smiling.

“*Never!*” The Witch speaks the word he recognized and smiles.

She kisses his head of silky blond hair.

“You treat him as though he were kin.” Lamia objects to suddenly kind treatment.

“Perhaps he is...” She kisses him again and smelling the essence of his soul, “... Perhaps he is.”

Looking momentarily to Michael watching on unseen by all but herself and Sebastian.

“You talk in riddles mother.” Returning to the boiling kettle.

“I don’t understand why I am here.” Looking about the strange cabin.

Bottles and books caught his fascination. Everything he had read about or seen on television. A skull with a missing tooth stares back at him through darkened eye sockets.

‘The fortunate sod.’ He thought to himself recalling the burial site.

“Indeed.” Answers the Witch.

A crystal ball on the table sparkles the flickering light of the fire. Ned looks within and thinks he sees something moving. A battle of some kind, trenches, lights exploding.

“Best not you look lest you see what cannot be undone.” She warns, catching him in time.

And covers the ball with a large purple silk cloth.

Crystals refract a kaleidoscope of colored light from candles about the small room.

“Gello still walks among the *others*?” Zahra asked seeing her absence.

“Hmm... She has chosen her Path. We cannot interfere.” Her mother responds.

“Gello?” Inquired Ned.

“My sister... That is Lamia my other sister... This is Ned.” Zahra offers the late introduction.

“We’ve met.” She chuckles recalling his last visit.

“Sisters? Okay...” Said Ned confused further. “...What is it that you want from me?”

“The Heart.” The Witch responds.

A silence deafened the room. All eyes turn to look at Ned. None more so than Lamia’s. Her ears pricking up with sacred word.

“I don’t have it...” He declares, to eyes as if they doubted him. “...I don’t, honest.”

The Witch glared at him, reading his mind. Weaving her way through thoughts and memories. Of the past. Of the future. That he had long since forgotten.

“You will.” Said the Witch releasing herself from his mind.

“Why will I have it?” He asked hesitantly.

“There are forces afoot. They step closer by the day... Soon you will leave this realm Ned Parffet... Back to your world... Taking Kristina and the Heart with you.”

“Kristina?”

“She has been chosen like you.” The Witch looks over to her standing beside her mother listening on quietly.

“I don’t understand any of this?” Ned declares innocently.

The Witch wraps her arms around Sebastian and kisses the top of his head.

“You will ... When the time comes.” She foretells, eyes glazed with a vision.

“I don’t know where the heart is... Only *you* know its location.” Looking to the Witch, then to Zahra to confirm his words.

She grins. Then chuckles.

“It is where people least expect it to be...” The Witch begins.

Lamia listens on carefully. The secret to be revealed after a century of silence.

“...It lays... In my father’s hands.” She rocks gently and grins.

Zahra sits back. It all made sense now.

But to Ned it meant nothing.

“Aah! ...” Exclaims Lamia. “...Of course it is... *Swear on my father’s grave.*” She chuckles to herself in amusement recalling the words.

“You must retrieve it by the next blood moon... The end is neigh.” The Witch forewarns.

“I don’t understand. Why now?” Ned asks.

The Witch looks over to the corner to see Michael standing there. He smiles at him and nods. Suddenly a brilliant flash of light fills the cottage.

Much to Lamia’s relief.

“Hsst!” She snarls his departure.

“Play nice Lamia... He means well.”

Lamia returns to the table with a tray of tea.

“I hope you like bat’s wing.” She teases Ned.

“It’s my favorite.” He lies hoping she was kidding him.

Lamia tops up his cup to the brim.

“Enjoy.” She said pinching eyes closed and chuckling as she walked away.

The Witch rocks gently in her chair. Sebastian nestled in her arms. More visions reveal before her.

“Sigmund will return defeated. His men slaughtered... He has opened a hornet’s nest... A betrayal of a loved one... A final battle...” She gasps, seeing a new vision. “... Perhaps I had judged wrong.”

“When?” Ned asks.

“You will know... Some things must be left to fate. Lest you tamper with them... But you will know... Now drink.” The Witch commands taking a sip of her tea.

Ned sniffs the pale brown brew. Watching Zahra sipping hers. Lips pursed with the sweet bitter taste.

“Your dream Ned... The dream that troubles you...” The Witch catches him by surprise. “...You must let go... As one life ends, another begins... While other cease to exist... You will carry on.” She offers comforting words.

“Oh.” Unsure what to make of them.

“How’s your tea?” She asked him curiously

“Mmm...” He lied.

The Witch grinned and chuckled...

Chapter Thirty

Clouds masked the glittering pinpricked heavens.

Clouds illuminated by large camp fires below. Sigmund looked up in search of the shrouded rising moon as he walked among his men, rousing them with victory and violence. Reciting tactics to depose of the enemy.

Or a death with honor.

“This evening we stand on the threshold to rid the heathen hoard from our Christian soil! ... Let us return victors to our families that sleep soundly in their beds because of your courage this evening!”

Boisterous cheers fill the dark evening air, as raging fires spat lighted cinders with the raising smoke. Giving away their settlement to the Turks.

Scouts had reported the Turk's continued drunken festivities from the previous evening. Some of his own men were intoxicated. Fortified with courage, but nonetheless lethal.

“Good... They are in slumber mood. We strike while the iron is hot, and crush them once and for all!” Commands Sigmund looking into the eyes of his men.

A roar resonances about the encampment. Men sleeve their swords and bows. Horses jitter in anticipation sensing something about to happen. A battle. Riled by the smoke, testosterone and stale sweat filled the air.

“To your horses!” Sigmund commands.

A thousand men mount up.

Each with an unlit torch hanging from their saddles. Quietly the cantered from camp. Taking a longer route to the Turk's camp. Sigmund raises his arm to the men to halt. Gesturing for them to split into three divisions. They were to attack from three sides and drive the heathens who ran into the Danube at their backs. Few, if any of the Turks could swim.

Thrusting his sword into the air, signals to proceed on his mark. Horses cantered and then at the last moment galloped. Sending an earth shaking tremor through the ground. Hooves thundered the turf. The sound of

encroaching death lost to the Turks beneath music, dulled senses and inebriated ears.

Turkish watchmen could hear the thunder and look to the skies.

Suddenly before them, a wall of horses appear from the darkness and sweep past. Heads topple to the ground. Leaving the bodies standing before they too succumbed to death. Trampled beneath the hooves of a hundred horses rushing over them. To become ragged bloodied bodies, torn by hooves and pikes.

Incensing horses into a frenzied state.

Sigmund had surprised the foe and his men raced through the camp lighting torches that they threw into tents. Igniting them in flames.

Lamp oil accelerated the infernos. Arrows flew from both sides. Animals lay slaughtered and lamed as the first wave washed through the camp site. Innocent slaves and whores cut down where they stood. Incapable of escaping the onslaught of horsemen.

Ismael appeared from his tent dressing himself and banishing a saber.

“Infidel! Where are you?!” He shouts, eyes blazing in search of Sigmund.

Bodyguards rush out and stand in front of Ismael fearing he would be felled by a stray arrow from either side.

“Sound the horns! ...” Ismael orders. “...Call up the reserves before it is too late... The *bastard* Sigmund has arrived!”

Agonizing screams of men dying cried out as the camp became blanketed with smoke. Horses and men silhouetted in the flames and fire light. The heat as fierce as the battle. Sigmund’s men had the upper hand. Slashing down drunken janissaries stepping from tents unprepared for the ensuing battle. One by one, systematically cutting down tents and men and animals. Leaving nothing standing.

An ominous horns sound. Loud and long. Summoning Ismael’s reserves.

“Silence those horns!” Orders Sigmund turning his horse about for another assault.

The skirmish continued without respite for either side. Unaware of his own losses. Unwilling to concede the Turks a chance to regroup. Sigmund rallied another charge. His eyes searching for Ismael.

Finally seeing him, surrounded by his men.

“The coward!” Sigmund cries out and turns his mount to charge Ismael down.

Through drifting daze smoke, Ismael senses a horse thundering its hooves towards him.

Waiting until the last possible moment he ducks down to avoid Sigmund’s sweeping blade and thrust his own saber into the horse’s flank. A body guard is caught unaware from Sigmund’s thrusting blade. And falls to the ground grasping his face. Blinded, blood spurting between fingers. Staggering aimlessly, is felled by a vagrant arrow.

Sigmund’s horse falters and halts. Unresponsive to heels digging into its gaping wound. Stumbling the horse yields to incredible pain and collapses. Sending him tumbling with it.

Ismael seizes the moment.

“He’s mine!” Ismael orders his men to stay back.

Dazed, Sigmund gets to his feet holds out his sword.

Two young bulls locked metal horns. Thrusting lethal blows at each other. Sparks threw as metal struck metal. Sword and saber clashed and crossed and locked together. The two men press against each other, their faces but inches apart. Each grimacing their contempt of the other. Their eyes searching for fear, taking in the vulgarity of the other’s face. Breaths exchanged, neither would give an inch.

With a sudden burst of fresh energy Ismael pushes Sigmund backwards sending him tumbling onto the ground. His sword flying from his hand. Ismael steps forward grinning for the final blow.

“This is it my friend... Any last words?” Ismael raises his saber above his head.

“*Fukk you.*” Recalls Sigmund. Unsure what it meant. It sounded appropriate staring death in the eyes.

Ismael is lost at the phrase. Latin perhaps?

Suddenly arrows rain down on Ismael and his body guards.

Striking two that fall dead. An arrow strikes Ismael in the thigh and he grimaces at the pain. Pulling the arrow out as though it were a nuisance. Body guards rush to stand ready to defend their Prince.

Outnumbered and annoyed Ismael hobbles back to his tent untouched by the flames. Collapsing into a cushion. Medicine men go to work on Ismael's wound. Wishing he had not been so hasty to pull out the arrow.

His survival would be their survival. His pain would be theirs.

Sigmund's men gallop towards him. A horseman reaches down and wrenches him onto the saddle. Realizing the reserve would be upon them and they would soon be heavily out-numbered.

"Time to leave... We have delivered your message." Sigmund calls out the order to retreat.

Horses and men limped back to camp.

Licking their wounds, men looked around for those that had not returned. Crossing themselves at the thought of their fallen companion. Looking back to the burning camp site hoping they were dead. Or soon would be.

To be left alive would be cursed with a fate worse than death.

Sigmund counted the toll of the incursion. A third of his men dead. A cheap price to destroy Ismael's camp. Now lacking horses and food, he would not be moving too soon. Returning to his tent and allowed a slave to wash him down. Then summoned a whore to relieve the stress of battle. Imagining Ruth at his loins.

In the rising light of day Sigmund stood atop the crest of the hill.

And observed the smoldering camp from afar. Far from seeing a desecrated camp he saw re-enforcements had arrived. Fresh horses, and with them supplies of fresh food. Perhaps it was he who was now under provisioned.

Squinting eyes made out bodies. Impaled on long poles. Suspended in the air. Those still moving being used as a target practice for archers. He watched as each man fell dead. It could well be him spiked among them.

It could still be, if he did not make tracks soon.

Returning to camp, surveyed the tattered legion of men and explains the situation to them.

"Ismael would be keen for revenge. I am afraid we have only awoken a hornet's nest... He out numbers us... And it is a fight we cannot win. But..." Sigmund holds out hope, "... We can fight another day... I want a

day's ride on him... Leave anything that is not essential behind." Sigmund gives the order to leave.

"What of the whores and slaves." One soldier asks.

"Kill them or leave them..." He ordered his men. "...And poison the water troughs. We leave within the hour!" He spits out the order to return to the Castle.

Ismael looked up to the hills.

Hidden from view, Sigmund was pulling up camp. It is what he would do. And limped inside his tent.

"What are we to do? ... Are we to let them escape?" A Janissary asks.

"Patience my friend. I know where he is heading... Back to the nest."

Ismael leans back on a cushion contemplating the situation... It was where he was headed anyway, but on an entirely different mission.

Until Sigmund had shown up and spoiled his father's plans for peace.

"His men are tired... We will pick them off one by one." Ismael informed his General.

Stung by an archer's arrow that had missed the mark and not killed him. Sigmund would pay dearly for the wound. Caressing a thick black oiled moustache and beard over his chin, as though he were stroking a cat.

A favorite wife feeds him a grape, as another stroked his swelling pride...

Chapter Thirty One

Ned had had a sleepless night on the floor of the Lair.

It was time to head back to the Monastery. Leaving he looks back over his shoulder to see the cottage still *there*. A cold breeze rushes past him.

“*Ned Parffet.*” Lamia whispers in his ear.

And feels a push in his back.

“Ignore her... I think she likes you.” Zahra tells him, grinning.

“Really?” He asked anxiously, wondering where Lamia was.

“We better leave before she changes her mind to turn you into a frog.”

“She can do that?”

“You want to stick around to find out?”

“Let’s get moving.” Ned picks up the pace.

Looking back to see the cottage had suddenly *disappeared* again.

“What did your mother mean *I would know what to do with the heart?*”

“Only you will know the answer to that... When the time comes... We best not interfere with future events, lest we change their outcome.”

“Yet the Witch knows all?” He enquires.

“It is a burden she carries.” Informs Zhara.

“Your Grandfathers grave? ...Where exactly is that?” He asked hesitantly wondering if were far.

“Bran castle... About a day’s walk from here... Two from the Monastery...”

“We’ll be cutting fine to make it there in the Mist with Beasts lurking in the shadows.”

“... And then you just have to lift the heart from of my Grandfather’s dead hands.” She grins at the prospect.

Ned contemplates the thought of coming face to face with Dracula.

Torrid black and white images flash through his mind. Vampires wanting his blood. Zombie with glazed over eyes looking into his soul. A chill comes over him at the thought.

“Don’t worry... Kristina will be there.”

“Oh... That really puts my mind at ease.”

Ned hesitates his next question.

“You coming?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I wouldn’t leave without you.” Taking her hand.

“You are taking my daughter with you... It is a package deal.”

“And Sebastian?” Ask Ned.

“Without Ouster blood... At the border he would cease to exist... While we would carry on.” She used the Witches words.

“Oh I see.” Imaging little Sebastian fading away into thin air never to be seen.

Or heard of again.

“*Never!*” A squeal brings Ned back to the dark towering dark forest about him.

Though the distance grew between him and Lamia he was sure he could sense her presence in the breeze about him.

“Lamia is your sister? ...” Asked Ned curiously. “...You never became a witch?”

“Half-sister... We had different fathers. I never knew mine... An ouster that came and never returned. Much like Kristina’s.” Zahra’s mind drifts at the encounter.

“Gello? ... What of her and the *others?*” Ned asks.

“She was stronger than Lamia... Mother could not please her appetite for knowledge of the black art. One night a year ago she left and never returned... There are others like her deep in the forest. Unseen. Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“The final battle... Tis what the Witch spoke of, soon.”

“Final battle?” He asks.

“Between good and evil... She speaks in riddles so we never know until the time.”

“Are you not afraid?”

“Always.” She squeezes his hand.

“She spoke of a betrayal of a loved one... Who?”

“I have no idea... But I think we are about to find out.” Said Zahra hearing the sound of crashing water ahead.

Sigmund rode like the devil leaving his men in the raising dust of his exhausted horses.

Riding one horse to near exhaustion before swapping saddles to another. With little sleep he hid like a fugitive within the dense forest. Hoping to avoid Ismael's scouts. Forsaking his men, hoping they would slow Ismael's progress.

One by one his men were picked off by Ismael's archers with keen eyes. One by one they would be impaled and left to hang in agonizing misery by the side of the road. Much as Caesar had crucified Spartacus' army along Appian Way. Only Ismael would be more merciful.

Offering those who converted a quick death beforehand.

For three days and three nights Sigmund rode like a madman in fear of his life.

Covering the same ground he would have covered in a week. The Monastery's belfry was in sight. And he gallops past without slowing down to warn those outside of the impending danger. Heads turn to see what was causing his haste. They see nothing.

Only the dust clouds of his horse was stirring up from the sun baked road.

Rushing inside the gates, orders them secured in fear something or someone was in pursuit. It was too early to be a Beast. And during day light hours. This was another Beast. Ismael. Many had heard stories of his torture and mutilation.

On entering the Castle gates Sigmund ordered them closed. The heavy wooden gates slammed closed. Heavy bolts fell into place. And a sturdy wooden beam laid across it. Leaving those caught outside stranded. Archers set their bows to the road below and woods in search of movement. Eyes searched the horizon for the assailing foe. Seeing nothing but Sigmund's settling dust.

The monastery bell tolled out an ominous warning.

Mother Superior appears at the dark opening of the front doors. Stone columns frame her presence. Her eyes searching the forecourt before looking up to the belfry as to the cause.

“What is this about?” Asking a Brother scurrying inside.

“The Turks! The Turks they ride! ... Sigmund has returned in haste. Without his men!” The Brother looks about fearing the Turks would breach the gate at any moment.

“Assemble everyone in to refectory. Hurry Brother... I fear we do not have much time.” She instructs, watching the Brother who disappears ahead of her.

“What’s happened?” Asked Zahra arriving to see what the panic erupting about her.

“Sigmund has returned. Without his men... I fear the worse... The Turks will not be far behind. Pray we can hold them out.”

The words ringing in Zahra’s ears, the witch’s prophecy coming true. Her eyes look about the scanty fornications. Glass sparkled atop the walls. They had faced Turks down before. Though a Beast could not step on hallowed ground, Ismael could.

“What have you done Sigmund?” Zahra asked herself looking towards the castle for the answer.

“There were ten thousand of the heathens...” Sigmund exaggerate, “...We were outnumbered from the start... It was a slaughter.”

“You stood to battle?” Asked Nicholas leaning forward to hear the details.

“Indeed father... I had Ismael at my blade about to die until a volley of arrows from his archers narrowly missed me.”

“Yet ye somehow survived? ...” Nicholas looks down at his son weakened by the grueling ride.

“Barely... With my life.” The rare words of truth passed his lips.

“Shame your men cannot say the same.” Sighed Nicholas suspicious of his son’s lies.

Looking awkwardly at him to reconcile his presence.

‘Even if it were half the numbers and it would still have been a considerable force.’ He thought weighing his son’s predicament.

Had his scouts miscalculated the original numbers? Unlikely. To lose a few hundred men would leave him short to defend the castle. But to lose all men and save one? His son. The numbers did not reconcile.

“You did not chose to stand and die with your men with honor?” Nicholas cajoles his son.

“I gave the order to retreat and each man for himself. To make their way back here to defend the castle...To defend *you*... My Lord.” Sigmund kneels humbly before his father.

“How very honorable of you. Get up... You are starting to sound like Talbot... Where is that pathetic excuse for a foreskin?”

Nicholas looks up just as Talbot enters, seeing Sigmund kneeling before his father.

Talbot automatically kneels to beside him.

“Get up the both of you.” Nicholas shook his head at the pair.

“Send word out for every male over the age of twelve to report here immediately. Those refusing to serve. Execute on the spot... Understood?” Nicholas instructs his son.

“Yes my Lord.” Backing away to delegate the order.

Nicholas looks down at Talbot.

“What am I to do with you?” Said Nicholas pinching thick eye brows.

Fingers formed a steeple and he taps them together. His mind was blank.

“Seems you are stuck here... Too late to send you back your nuns at the monastery... Hmm.”

Talbot stood in silence as though awaiting his sentencing.

“I will need every able man to fight... Including you.” Nicholas sternly eyes Talbot.

“But I took an oath not to kill. My Lord.”

“That nay stop you from beating Brother Geoffrey about the head did it? ... Less so if it were a heathen at your throat? ... Hmm?” Nicholas postulates.

“That was different... I did it for you. The Ouster was to escape... My Lord.”

“Well you can do this for me... Lest I throw you to the Turks... Dare I say they fancy a devout Christian such as you on a stick?” Mused Nicholas

chuckling. Imagining Talbot jiggling atop a spiked pole. “Ha-ha-ha!”

“As you wish My Lord.” Talbot bowed walking slowly backwards keen to leave.

“Don’t wonder too far Friar Talbot...” Nicholas warns, “... I want you where I can see you.”

“Yes my Lord.” Talbot mutters meagerly with no intention of sticking around.

The wolf-hound looks up and sniffs the air. Urine. And then resumes its slumber on the cold stones. The sun shone through the portal window warming its thick grey shaggy coat. To resume a dream of chasing a diminutive boney monk. Saliva gathered on the stone floor. Whiskers and lips twitched in anticipation.

Nicholas thought out the impending battle.

The Blood Moon would be in a week’s time. Ismael would arrive in a few days at best. The Mist would play into his hand if only he could prolong Ismael’s stay. Or delay his departure. Catching him in the twilight. Exposing him. Nicholas grinned at the thought of having the Beasts doing his killing for him. Perhaps fate had served him an opportunity. It would all be in the timing. Preparations had been underway for the past weeks on the basis on Sigmund’s unfortunate demise.

Somehow the scoundrel had evaded a noble death.

Reminding Nicholas of himself when he was much, much, much younger. Despite his son’s impetuous shortcomings, he may be useful after all. His treacherous words had slipped from Nicholas’ mind momentarily. He needed someone to watch his back and enforce discipline with the men he had left.

There were none more ruthless than Sigmund.

Talbot in the meanwhile had scurried to the Judas gate at the rear of the castle.

Running as quick as his feeble boney legs and shallow lungs would allow. The Castle was no place for a Friar in the beat of battle. He would take his chances on hallow ground and the sanctuary of the dark forgotten cellar.

Reaching the Monastery’s Judas gate just as Sister Ruth was leaving.

“Where do you think you are going Jezebel?” Grabbing her arm, knowing her dirty secret.

“Sigmund is back. He will need... Spiritual support.” Ruth dismisses the insult.

“I will inform Mother Superior of your improprieties.” Talbot begins to threaten.

“And I will inform Mother Superior of your transgression... Or should I inform Brother Geoffrey and let him decide your fate?” Ruth counters.

“You have not heard the last of this.” Trying to gain the upper hand.

“Oh I think we have... Now if you excuse me... I would prefer to be impaled by Sigmund than the Turks.” Wrenching her arm away from Talbot looking at her with disgust.

And she rushes into the bushes disappearing along a path that took her up to the castle.

Talbot composed himself and wandered into the refectory just as Mother Superior was about to announce their position.

“Ah... Brother Talbot. I am so glad you are safe... I was informed you were at the Castle.”

“Yes Mother Superior... But Nicholas *insisted* I should be here to help... I came as fast as I could.” He lied.

“How very noble of him... And yourself... Though I fear he has better fortifications than us despite our meager efforts.”

“God is with us.” Talbot crosses himself.

“Yes He is... Watching over us all... We have stock piled supplies. More than enough to see us over the Mist... Ismael will not wish to linger... Brother Ned has strengthened our walls. Let us pray they ride past and leave us be...” She pauses and contemplates the possibility. “...But we must be prepared for a breach.”

“A breach?” Asked Talbot his eyes lighting up at the word, wondering now if he should have stayed at the Castle.

“Ismael will arrive any day now. No one is to leave... Watch the children and keep away from the windows lest an arrow finds you.” She warns him.

Talbot scurries from the room almost unnoticed as others prayed with bowed heads.

Taking himself first to the kitchen for bread and water and then to his dungeon cellar. Bolting the heavy door behind him. Ned observed him sneak out and allowed him go unimpeded. And also left the room unnoticed, almost. Sebastian and Kristina's eyes tracking him and they followed him to the cellar to inspect his arsenal of black powder.

"You want to see some magic?" Asked Ned sensing two hungry sets of young eyes.

"Baa-boom!" Squeals Sebastian.

"That's right Sebastian... Baa-boooooom!" Ned throws his arms in the air.

Having tested a small amounts it was time to see if a larger amount had a larger effect. The only thing lacking was a fuse. His mind juggled with possibilities. Spying some twine, loosen it and rubbed black powder into it.

"Okay Sebastian... Give me your lighter."

Blank blue eyes blinked and stared back at him wondering what Ned was talking about.

"You don't smoke? That's good... Don't. They'll kill you..." Ned warned him. "... Best we keep fire away from this stuff okay?" Advising his recruits. "Otherwise..."

"Ba-boom!" Squeals Sebastian.

"That's right. A very, very, very big ba-boom! ... And we don't that that do we?"

Two small heads shake side to side.

Sebastian leaned in eager to see more sparks. Kristina stood back unsure what to expect. Flicking the lighter, held the flame under the cord. A sudden billow of smoke and flames exploded along the cord causing Sebastian to squeal hysterically.

"You like that? ... Now we just have to get the length right otherwise we'll blow ourselves up."

"Again!" Squeals Sebastian.

Finding a suitable length. Long enough to give him time to throw and short enough to be effective.

“Are you ready?” Ned asked the two keen faces watching on in fascination.

Heads bob in up and down as they watch his every move.

“Never ever touch this stuff okay... If your mothers knew you were here...”

“We would what?” Zahra asked appearing in the door way.

“Ah... You’re just in time to witness history... So to speak.” Jokes Ned.
“...Pass me that cloth Kristina.”

Taking a small handful of the course black powder places it on the cloth and ties it off like a Christmas pudding. A length fuse stemming from its knot.

“Outside everyone! ...” Warns Ned. “...Kristina... Bring the lighter if you please.”

Zahra follows unsure what to expect from the small cloth ball. Skeptical something so small would keep Ismael, little alone his men at bay.

“Stand over there... Okay Kristina... Hold the lighter very still.”

Looking about for a direction to throw the pudding spies Geoffrey’s vegetable patch.

“That will do... Brother Geoffrey forgive me.” Prays Ned about to light the fuse.

It ignites violently spitting spits, bellowing smoke. Ned is taken back by the sudden eruption and almost forgets to throw the cloth wad until the last moment. Sebastian’s eyes follow the trajectory as it disappears among the green foliage. They waited. And waited. Smoke bellowed from within the vegetation.

Nothing.

“Stay here.” Warned Ned going to investigate.

After a few steps there is a sudden flash of light. A violent explosion of smoke and a thunderous boom. Sending dirt and vegetation into the air.

And sending him falling backwards.

“Baa-boooooom!” Squeals Sebastian.

“Ba-boom!” Coughs Ned inhaling the grey acrid smoke.

“Again!” Cries out Sebastian excitedly.

Geoffrey’s vegetable patch was destroyed in the process. Hoping he would understand that it was all for the *cause*.

“Brother Geoffrey won’t be pleased.” Declared Zahra, looking at the blackened patch.

“Well... He’s either with us, or he’s against us.” Claimed Ned citing a defense. “...Either way, hopefully he’ll understand.”

Talbot looks to the ceiling.

Wondering what the tremor and noise was that had shaken him from his deliria and pain.

Seconds later, the noise from the explosion carried the distance to the castle.

Causing Nicholas to curiously look out his window towards the Monastery. Perplexed by the strange percussion. Perhaps the Turks had arrived earlier than planned. He was ready for a fight. But first Ismael would have to breach the walls. Nicholas held the upper hand.

The Beasts being the highest...

Chapter Thirty Two

Ismael spies the belfry above the tree line.

A cross peers over the trees to see who had arrived. Raising a hand to him and his men to halt. They were not welcomed in these lands. Astrologers riding with Ismael lean over and advise him again he should leave before it was too late.

“Return after the Mist...” One Magi suggests quietly. “...The Infidels are going no-where. They hide in their castle and quiver in fear... The Beasts will trap them within, and us outside...” The Magi looks to the sky. “...The stars speak.”

Ismael intended his stay not to be protracted. He would strike quickly and destroy the castle. Dare he have to cower on hallow ground of the Monastery. But if he must, he would.

There was but one true God, and His house had many doors.

‘It would make a fine mosque.’ He thought to himself.

“We attack! ... There will be no time for a siege... Those days have long since passed since this curse was placed... I curse you *Dracula!*” Ismael spits on the ground.

“As you wish my Prince.” The Magi bows and return to his positions among the entourage.

“Make camp between the Monastery and the Castle... Tomorrow we attack both at first light! ...” Ismael brandishes a saber into the air. “...I want Sigmund’s head by the end of the day!”

Men cheer eager for battle as horses gallop in search of a field to camp. Kicking up dust. Raising a dirty haze to the air. The ground trembled with thundering hooves. Yelling insults and firing sporadic arrows over the Monastery walls. Laughing hysterically. Provoking mayhem of those within the walls. Tomorrow they would return and finish the raid for Prince Ismael, son of Sultan Mehmed the Conquer. He would have his conquest.

A story to tell his grandchildren, and their grandchildren.

Ned watches from the belfry as Ismael's men ride past in a hurry.

Ismael staring back up at him standing in the shadows.

"There must be thousands of them? They're heading to the castle... Perhaps he won't attack here?" Ned hopes.

"Perhaps. But don't count on it... He'll be back. We must be ready." Zahra warns him.

"They have arrows, what do we have?" Looking about for weapons.

"The Brothers have some arrows for hunting but they will be no match for theirs? We can only pray the walls are high enough and your black powder scares the demons out of them."

"If they breach the walls we can only lock ourselves inside and hope Nicholas keeps them distracted long enough before the Mist descends."

Ned looks towards the castle and wonders what preparations were happening up there. Somehow wishing he was there. Men with pikes and arrows and swords stood a better chance of holding off murderous Turks than a dozen friars and nuns with bibles.

Smoke rises from the Turkish camp site fires.

Chanting loud voices carried over the still air. Drifting over the fields, over the Monastery's walls. Those within looked up to windows in fear to the unholy voices taunting them.

"They camp tonight. Tomorrow they attack..." Nicholas tells his son watching on from a tower window. "...What men have you sent to the Monastery?" Nicholas asked concerned for the undefended nuns.

"None... We need the men here." Sigmund replies coldly.

"What?" Exclaims Nicholas looking at him in horror.

"We need men here. To defend us. They have Roma. They can fight for themselves." Declaring his fondness for the Roma.

"Send a dozen archers there now!" Orders his father.

"Now? ... *But...*" Spluttering a response.

"Now! ..." Nicholas bellows again, disgusted with his son's oversight. "...If Rome were to find out your oversight we can kiss your previous Kingdom goodbye."

Watching his son disappear hastily from the room.

“Unbelievable... How did I conceive someone so selfish?” Nicholas laments his sacrificed wife.

Looking toward a distant field raising with white smoke, contemplates a plan that would keep Ismael occupied, while giving him a false hope. A hope that would distract him of the Beasts that would soon roam and devour him.

The walls were high, the gates strong. Fewer men than he had hoped. Had he really expected Sigmund to return? Less so his men. Perhaps he had sacrificed the men for nothing. Only to be burdened with Sigmund again. If he was to be cursed and live forever, then perhaps he would have another son that could not be as treacherous as Sigmund.

Sigmund enters the mess and calls his trusted man over to him.

“Find a dozen of the weakest archers and send them to the Monastery!” Orders Sigmund looking about the men for his dislikes.

“But the Turks camp outside! They’ll be slaughtered!” The man protested reluctantly.

“Let’s hope so.” Smirks Sigmund pushing the man away.

“You, you and you! You, you and... You!” A brawny man counted off the volunteers pointing the finger of death at them.

“Get your asses down to the Monastery. King’s orders! Be gone!” The man shouts at the confused men.

Daring not to question the order lest face his sword. They would take their chances with the Turks. Gathering bows and what arrows they could carry among them, begrudgingly headed out. The night sky would provide some cover and the longer route would see them at the monastery within the hour. Hoping no Turkish scouts were about.

Crouching, they made their way cautiously beneath the cloud covered evening, step by step closer to the monastery. Stopping repeatedly. Checking for scouts. Movements and sounds about them. Inching to the Judas gate. They look at each other as to what to do next.

Rustling sounds came from among the bushes. Eyes searched the darkness for Turks and hands reached for the hilts of swords.

Heads appear one by one. Wolves. Six of them.

Growling softly. Penetrating red eyes sensed the men's fear sweating from every pore. Tension hung in the air. Then quietly among the wolves steps small boy appears. And begins stroking the leader. Leaning down as though to console it.

"It's okay..." Whispers Sebastian to the wild animal. "...Sssh."

The pack stands reluctant to move. It's pray within reach, then the wolves reluctantly turn and disappears into the darkness the night.

Sebastian gestures to the men to follow him.

Taking them to a small opening in the wall. Crawling through, one after the other. Unsure who or what the small boy was.

"Who goes there?" Brother calls out holding up a lamp.

"The King's men... Who goes there?" An archer asks.

"Brother Geoffrey... Have you seen Sister Ruth have you? She seems to have gone missing."

The men look at each other. The last time they had seen her was tied to Sigmund's bed. They all shook their heads to deny her whereabouts.

"Sorry Brother Geoffrey... Is Mother Superior about? ... We need a word." An archer asks.

"I think she is still up... How did you get in?"

"A small boy. The wolves..." The man tries to explain the unexplainable.

"Ah... Sebastian. Lucky for you then..." Geoffrey grins. "...Follow me."

Ned watches as a dozen men march pass him to Mother Superior's room. And follows the men, standing back to hear what they had to report.

"The Overlord has sent us to help keep the heathen's out." One archer relays his orders.

"We are pleased to see you. We thought Nicholas had forgotten about us..." Mother Superior responds. "...Have Brother Ned show you about... This is all beyond me I am afraid."

"We understand..." The archer replies. "...The heathens make camp a mile up the road. They will attack at dawn... Such is their custom."

Mother Superior nods and dismisses the man. Turning to see Ned standing behind him. And recognizes him from the trial. Recovered and

healed. He had taken a beating and lived. Sigmund must be losing his touch he thought. Few ever lived after his interrogation.

“Follow me.” Ned orders the men.

Taking them to various vantages that may help their aim.

And returned to the cellar. A wooden bucket filled with a dozen cloth balls. Black stringy fuses protruding from them. Each laced with small pebbles to maximize the infliction. Making every one count. Feeling the weight of one and went through the motion of throwing it over an imaginary wall. Checking fuses wondering if they need more power, if the fuse would be long enough.

‘We’ll know tomorrow.’ He thought.

Wishing tomorrow would never come.

“There you are...” Said Zahra appearing at the door. “...You all set?”

“As good as we will ever be...Time is not on Ismael’s side... We just have to hold him out long enough.”

“It will only encourage him to take risks we have not anticipated.” She speculates.

“Archers are here and... With these.” Ned pats the bucket of cloth balls, “... These should scare the hell out of them, and have them think twice.”

“I hope so.” She responded.

A near full moon begins to rise above the mountains to the east.

Lacking a red hue. Absent the fore-shadowing warning. A lone wolf howls in the distance. Nicolas’ eyes peer into darkness in search of its location. Unable to sleep. His mind playing out Ismael’s assault as he watched the glow of the Turkish camp fire from a tower window. Rationalizing that Ismael would use most of his men attacking the Castle. A few hundred perhaps to harass the monastery. He could ill afford to spread his men too thin. Focusing his forces on the castle is what he would do.

It is what Mehmed would do.

Men manned turrets and tower windows. Buckets of arrows at their feet. Some men slept as others kept watch. Large pots of boiling oil sat

waiting to be poured over the innocent who would dare clamber the walls below them. Gates shored with large beams.

Nicholas's mind raced with thoughts, had he overlooked something?

Just then a giggle echoed the hallways again. Sigmund had found a woman for the evening and her shrieks could be heard through the stone halls and stairwells. Nicolas looked up and wondered where his son found the energy. Hoping he had energy left for the next morning to fight.

Ismael reclined on a large soft cushion while a favorite wife feed him grapes to his opening mouth.

An elongated purple tongue protruded as though a fleshy platter on which to serve it. Looking west to the Castle. His mind set on retribution. His leg beginning to throb with pain. He could see lights flickering from tower windows. Making out the outline of the castle silhouetted against the dark night sky. Knowing they would making preparations against him.

All futile he thought.

He would have Sigmund's head. Strike swiftly. Strike furiously. Death to the Infidels who stain this land. Land that would add to his father's ever growing empire. In time it would be all his. And his children's children.

Looking east to the glowing celestial orb.

Stubbornly denying it's over shadowing macabre presence. His mind refusing to be distracted from his vengeful mission.

"Sigmund you are mine." Stroking his thick glossy beard.

Ismael pride beginning to swell beneath his robes, as a favorite wife danced seductively before him. Her face covered by a thin vale. Hips moving sinuously to a flute as abdominal undulations rouse the sensual pleasuring...

Chapter Thirty Three

Dawn breaks, and a cock crows from a top of a Roma wagon within the Monastery court yard.

The day's new light spilled over the horizon and flooded the land. Bleaching it of the darkness. A chill floated in the air. Sparkling like diamonds, dew glistened.

Restless bodies stir from a sleepless night unsure what to expect, or when. From a distance voices could be heard approaching.

"They're coming!" An archer calls out seeing the approaching troop of Turkish warriors.

Riding fast. Yelling war cries and insults to those about to die. Sabers raised praising Allah, seeking a swift victory. Air crackled with thunderous hooves and whips. Kicking up earth and dust in the still morning air.

The deafening thunder grew closer. Sending terror among those within the walls.

"How many?" Asked Ned watching behind the archer.

"A few hundred maybe... More would be sent to the Castle. This is only their first wave... Archers!" A man calls out.

The Monastery bell tolls loudly. Drowning out the sound of the approaching horsemen. Raising their sabers to the insult, spurred their horse's flanks to make haste. Wailing voices cried out revenge.

"Ready! ..." And Archer calls out. "...On my mark!"

Waiting for the apt distance to fire a volley into the group of leading Turks before they could disperse.

"Come on you heathens bastards!" Challenged an archer from a vantage point.

The archer waited. Watching as the targets grew closer. Fingers released the tensile string. Sending a heavy wooded arrow along a path of no return. It's sharpened broad head striking the man at which it was aimed. The rider is struck and clutches his chest and falls from the saddle.

With a foot caught in a stirrup, the man is dragged beside the horse. Distressed by the lopsided weight pulling at its flank.

And gallops wildly down the road from the battle.

More arrows follow in quick succession and find their marks. Ned watched on helplessly. Watching people die first hand was not foreign to him. Watching them being slaughtered was. He steps back from the window. And makes his way to the cellar to retrieve the black powder balls.

As one group of Turks attacked the Monastery, a greater force was bearing down on the Castle.

Nicholas had the higher ground. Ismael had the greater numbers. A volley of arrows greet Ismael's men and send the unlucky to the ground. Undeterred Ismael pushes closer. Shields raised against the next barrage of arrows. Absorbing the next volley.

'Punch-punch-punch.' Sound the shields, looking like porcupines.

Turkish archers fire from the saddles over the walls to the turrets and windows. Their arrows ricochet off stone walls. Only to have the same arrows fired back at them. Drums beat loudly adding to the confusion of battle.

Sigmund watched on from his bedroom chamber window.

"Shouldn't you be down there fighting?" Asked Ruth reclining on the bed.

"And leave your honor unprotected? ..." Sigmund chuckled. "...Later perhaps... They're not going anywhere."

An arrow sails swiftly through the window narrowly missing him and strikes the opposite wall. Penetrating a wooden cabinet. And he steps back from the window to avoid another near miss.

"Now where was I?" Sigmund pulls the sheets from Ruth naked body.

"Where is that sniveling Talbot?" Nicholas calls out to a man.

"Someone saw him heading back to the Monastery last evening." A guard responds.

"That little *Cuntus!* ..." Curses Nicholas in Latin. "...I should have guessed the weasel would run at first sight of trouble."

Looking out the window to see a group of Turks push a ladder against the walls. Falling short of their mark. Nicholas chuckles at the blunder. They would try again elsewhere on the wall.

“Have the oil ready...” He calls out to the man. “...Don’t let them breach those walls!”

Looking about for his son. Wondering why he was not in the thick of the defense. Imagining he was still in bed after his carinal evening.

“Sigmund!” His father bellows out.

His voice carries the empty halls and leaks into Sigmund’s bed chamber.

“Hmm... Alas my love... It seems I have been summoned... Don’t go away.”

“Untie me you bastard! ... What if the Turks find me like this?”

“Then I suggest you do what you do best my love...” He jests her, pulling on boots.

The Monastery was holding its own.

Arrows flew in both directions. Gypsies, Nuns and Brothers huddled in the refectory. Half in prayer. Half singing hymns to soothe those their souls. Fearful of who was holding the upper hand.

“Has anyone seen Friar Talbot?” Mother Superior asks.

Heads look about in search of the Friar and shook unaware of his where about.

“Sister Ruth?”

A shaking of heads continue.

“They have made their beds...” Mother Superior broadcasts her judgement. “...No one is to leave this room. Understood?” She orders.

Worried eyes looking back at her.

“They’re ramming the gate! ...” A Brother calls out to those inside, “... They’re ramming the gate!”

“Stay here.” Ned tells Zahra.

“I’m coming with you... You two stay here! Don’t you are move!” Zahra warns two children looking up at her.

“Listen very carefully Sebastian... Okay?” Ned gives Sebastian a wink.

“Ba-boom! ...” He exclaims excitedly, eyes lighting up in anticipation.

Rushing to the cellar Ned grabs two cloth balls. And shelters behind the opening at the main door. Its thick lumbers peppered with heavy arrows. Across the courtyard, the sound of the gates being struck heavily. A loud crashing noise resonated with every blow. It was holding, but it was only a matter of time it would succumb to the perpetual pounding.

“Follow me!” Said Ned looking back to Zahra seeing no hesitation in her eyes.

Arrows stuck out of the ground beside them.

Unseen by Turks, they crept close to the stone wall to the gates.

Ned stepped out to gauge the height of the wall and the position of the Turks on the other side. Taking a cloth ball and lit the fuse, igniting it violently with smoke and crackling sparks. Taking them both by surprise. Threw it over the wall in the direction of the voices at the gates. Ned counted and waited. Longer than he had hoped.

The ramming stopped and voices cried out in confusion. Smoke spewed from the fuse sending some running unsure what to make of the innocuous small ball. A man picks the cloth ball up. Holding it out and laughing. Other men join in the jocular gesture.

Then it detonated.

‘Ba-booom!!’ Sounded amassive explosion.

Anguished screams bellowed from the other side of the walls.

Men run in all directions. Peppered with pebbles. Missing a hand and blinded, a Turk wanders blindly, calling for help. Walking into an opening. An archer takes aim and puts the man out of his misery. Stumbling to his knees before falling face first into the turf.

Ned waited for the recommencement of the ramming to begin that never came. Looking up sees an archer gesturing for him to move along the wall. Foreign voices could be heard coming from the other side. Lighting the second fuse he waited until the very last moment before throwing it over.

Voices yelled out as they saw the smoking projectile falling upon them. Detonating before they had time to avoid its lethal sting.

‘Ba-booom!!’ Resonated another the massive explosion.

Followed by an excited squeal within the refectory.

More screams of pain and anguish cried out as the Turks ran for cover. Fearful of the weapon of mass destruction that was being unleashed upon them. Arrows flew at them as they ran for shelter away and the thunder bolt that lived within.

Ismael looked to the Monastery and pondered the thunder bolts he had heard.

The skies were clear. Perhaps Allah had intervened and struck the infidels dead. Smirking at the divine thought. Nicholas was unsure what to make of the foreign sound. From his vantage point could see a cloud of bellowing like a mushroom into the air. Whatever it was, was beyond his control. Looking down at Ismael's troops attempting to scale the walls.

"Conserve your arrows! Make every one count!" Nicholas calls out.

Sigmund appears by his side dressing himself making himself presentable for battle.

"Glad you can finally join us... We have visitors."

"I know." Sigmund holds out the arrow that had narrowly missed him.

"I hope the young lady is safe." He asked his son.

"Sister Ruth is no lady father."

"Christ! ... Have you no scruples my son?"

"Of course..." Sigmund speculates, "...But I fear Ismael wants them on a silver tray."

"If you drew your sword as often as you did your cock, Ismael would lay dead by now!" Claims His father.

"What was that strange noise?" Asked Sigmund deflecting his father's comments.

"I don't know... Came from the Monastery. Twice now... I fear it be a secret weapon of some kind..." Said Nicholas still perplexed unable to place it. "...Go around the men... Secure all windows... Allow nothing inside. Understood?"

"Yes father." Sigmund steps back.

Nicholas assessed the situation unfolding before him. It was nearing midday. Both sides had reserves ready to replace those that had taken a beating that morning. The day was passing and that was all that mattered for Nicholas. Keeping Ismael out and stalling his return.

Ismael appeared in no hurry to leave.

“We’ll see.” Said Nicholas to himself, inviting Ismael to stay a little longer.

Ismael returned to his tent to feast and to service one of his favorite wives.

His men had been given orders not to relent. Victory would be theirs’ over the Infidels that sacked his camp. Reports of the explosions had reached him. He had heard of this weapon, brought to his father’s country from the far-east.

How did the Infidels obtain this magic black powder? It was beyond him and he let the riddle slip from his mind. Now distracted by the youthful dutiful wife seducing his loins. Advisers turnabout and leave lest they witness the salacious act rapidly undressing itself before their eyes. All but one consul remains, undeterred by the carnal foreplay.

He was blind. His ears hearing everything his eyes could not.

“My Prince... I have seen a great defeat if we out stay out welcome... We have but days.” He quietly spoke in the direction of the grunts and giggles.

“You have seen? But you are blind... Did I not personally cut your eyes from their sockets myself?”

The consul’s eye sockets covered with black leather patches.

“You did most merciful Prince... For that I am grateful you spared my life.” The consul lied, bowing lowly.

“Say you can see?” Inquired Ismael.

“In my visions... In my mind I see these things.” The man begins to explain.

“Perhaps I should have cut off your head from your shoulders?” Warned Ismael, looking peculiarly at the man who could see with no eyes.

Noticing his words did not frighten the consul, Ismael continued.

“What did you see?” He asked.

“A betrayal... A death.” The Seer hesitant to say more.

“A betrayal? ... Say who and I will cut their heart from their breathing body!” Ismael exclaims.

“An infidel... You are saved, praise be to Allah!” Said the Seer bowing his head hoping a sword would tether it from his body and release him from the living death.

Grunting and giggling continue uninterrupted before Ismael groans a stuttering moan. Pushing his wife aside as though a discarded meal that had pleased him.

Reclining satisfied with his efforts.

“Another grandson for my father’s blood line.” Ismael muses to himself.

Turning to the Seer sitting on a cushion. His head still bowed as though a sleep.

“Have the Magi come to me... We need to speak...” Ismael clapped his hands twice sharply, “...A betrayal... An infidel.” Repeating the words, toying with them in his mind.

Three Magi enter the tent dressed in colorful robes and turbans. Pleased they had been granted an audience with the crown prince. Eager to warn him of their observations of the heavens.

“Sit, sit...” Ismael gestures his hands to the surrounding cushions. “... Tell me what the stars say.”

“You must leave before the blood moon rises. Lest you be trapped between the mountains and the Beasts... Every hour counts our Prince.” The Magi warns lowering his head fearing it would be cut from his body for speaking so boldly.

“I fear no Beast!” Ismael lied.

“The day draws out and with each hour we delay the march to the Danube.” A Magi relays.

“Don’t speak to me of retreat.” Ismael warns glaring down the Magi.

“The stars align... Unlike ever before... Something is afoot in the heavens...” The Magi continues. “...There will a betrayal of Father and Son... Victory will still be yours... But not by your sword.”

Ismael’s ear pricked up at the word... *Victory*.

“Perhaps one more day...” Responds Ismael looking out the opening of his tent to the castle within view.

His mind already playing out Sigmund’s next move.

Disturbed by the treacherous events that would transpire. Karma would play into Ismael’s hands. No good ever came of evil...

Chapter Thirty Four

Waves upon waves of Turks crashed against the Castle's walls.

Each wave being repelled, or covered in flaming oil to die an agonizing screaming death. Pungent black smoke spiraled over the walls and drifted back into the castle courtyard. The sun retired itself from the heavens. On the other horizon the moon's crested light spilled over the Carpathians.

Signaling a new sun in the heavens.

Raising higher and fuller. Men looked up and knew it was all a matter of days before it would run with blood. How much longer would their Prince pursue his vengeful retaliation for the insipid Hungarian?

A horn sounded cessation of fighting for the day. Relief came over the men. They would not die today. On mass wary warriors returned back to camp dragging the wounded with them. Leaving the dead and those at Hades door behind. Archer's picked off the stragglers. Nicholas watched the Turkish exodus.

Leaving their dead and wounded where they laid.

'Have they no morals? ...' He thought. *'...Lest spare them their misery.'*

"Wait for them to leave... Finish those that breathe and take what weapons they leave. I fear they will be back tomorrow... We will need all the arrows we can find... Theirs' or ours'."

"Yes my Lord." The man acknowledges the order and disappears from the chamber.

Sigmund had retired early for the evening. If only to rescue Ruth from Turks that may have ventured to his chamber. Finding her bound and asleep. An arrow sticking from the mattress. He muses the thought of her death. Making the detachment easier when it came time to make the Gypsy woman was his queen.

No quarrelsome loose ends to take care of he mused to himself.

The sound of horns drifted over the Monastery walls, signaling an end to the attack.

Archers waited for the Ismael's men to retreat before venturing outside the gates. Ned stood ready with a cloth ball in one hand. The lighter in the other.

The evening light dimmed as the sun sank further below the horizon. Allowing moonlight to faintly light the roadside of fallen bodies. Lifeless balding porcupines. Arrows projecting from them. Ned hears one moan. Rolling the man over sees life and fear flickering in his eyes. Ned showed him a kind face and the Turk grinned momentarily.

"Don't worry..." He consoled the wounded man. "...I'll fixed you up."

The man did not understand the words but he felt the compassion in his voice and sighed a relief.

"Over here! ..." Ned called out to an archer. "...This one lives, help me get him inside."

Without warning the archer drew his sword and plunged it into the man's throat. Causing the man to choke and spewed blood from his mouth. Eyes rolled in his head looking to Ned for words of comfort, now forsaken. As though he was looking past him. His hand reaching out to someone standing behind him.

In his final breath a smile came over his face. Paradise was at hand.

"What the fuck? ... I could have saved him!" Ned protests the sudden execution.

"Save him? ... He would have killed you the first chance he had." The archer spits on the man.

Hearing a distant groan goes in search of the living dead. Moments later the sudden thud of a heavy blade found its mark and dispatched the man to his maker. Ned looked about. There were just too many to be *saved*. Realizing they would turn on him once they recovered. He would not be part of the killing. Seeing two heads peering around corner of the gates.

"Hey! You two get inside!" Warned Ned.

Apparently that meant nothing to them, and they rushed over to him. Eager to see the dead Turk. His throat lacerated and bloody. Young eyes stared down at the rawness of death. Accepting it were a piece of candy.

"Go pick up the arrows, take them inside." Ned instructed.

Sebastian rushes into the woods as though he had seen something move. Kristina remains and reaches for Ned's hand.

"It's okay sweetie. Let's find some arrows okay?" Said Ned, to make a game of it to distract her from the violent image of death that laid about them.

Ned looks to the edge of the forest and sees Sebastian crouching beside a lone wolf as if it were a pet. As though he were trying to explain the wanton killing of man by fellow man.

Somehow the wolf could not understand.

Stacking the dead on a funeral pile, archers doused it with oil before being set alight. The charred bodies would be a ghastly memento for others that would return tomorrow. Gates closed leaving Sebastian outside watching the flames grow higher. An inferno of human flesh.

He was safe, he was among friends.

Nestling his head of blond hair into the warm thick grey coat of the wolf lying beside him. Feeling its warmth. Sensing its compassion. Eyes watched the dancing flames. The souls of the dead leaving their bodies. Spiraling towards the heavens in the sparks and cinders.

"Ashes to ashes." Recites Sebastian to the wolf listening intently on.

"Day one out of the way..." Reports Ned to those that had gathered in the refectory. "... Good job done by all..." He encourages them. "...Tomorrow they will try again. We just have to hold them out."

Looking about the frightened inmates, their faces betraying their fears. It would be a test of endurance and will. Blink and you die. Stand fast and you might, might just survive. The vision of the wounded man being stuck with the archer's blade came to mind.

Shaking the image of death from his mind. He came back to the room. He had seen death countless times in the ER. Just a different battlefield. A different time. Those in the room had seen it all before.

Perhaps it should be they who should be consoling him.

"Thank you Brother Ned." Spoke Mother Superior taking charge.

Ned slumped to his stool. Tired, the exhausting day catching up with him.

"Eat something and get some rest." Said Zahra pushing a bowl in front of him.

“Has anyone seen Friar Talbot or Sister Ruth? ...” Mother Superior asks. “...They seem to be missing.”

Although most of the blank faces had a good idea where Sister Ruth could be, Friar Talbot’s was a mystery. Heads shook about the room looking to each other as if they were to know.

“Let us pray he is safe at the Castle with our Lord Nicholas...” She comforts the group. “...Brother Ned if you could attend to the wounded in the infirmary.”

“Why wasn’t I informed earlier?” Ned is caught unaware of injured.

“You were needed out there...” Zahra tells him. “...The Sisters have been attending to them.”

Without another word Ned rushes to the infirmary to discover a dozen people laying on beds in varying states of delirium and wounds. Moving quickly about the triage of bodies, assesses the priority cases.

“Hot water! Clean cloths! A-Sap!” Ned calls out.

Peering over a body ruptured by an arrow that had been pulled out in haste. Only to make the wound worse than better.

“Leave the arrows in! Don’t pull them out! ...” He yells out the fatal implications. “... Light!”

A lamp is held over the patient.

“Thanks...” Said Ned collecting his calmness again. “...Sorry.”

Kristina appears beside him keen to assist.

“Ah... My favorite nurse. Can you get me my medical kit?” He asked.

She disappears momentarily and reappears holding out the black box.

“Thanks sweetie. Watch carefully... Magic.”

“Tech-nog-gee.” Counters Kristina.

“Yeah... But it’s still magic...” He smiles to her. “...Press down there hard to stop the bleeding while I stitch them up.”

Kristina watched on intently. Unperturbed by the blood and lacerations.

“What do you want to be when you grow up? A doctor, policeman, a fireman.” Ned asked curiously.

“A dancer.” Kristina declares with assurance.

“Oh course... A dancer. I should have guessed... You would make a beautiful dancer...” Said Ned, “...Maybe you could be a doctor in your spare time? Like me... You’re very good at this.”

“Maybe.” She lied.

“Where’s Sebastian?” He asked.

“Outside playing.”

“Outside?” Ned exclaims.

“He’s okay... He always plays outside... With his *friends*.”

“Oh...” Responds Ned wondering. “...His mother is okay with this?”

“He has no mother... Just his Aunt.” Kristina discloses. “...He’ll be back, later.”

Ned looks out into the darkness of the window. Contemplating how a five year old boy overcame the dangers others struggle to survive. Accepting there was something special about him. The Witch had taken a fondness to him.

‘You treat him as though he were kin.’ Ned recalls Lamia’s words, wondering what she meant by the comment.

“We’re finished up here. You’ll all live... Rest, and no clubbing for a week...” Jokes Ned to confused faces staring back at him. “...Good job Kristina. Couldn’t have done it without you... And you too Sisters.”

Picking her up carries Kristina to her mother.

“Nurse Nightingale here did a wonderful job in the infirmary. They’ll survive... Did we miss anybody?” He asked Kristina, who shakes her head.

“Wash up and get into bed...” Zahra winked to Ned. “...You too Kristina.”

“Tell me a story... Ma-ma tells me stories of the outside world.” Kristina implores Ned to stay hold his hand from leaving.

“What can I tell you that you have not already seen from the magic pictures? ... It’s a place filled with technology. It is a place of contradictions. A place of eternal peace and wars... Of charity and greed... A place of discovery and ignorance... But it is always a place of hope.” Ned caught him drifting off. Finding himself going beyond a child’s comprehension.

“And God?”

Sighing deeply he goes in search of the right words.

“It is a place where God visits those whose open their doors to Him.”

“My door will always be open to Him.” Kristina declares proudly.

“Mine too.” Confesses Ned.

Suddenly there is a brilliant flash of white light filling the room. He looks up at the window expecting thunder to follow, that never came.

“What was that?” Ned asked curiously.

“Father Michael *silly!*” Kristina giggles snuggling her pillow contently.

“Oh... Of course it was.” He responded looking to the window waiting for the thunder to sound.

Tucking the blanket about her, kisses her forehead.

“Sweet dreams sweetie.” He whispers.

Zahra stands at the door way watching on. Taking his hand leads her room and closes the door behind them. A ray of moonlight penetrates the portal window above. Faint distant voices seep through the window as Turks celebrated the day and remembered the fallen.

Those who would celebrate in paradise that evening. The lucky ones.

“You did well today.” Zahra thanks him.

“We all did well.” Said Ned pulling her close and feeling her warm body against his.

And they kissed.

Sigmund pulled Ruth close and felt the warmth of her body against his.

His mind racing with the day’s events. Racing with treacherous thoughts. If he were to make his move for the throne it would be soon. The opportunity had presented itself with Ismael at the gates. A diversion was required. It would need to appear legitimate, lest the Empire refute his claim. A deceitful scheme formulated in his mind and fell into place.

He could rely on the Turks to find the open window and his father. What they could not achieve, he would. Excited by the plan a rush of blood surged through his body and without warning impaled Ruth as she laid sleeping.

“You bastard!” She groans at the intrusion of her sleep.

“I know my lineage...” Sigmund refutes the accusation, “...Which is more than can be said for yours!”

Trusting an explanation point of us own.

Nicholas sat high on his throne.

Looking down as the faint white disc of moon light that had appeared on the floor before him from an overhead window. The stained glass enriching the projected disc. For a moment he thought he saw a faint red hue and looked up to the window. And dismissed the aberration.

A woman's squeal echoed through the halls. Sounding his son's retirement for the evening.

"Where does that boy find the strength? ... Lest he spend it killing an enemy at the castle gate than pounding at Sister Ruth's gate." Looking to the ceiling.

Ismael pulled one of his favorite wives close and felt the warmth of her body against his.

Unsure of her name. It was her beauty he remembered. A daughter of a passing caravan owner. Sold for thirty pieces of gold. Well worth the investment. Yet to bare him a son, she was young and would keep. Exhausted from erotic exertions he sighs and allows himself to drift to sleep.

He had lost *some* men. A few hundred expendable souls. Their places assured in paradise if they had died an honorable death. Rewarded with seventy two virgins. He had conceded to his consuls' wisdom, and tomorrow would launch a final major offensive. Time was against him if he wanted to avoid the Mist coming between him and the Danube. And the Beasts roamed in search of his royal blood. Slaves could be spared should it come to a sacrifice.

Victory would be handed to him by Sigmund's foul hand.

Talbot lay on the floor and felt the coldness of the stones against his body.

His back welted and bloody. Etched with pain and devotion. In the darkness of the cellar where not even the moon could reach he beseeched God to take him from the cursed realm. And deliver him to His eternal kingdom. His prayers went unanswered.

The dying candle was granted the wish, and the room fell dark...

Chapter Thirty Five

Dawn stained the barren landscape. Snubbing the smoldering charred bodies.

The smell of baked human flesh hung in the cold morning air and drifted mournfully over the Ottoman camp. Fallen souls calling comrades to arms, to join them. Nostrils twitched at the irritation. Eyes looked towards the stubborn fortress that refused to yield.

The cock refused to crow that morning. An ominous sign as to what would befall the day. Nicholas sounded the drums awakening his men from their lucid dreams of death. Impalement atop Ismael's spiked poles. Many staying awake, lest a Turk cut their throat while they slept. Wishing the Beast were among them to rescue them from the siege.

Three more days until the next blood moon. For once it could not come soon enough.

Sun pierced the portal window of the bed room. Awakening Ned as Zahra laid sleeping beside him. Wondering how she could sleep with another attack about to begin. A head of blonde hair pokes itself around the creaking door.

"Sebastian... I can *see* you." Ned quietly calls out.

There is a small giggle and he scampers in and jumps on the bed onto Ned. Causing Zahra to stir from her slumber pulling her from field of wild flowers. And her Mother. Telling her of events to come. The memory fades, and the dawn light rouses her senses to the world about her.

Leaving her mother and grandchild among the wild flowers and long wavering green grass.

"Go wake up Kristina Sebastian... Get." Zahra warns him.

Sebastian springs from the bed and gallops down the hallway.

"*Surrender!*" A voice cries out in the distance.

"*Never!*" Kristina bellows back.

Followed by raucous giggles and squeals as Kristina attempts to hold him down. Tickling him into a submission.

“*Never!*” He squeals.

“Those two...” Ned begins wondering how they would cope being apart.

“Yeah.” She grins.

“Another day in paradise.” He muses pulling himself from the bed stretching his limbs.

Muscles ached. His mind wary of what would be thrust at them that day. How they would repel an enemy intent on killing them all.

Perhaps his world was no different. Other than it being telecast live.

People inert to conflict, blind to do anything about it. More worried that their cup of coffee had gone up twenty cents than the loss of twenty thousand civilian lives half a world away.

Though the realm was growing on him, he knew he would have to leave. The Witch had told him so and he had no reason to doubt her. The thought of Lamia sent a chill over his body. A cold breeze wrapped itself around him.

“You think too much about her...” Zahra warns. “...Play nice Lamia.” Zahra calls out and the breeze falls away. “...I think she likes you... She rarely ventures this far.”

Ned looks about the room in search of her presence. Shaking the chill from his bones.

“She’s gone. Go get ready... You have a big day.”

Zahra pushes Ned from the cot.

Pushing aside his wives Ismael stood proudly naked with outstretched his limbs.

His manhood stirring with him. Feeling the wounded leg for strength and pain. Was satisfied he can raid a full day with it. Dutiful wives dressed him in long white robes. Securing his belts and sword. Scratching his beard. A favorite wife rubs oil into it. Another wife begins to weave three plaits from the long black course fibers. Fastening gold beads to the ends.

Leaving the shaded shelter of the tent Ismael is struck in the face with the direct light of the rising sun. Thick black eye brows pinched together. Turning about to deny its brutal assault. Making his way among his men he recited his objectives.

Threatening there would be no retreat lest pain of death. Or worse.

Many had witnessed the consequences of failure. A death at the hands of a Beast would be more merciful.

Climbing astride a large white mount Ismael rises his saber and orders the charge. Two thousand men ride as one. Hooves pound the turf signaling their imminent arrival to those in wait. Expecting no less punishment than the day before. Arrows greet their arrival and two dozen men fall to their premature deaths.

Nicholas watches on and spies Ismael atop a large white horse.

“There!” He yells to an archer to fire.

Taking aim the archer strains the limit of his bow. Finger tips short of bleeding. Bandaged from excessive use. Releasing the string the arrow flies swiftly. Nicholas watches its flight.

“Thud!” Into the turf but yards from Ismael.

Who looks up at where it could have come from? Spying a head peering from an upper tower. His sharp eyes making out the features.

“Nicholas!” He surmises gesturing a bow as to say you are welcome. But you missed.

The archer shakes his head back to his Lord.

“Too far my Lord.”

“Keep trying. If steps closer take him out.” Nichols orders.

“Yes my Lord.”

An itinerant arrows whistles past Nicholas. Seeing the Turk who had fired it being slain by a volley of arrows from his archers. Stepping away from the window dare another arrow find its mark?

Sigmund appears earlier than the day before.

“Glad you can join us today my son.” Nicholas greets his son.

“Wouldn’t miss *this* day for the world.” He said as though there was something special about it.

Distracted by battle, the inference passing over Nicholas.

As had he forgotten Sigmund’s treacherous words. He had more pressing matters than an impetuous son. The Turks knocking at his gates.

“Secure the doors and windows. Rotate the men. Keep them sharp... Understood?” Nicholas orders his son.

“Yes father... I have your back.” Sigmund lies.

Leaving his father to watch on from on high, standing back in the shadows. The Turks fall one by one. Exposed to his skillful archers arrows.

Watching a battering ram being pushed into place.

“They will never learn.” Nicholas chuckles to himself shaking his head in disbelief.

Signaling a man to prepare the oil it is moved into place to await the unfortunate souls to take their positions. Moments later screams sounded loudly, men covered with burning oil. Soon picked off by archers as they staggered about blindly in search of rescue. Other Turks ignoring the burning men, lest they fall foul of an archer’s arrow.

Shields raised over their heads, Turks continue to pound the castle gates. More oil is tipped over the top of them. Only to retreat again. Leaving the battering ram to burn. Thick black smoke clouding the road side. Hindering the visibility of the Turkish archers who fired blindly at voices and shouts sounding from within the walls.

Sigmund made his way around the castle.

Checking on stationed men who had drawn the long straw away from the flying arrows. Coming to a strategic far window at the base of a stairwell that lead up to the tower his father stood, begins to question the solitary guard.

“Is it secure?” He barks at the man.

“Yes my Lord.” The man answers assuredly.

“Check it again!” Sigmund barks at the man.

Turning his back on Sigmund long enough for him to draw his dagger and plunge it through a back into the man’s heart. A swift silent death and the man slumps to the floor. Lifting the man’s body Sigmund pushes him through the open window and it crashes to the ground below. Leaving it open for any Turk passing to find.

Seeing no witnesses, continues on his way to the other windows.

The monastery gates were being battered to hell.

Ned maneuvered his way to the gates. Hearing voices yelling and screaming as they were struck with arrows from above. An archer gestures the position of the Turks and he lofts a blackened cloth ball over the top. Moments later a huge explosion and more screams. Moments later, heads

at the castle turned in the direction of the explosion. A mushroom cloud rose high into the sky.

Fearing demons were afoot Turks scattered only to be cut down in the open.

“Pace yourself.” Ned told himself to reserve his arsenal of grenades.

Making his way along the wall to where another group of Turks were about to climb a ladder in a vain attempt to get over the top. Another grenade is sent flying. Yelps cried out at the smoking fuse. Too late to react, peppering them with pebbles and flash burns. The ladder splintered to pieces sending the men retreating to hide among the trees. To be greeted by waiting wolves. Running back onto the road, to be caught in no man’s land.

A volley of deadly arrows bring an early death.

As the assault assailed the front of the Monastery.

The Judas gate had been left unguarded. And Friar Geoffrey quietly tended to the destroyed vegetable patch. Fighting was a little beyond him. Killing less so. He needed to seek absolution every time he pulled out a weed. With his back to the gate. His mind occupied with tilling soil and intermittent explosions, singing a hymn that put his soul at ease.

Unaware of the encroaching Turks making their way through the gate.

Beneath the vines that covered the walls, three Turks had found entry through the small opening. Sabers drawn. Eyes in search of guards. Seeing but a lone monk tilling the garden. Unsure to make of the unprotected yard. With stealth a Turk draws a dagger and creeps up on Geoffrey. A shadow appears on the ground beside him.

“Sebastian... What have I told you? ... Aaah!” Geoffrey gasps painfully.

The hilt of a sword is cracked into the back of his head. Falling to his knees feebly crossing himself as though this were the end of his life on God’s earth. Seeing Father Michael shaking his head and smiling at him. Geoffrey smiles momentarily, as though his prayers were answered. And fell to the tilled soil.

“This way.” One Turks whispers to the others.

Creeping cautiously into the Monastery. Strange rooms awaited them. Shying away from wooden crosses that hung on the walls, lest they burn

themselves should they get too close. Distant voices echoed about the hallways. Ears listen intently as to how many.

Women.

“Down here.” A Turk spies a stair well.

The others follow. Perhaps treasure laid in weight for them. On reaching the cellar to discover an empty room. Beer barrels and sacks of grain. A Turk clashes the bags with his saber watching the grain spill over the floor. A wooden bucket with blackened cloth balls sit in the middle of the table. Picking one up the man sniffs it and screws his face up at the foul smelling object. Pushing the bucket over and throwing the ball against the wall.

Narrowly missing a nearby lamp.

A strange cracking noise sounds from a nearby room. They venture closer to investigate.

“This way...” A man encourages the other two to follow.

Drawn down a darkened hallway, they stand outside a solid wood door that appeared to be bolted from the inside. Pressing their ears against the door they could make out a whipping. A cry for salvation.

Someone was being flogged, possibly a captured Turk.

The men look at each other perplexed by the punishment being inflicted. A nod is given to one of the men to break the door open.

A large Turk rams the door suddenly with a heavy shoulder. It held fast. The whipping stopped.

“Who goes there?” A weak voice calls out.

Silence befell the two sides of the door.

One wanting the other side to answer. Another nod indicates more action. A Turk gives the door an almighty kick with his boot and the door breaks open.

Light penetrates the chamber. Rescuing the darkness from captivity. And it escapes unseen.

Air saturated with the smell of feces and urine. Percolating from a covered wooden bucket. Blinded by the sudden assault of sunlight Talbot stands all but naked before the Turks. A meager filthy cloth covering his filthy modest loins. His unkempt hair, a ragged beard of several days' growth, ribs heaving up and down in a feeble chest. Amused, the Turks

laugh at the diminutive figure. A stark contrast to the plump individual that had been dispensed within the garden.

Talbot's eyes slowly adjusted to the sudden invasion of light. Making out the two Turks sabers drawn and one with a bow drawn. Falling to his knees. Holds out a Bible as though salvation had arrived. Only to have an arrow strike it heavily and perpetrate through the other side.

The barred arrow head an inch from his face.

"Ehk!" He exclaimed and jumps back, eyes focused on the lethal tip.

"Take him with us..." A Turk orders the other two. "... For *Ismael*."

The only word Talbot could make out. Fearful eyes light up at the name.

One Turk stayed behind to look about for other wayward souls. Or treasure.

Creeping silently long empty halls. Staying in the shadows and slipping into doorways. His dagger drawn at the ready. Coming to a door partially open, peers in to see an old woman in pray on her knees.

The door sounds a creak as it slowly opens. Mother Superior looks up and to see the Turk lunging at her. The blade cutting across her. A Bible in her hands preventing it from striking deeper.

Screaming in panic and pain.

"The Lord forgive you!" She calls out hoping the man understood.

The words going unheeded and the man clashes again. Catching deep under her arm. Blood spurts out onto the floor. Raising his dagger for the fatal blow.

"Thud!"

Suddenly the man stands frozen, Death had caught him napping.

A heavy shafted bolt of a cross bow projecting from his skull. Unsure if he was dead, the man falls to the floor. The corpse shakes violently before laying still.

An archer stands in the doorway, his sword now drawn.

Zahra and Ned rush in to find Mother Superior in the infirmary nursing deep gashes and bleeding profusely.

Nothing seemed to hold back the bleeding.

"It's an artery." He exclaims.

“Nay touch me Ouster!” Mother Superior protests his intrusion.

She had found a way to die and Ned was not going to prevent her a release from the curse.

“If we don’t stop it you’ll bleed to death.” He warns knowingly.

“Nay you touch me... This is God’s will! ... Leave me be!” Warning him a final time.

“Okay... If that’s what you want...” Stepping back quietly, content for her to have her way.

“But Aunt? ...” Zahra challenges her, “... Ned you can’t let her die?”

“I have made my peace with God...” Speaking weakly, her eyes struggling to remain open.

Ned watched on indifferent to her decision to die. And waited for her to slowly pass out.

“Just as well...” Said Ned. “...There’s no anesthetic.”

“No what?” Zahra asks.

“Do you see anywhere where it says ... ‘*Do Not Resuscitate*’?” He asked searching for the medical citation.

“No... Why?” She responds confused.

“That’s good enough for me... Kristina! ... Medical kit please! ... We need to patch up your great Aunt!”

Examined the lacerations.

Applying pressure to the artery to stop the bleeding. Humming a tune that had been in his head all day. And waited patiently for Kristina to appear.

“What did you mean she had made her peace with God? ... It’s just a *scratch*.” Dismissed Ned.

“She’ll live?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen a lot worse. So... What is she? ... Crips? Bloods?”

“Catholic.” Responds Zahra.

“Hmm...They’re big.” Noting the gang affiliation.

Looking over to see Geoffrey nursing a sore head.

“As for you big guy... You sure you chose the right profession? ... You seem to get into a lot of fights since I’ve arrived...” Wondering how Geoffrey was always on the receiving end of the blows. “...Perhaps a few self-defense classes for you.”

Sister Rebekah holds Brother Geoffrey's hand and frets over him.
Sister Jillian offering her a wooden cup of fortified wine.
Taking a mouthful for her own frail nerves...

Chapter Thirty Six

Two prowling Turks found the body of the guard laying on the ground.

Stabbed in the back. Looking up at the open window. Perhaps a trap. And they wondered if others were inside. It was too good an opportunity to pass on. Scaling the wall, pulling themselves inside, discover the patch of blood on the floor beneath the window and speculated what could have transpired.

Hearing voices above them, draw their sabers and crept cautiously up a darkened stairwell, coming to closed door. A voice sounded within, as though calling out orders. And waited for other voices to respond, but none came.

Whoever was in there, was alone.

This would be a great prize for Ismael. Whispering their intentions to rush in and surprise the man.

Suddenly the door burst open and Nicholas is confronted by the two shabby Turks wielding sabers. Flashing them in circular motions, their intent clearly evident. Nicholas draws his sword and a Turk lunges at him only to be deflected at the last moment.

The other clashes at him and is met with a swift lunge to his belly. Nicholas pulls the sword out. Twisting it as he did so to maximize the infliction. The man falls to his knees before toppling over holding his stomach in pain.

Stepping over his crippled comrade and the remaining Turk clashes out wildly. Again and again and again and again. Nicholas responds to the amateur swordsmanship. Playing with him with every stroke. Tiring the Turk more so than he. Having had enough of the foolery Nicholas detaches the man's head from his body in a single blow and it topples to the stone floor. Blood erupting from the man's decapitated neck.

Standing momentarily before it too fell collapsing to the floor.

Sigmund appears at the door, a little too late to join the fight.

“Glad you can join us my son.” Nicholas jests returning his sword to its sleeve.

Turning his back on his son to continue his observation of the fight outside.

“Forgive me father.” Sigmund seeks absolution.

“You have nothing to be forgiven for my son.”

“But I have father... I have...” Responds Sigmund plunging his dagger into his father’s back finding his heart.

Incapable, or unwilling to face his treacherous son, Nicholas speaks the only words he found appropriate.

“Thank you.” Responds Nicholas meekly in his dying last words.

As though to thank him for ending his eternal curse. With those salient words his body fell to its knees and then to the ground.

His soul long since taken flight.

“Guards! Guards! ... The King is dead! ... The two heathens who did this lay dead at my feet!” Sigmund cries out from the turret opening to the men below.

Holding up the head of one of the Turks to cement his alibi.

Tosses the severed head through the opening. Striking the stone ground below with force. A bone cracking thud sounds as it bounced and rolled about. A guard kicks the head to another man. Picking it up by its long bloody hair swings it wildly. Throwing it over the wall among Turks who scatter at its arrival.

“Kill them all! ... Make them pay for the death of my father, the King!” Sigmund riles his men to a frenzy.

Without looking back with guilt, Sigmund steps over his father’s fallen body, and returns to the open window through which the Turks had entered. Closes it securely and posts another man to stand watch. The guard looks down at the patch of blood on the floor and then to Sigmund. He knew the man that had been given the watch. And could only assume he was now out the window.

A place he feared to stick his head to look.

It had been a good day for Sigmund.

His plan had worked and Ismael was still locked out. As heir apparent, he was now King. No one stood in his way. Henceforth, his word would be law. And he could choose whoever for a wife. Reclining on his father's throne felt the contours and hardness of the great seat.

It felt, uncomfortable.

It reminded him of an ill-fitting boot. He would have a new throne made, for him and his queen, Zahra. The large wolf-hound paced back and forth frantically for his Master's return. Whimpering as though it knew something was amiss.

It could smell the blood of his master on Sigmund's dagger.

"Get over it... I'm your new master now..." He tells the dog. "...Now get!"

Kicking the dog. The dog scampers from the room with its tail between its legs.

The day drew to another impasse and the sun lowered on the horizon.

Remnant black smoke smoldered from cremated bodies and hung on the air as the horns sounded to retreat to camp. Men went about clearing the Ottoman dead. Piling those upon the first. Flames licked the flesh of the dead, flaring one feed the other. The stale stench of death drifted high into the heavens and over the Turkish camp.

Nicholas' body lay in State at in the Chapel awaiting a funeral. Befitting a King.

Sigmund would spare no expense to aggrandize the sin. The bigger the lie, the more the people will believe his version of events.

News of Nicholas' death had reached Ismael as quickly as the smoke of the dead had.

The Seer's words coming true. The *betrayal*.

Ismael rocked gently in thought. Perhaps he should put his pride to one side and listen to his consuls. As his wise victorious fathers did. He had not become *Sultan Mehmed the Conquer* without taking counsel.

Ismael nodded his head in veneration.

'*What son could kill his own father?*' Unable to reconcile the infidelity.

His father was a great man. He would die when Allah ordained it and not beforehand. Ismael would impale himself on an enemy's sword if so asked.

Greatness is earned, not taken.

To be a great leader, one needed a great teacher. A great father. Sigmund now had none.

He would amount to nothing.

Ismael wanted no more to do with Sigmund. The man was evil. He had slept with the devil.

Astrologers had warned him of strange events taking place.

Unheard of before. Planets were aligning. Not seen for five hundred years. There was something greater afoot. Destiny had taken the reins from him. Conceding the divine wisdom of the stars Ismael gave the order.

"We leave tonight!" He calls out clapping his hands to make it so.

And looks up at the moon rising in the East. The dark crest threatening to dissolve and leave him exposed.

"What of the slaves and whores?" A Janissary asks.

"Leave them for the Beasts lest it slows them down."

"And the Infidel?"

"What Infidel? ..." Unaware of the capture. "...Bring him to me."

Ismael grins, clapping his hands for the man to leave.

Talbot is dragged before Ismael.

His shaved bald spot giving him away as a monk of a Christian Order. Ismael had seen his kind before. They were not welcome his father's kingdom.

"You bring me this pathetic leper?" Ismael looks over Talbot hunched over standing filthy in a loin cloth.

"He is pious... Look at his back."

Poking Talbot to turn about for the Prince. The man holds up an arrow with the bible impaled on it. Holding it out as though he were afraid to touch it. Ismael looks on with disgust at the bloody lashing of Talbot's back. Festering with maggots.

"Who did this to him?" Ismael looks about his men his eyes searching for the man.

“He did.” The guard insists indicating Talbot, and lowering his eyes lest he to incur his master’s glare.

“Hmm...”

Ismael looks at the scoured Talbot as the Pharisees had looked upon Christ with disgust and perversion assessing his will to live. Or to die for his beliefs.

“If it’s pain you like... Perhaps it is pain you shall have.” Ismael begins. “...Take him with us... We will deal with him at the border... We have no time for it now.”

The gibberish of Turkish words flowed over Talbot. Perhaps God had listened and was about to answer his prayers.

The order is passed about the returning men to break camp.

Many were wary, relieved to be leaving the forsaken land of the Infidel. Pulling up tents and packing possessions. Within the hour they were on a slow march through the night and every hour counted if they were to make it back to the Danube before the blood moon brought out creatures of the Mist. Eyes search within the passing darkening forest. Then back to the silent moon looking down upon them.

Watching their every move, taunting them with its celestial presence.

On passing the Monastery, Ismael wonders why his men had not taken the meager defense. Seeing the ground peppered with blackened scorch marks. He had seen these before. The west was catching up to the east. It was only a matter of time when warfare would be fought with more than just swords and arrows. But from great distances.

It was cowardly.

Denying men courage. To look into the eyes of those they were about to kill. Or be killed.

“I’ll be back.” Ismael speaks to the Monastery before letting it pass from view.

The belfry slipping beneath the trees. Its cross like a hand waving farewell. Signaling its domination and victory over the uninvited visitors in this century, and the centuries to come.

Ned watched the Turks leave in the fading light.

Less than that had arrived. Ismael had been dealt a heavy blow, and would again if he stayed. Among them a bony half-naked man grubby and bound atop a horse. His head covered with a sack. Appearing to have been flogged, a back scarred and bloody. Perhaps a slave scoured for some transgression. Beyond Ned's reach, the man slipped from view to face his own fate and destiny, as he would face his.

He had survived the great Ottoman army. Brother Geoffrey lay injured. Brother Talbot and Sister Ruth were missing. Mother Superior was lucky to have survived. And like Ismael, he had deduced that Nichols had fallen foul at the hands of a treacherous son. Knowing the lengths Sigmund would go to siege power. Knowing he would stop at nothing to have Zahra. His words at the stream still ringing in Ned's ears.

There was little time to lose if they wanted to distance themselves from Sigmund's closing grip. Trying to recall the Witch's words. Now lost in the mist of time, as if it were a forgotten dream.

'Lest ye know the better.' A voice whispers on a passing breeze.

Ned looks about for the source. Confused as ever as to what to do next.

"Follow your instinct Ned." He tells himself sighing.

Zahra and Mother Superior appear beside him at the window overlooking the departing Turkish soldiers.

"Hey what are you doing out of bed?" Seeing Mother Superior standing beside Zahra glaring out the window watching Ismael leave.

"What did I say about healing me Ouster?" Mother Superior asked seething.

"Take that up with the Medical Review Board if you have a complaint." Ned suggests.

The process was lost on Mother Superior who continued to glare at him with as much disgust as she had Ismael and his troops.

"Aunt... He saved your life." Implores Zahra.

"Exactly!" Protested Mother Superior.

"Nicholas is dead and Sigmund is King... He will come and claims what he thinks is his." Fears Zahra.

"We held out the Turks we can hold out Sigmund." Said Ned.

"But for how long?" Asked Zahra.

"Until the Mist... That's all the time we need." Ned postulates.

“No he won’t...” Mother Superior coldly interjects the discussion.

“He won’t?” Asked Ned confused.

“He won’t lay siege to this Monastery if he knows what’s good for him.”

“Why not? ... He’s now King...” Said Ned looking to Mother Superior.
“...He can do what he likes... can’t he?”

“Somehow I feel he values the power of the crown more than the power of his cock.”

Ned is surprised by Mother Superior’s choice of words.

“Rome would not tolerate an invasion of Catholic ground. And would excommunicate him in a heartbeat if he ever tried. His Kingdom would be torn from him... And I cannot see Sigmund wanting to crawl to Rome to kiss the Holy Ring.”

A smudge smile of contentment comes over her face.

“For now, inside these walls you are safe... Outside is another matter.” She advises.

“We’ll face that when the time comes...” Said Ned. “...Now I need you to get back to bed.”

Mother Superior frowns at Ned wanting to excommunicate him for his transgression. Then sighed heavily and conceded that if God wanted her dead she would be. Requiring her presence on this earth a little longer.

Reluctantly, with Zahra’s help, she returns to her quarters.

Ruth lays back on the bed.

A fine silk night dress over her slender frame. Sigmund enters the chamber and undresses before her. About to take his frustrations out on her loins.

“Now you are King... I will be your Queen.” Ruth declares her claim to the throne.

“Perhaps...” Responds Sigmund, his mind racing with vexing thoughts of Zahra.

“Perhaps? ...What does that mean?” Contested Ruth pushing Sigmund away.

Relenting to her objection he rolls over. It was time to have... *That talk.*

“You want that Roma bitch don’t you? ... I’ve seen the way you look at her.” Ruth begins to quarrel.

“What of it? I can have whoever I chose... I am King.” He declares wantonly.

“She doesn’t want you.”

“Maybe not now... She’ll change... I can break her in... She will *come* to love me in time.”

“You think with your cock. Nay your brain... Tis the trouble with men these days... Will you ever learn?”

Sigmund sighs. Perhaps he had not thought it out fully. Was it lust, or love? Was there a difference he wondered? Perhaps not.

“Ask yourself my Lord... Who would push back harder?” Ruth postulates, opening her silk robe to reveal a tantalizing body.

“Hmm...” Sigmund’s cock conceded to logic.

“You would tire of her and her failure to satisfy you... Unlike I.”

“You make a good point... May I sample the produce? ... My Lady?”

“My Lady? I like the sound of that... My Lord...” Pulling the night dress over her head. “... Imagine me as her... Take me as you would take her...” Ruth stirs Sigmund’s manhood to life.

Sigmund is overcome with passion and mounts the flirtatious filly beneath him.

His cock had made a decision. He could have Zahra anytime he chose without prosecution. She would make a lousy bed-maid.

Less so queen.

“Take a bite of her anytime my Lord... But nay in this bed.” Ruth sweetens the offer.

Only to stir Sigmund to an uncontrollable shuttering climax.

“You bitch... My Lady.” Sigmund cried out.

“You’re welcome... My Lord.”...

Chapter Thirty Seven

A new day dawned and crept silently over the land as though not to wake the smoldering dead.

Sigmund stretched wary limbs, awoken by a shaft of light. Drained by his new found queen. Now laying starfish across the large bed. Zahra would be no substitute, surrendering the wanton desire. He could have her anytime. There was only thing he desired more than the crown.

The Heart.

And he knew how to obtain it. Having formulated a cunning plan.

“Bring me the boy!” Sigmund shouts to the man standing outside the door.

Moments later the man returns holding out a squealing wriggling blond headed creature by the ankles. Thrashing rabidly about as though it could bite him at any moment.

“Hmm... He’ll do....” Sigmund surmises. “...Bring him with us.”

Turning to the sleeping jezebel kicks the bed.

“Get dressed... You’re coming with me.” Sigmund advises awakening Ruth from a dream.

“Where we going?” Rubbing eyes of the mid-morning light.

“To the Monastery.”

“Oh... Do I have to?” Not wishing to face Mother Superior.

“It’s time you to divorce your Christ.” He informed her of the proceedings.

Four horses canter up to the gates of the Monastery.

A sack hangs over the hind quarters of the rear rider. The large wolf hound trots alongside. Guarding the precious cargo. A rider bangs the shaft of his spear loudly against the heavy pitted gate. Hesitantly they open and Mother Superior stands supported by Zahra at her side. Kristina clutched her mother’s leg.

Sebastian was no-where to be seen.

Mother Superior blocks Sigmund's entrance lest he finds a foothold. Ned stands in the background. A cloth ball at the ready should Sigmund try something on.

"Am I not welcome to enter?" Sigmund asked.

"You are always welcome My Lord... Lest you know your place." Warns Mother Superior.

Seeing Ruth side-saddle atop a horse beside Sigmund. Dressed in a long rich gown.

"Sister Ruth. Where is your habit? ... Why does ye dress so?" Asked Mother Superior eyeing her stringently. Quickly realizing where her allegiances now laid.

More so whose bed she now laid.

"Tis Lady Ruth now Mother Superior... If you so mind." Ruth talks down to her.

"You are no lady... Have ye forgotten your vows?"

"Watch who ye speak old woman. I am betrothed to our Lord now..." She informs Mother Superior. "... I am to be Queen."

"Lest you forget your vows to Christ." She begins to berate Ruth.

"As for Christ... I think we should start seeing other people... It not Him... Tis me..." Ruth ends of the relationship.

"Enough woman talk! ..." Sigmund breaches the impasse. "...Ruth has chosen between lovers and the better man won."

"Watch ye tongue lest Rome hears you speak ill of Christ our Lord and Savior." Mother Superior glares at Sigmund to remind him his tenure would be temporary if he were to cross Rome's tolerance.

The warning stunned Sigmund momentarily, then he recalled the purpose of his visit.

"Ah yes... The Heart... I required it." States Sigmund coldly looking down at Zahra.

"I don't know where it is." She lies.

"Perhaps this might remind you remember where it is."

Sigmund gestures for the last rider to step forward. A large guard appears with a sack and opens it to hold Sebastian out by the ankles. Wiggling and squealing frantically trying to escape the grasp. Snapping his teeth and snarling wildly.

“Sebastian!” Zahra cries out to him.

Sigmund draws his sword and holds the blade to the boy’s throat. For a moment Sebastian falls still. And Zahra detects a sly grin. The dog now licking his face causing him to giggle hysterically.

“Bring me the heart before the fall of the Mist in two days and I’ll set the boy free.” He lied.

“That’s not enough time.” Zahra lied.

“Then make it enough time...” Sigmund warned. “...Enough of these games. Two days... Or the boy dies... I will have him hung as a theft from the castle walls.” Sigmund threatened, turning his horse about without further discussion.

Sebastian resumed a fit of hilarious gyrations. Teeth snapping and snarling like a mad dog. Zahra grinned and almost chuckled at the sight. Ruth glared down at Mother Superior. Before turning her back on the Monastery one last time.

Ned steps forward. Juggling a cloth ball in his hand ready to use it.

“No...” Zahra restrains him. “...Save them.”

“We can’t give him the heart... The Witch said...” Ned begins to say.

“I know what the Witch said...” Responds Zahra. “...I have an idea... We wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what?”

“Sebastian.” She grins to herself.

“Sebastian? Sigmund has prisoner.”

“Ha! ... Since when as anyone held Sebastian in captive?” Hoping she had read his mind.

“When do we leave?” Asked Ned unsure of the anything anymore.

“In two days... On Sebastian’s return. Sigmund won’t be far behind once he discovers his *hostage* has escaped.”

“Two days? The mist will be upon us!”

“It will also be upon Sigmund.” She reminds Ned.

“We’ll be cutting it fine. ... What of the Beasts?”

“You have the cloth balls?”

“Enough.”

“Good... We’ll need them.” Said Zahra calmly as though she had a plan.

A rush of cold air pushed Ned inside the gates as though to hurry up.

“I think she likes you.” Zahra jokes.

“I wish she wouldn’t.” He said looking about for Lamia.

For two days Sigmund laid on the bed and allowed Ruth to satisfy his every need.

Imaging Zahra when he could, and others when he could not. Men patched the damaged castle and prepared for the Mist. Sigmund was certain the Heart would be delivered.

The boy being watched over by a guard and a large grey wolf-hound. He was not going anywhere, and would hang the boy for amusement. And beside him the Ouster that had caused trouble since his arrival.

The dark thoughts pleased him as he watched the setting sun. Tomorrow the Heart would be his. And with it the power it the mythical power possessed. If it governed the Mist, it would govern his emerging Empire. Why his father had been so soft was beyond him.

Now that he was King, things would be different. Who needed alliances when he had the heart? Rome would be his feet and Ismael would come crawling to kiss his Holy Ring. Visions of grandeur filled Sigmund’s deluded mind. Ruth wondered what he was grinning about, only to think that she had pleased him.

Ismael’s wary caravan of warriors had made it to the banks of the Danube to set camp.

Pitching pointed tents to the heavens. Lighting bonfires to celebrate their arrival and perceived victory. And awaited for ferry boats that would take them to the other side. Beyond the reach of the Beasts.

Reclining comfortably on a large cushion, Ismael is fanned by favorite wives. Talbot was dragged bent and buckled before him. Supported by two hefty guard lest he fall. The small sack removed from over his head and he gasped for the taste of fresh air. Un-feed for two days. Good food would not be wasted on the dead. His back marked with black scabs and white maggots.

Eyes stared into space. Dazed as to where he found himself.

Ismael examined the peculiar infidel hunched before him. Or what was left of the man. If it were a man beneath its loin cloth. To be peaked at by vultures. Leaving nothing but bones. To bleach and crumble in the summer

sun. His life of prayer and devotion had amounted to this. To die a horrible death at the hands of his enemy.

“You choose the wrong path my friend.” Ismael advises Talbot in hindsight.

Ismael peers into Talbot’s glazed eyes for life. For something worth killing. Otherwise, where would be the fun?

Talbot blinked so as to not deny Ismael his wish.

“Wakey, wakey Monk! ... It’s time to die!” Clapping hands sharply to slap Talbot from his delirium.

Talbot did not respond. His mind had long since left him. Madness had seeped through the cracks, supplanting the sanity that once thrived. Muttering dyslexic religious scripture. Ismael made out faint words between the giggles.

“Why does he laugh so? ...” Ismael asked of a man holding him up. “... Is he dim-witted?”

Unable to answer the man shrugs his shoulders. Ismael gestures for the men to take him outside and get it over with.

“Save the world this fool another day.” He tells his men.

Talbot is dragged out. Feet scrapping the earth, legs incapable of holding himself upright. And is taken to a place beside the river for his execution.

Sometime later Ismael appears before the men seeing the Infidel still alive.

Expecting him to see suspended atop a long stake, long dead.

“What is the matter? ... What takes you?” Ismael asked annoyed.

“His asshole is tighter than a Jew's purse!” A man protests.

“Then cut him a new one!” Orders Ismael reaching for his dagger and thrusting the blade deep into Talbot’s anus.

Immediately followed by howls of excruciating pain from Talbot pulled back from the gates of Hades. Awakening from beneath the starvation and sleep deprivation.

“Thank you My Lord... I am not worthy.” Talbot cries out rejoicing the suffering.

“Say this man enjoy this?” Asked Ismael looking peculiarly into the eyes of the bald headed Infidel.

The man shrugs his shoulders again, unsure what make of Talbot's words. Perhaps he had gone mad. Perhaps he was nothing more than a misfortunate fool dressed as a monk.

Either way he was soon to be dead to meet his maker, to discover the one true God.

"If he loves pain so much let's not disappoint him..." Orders Ismael keenly watching on. "...If only my own men were so eager... I would have conquered Rome by now."

Men grip the long spiked pole. Spiting on the tip to lubricate it. Before thrusting it into gapping bleeding wound. Talbot screamed Hail Marys' between hollering screams of pain. Contorting against the agony burning within him.

Panting heavily as the lethal intrusion penetrated deeper into his body. Feeling every inch moving up through him. Retching a gut wrenching moan as the spike perpetrated a lung. Coughing and spluttering blood and tissue like a red bubbling mud-pool.

Eyes rolling about their sockets.

"Give us a hand." A man calls out to two men to help push harder and deeper.

Stretching and tearing the bloody incision wider as the rod thickened. Successive shoves drives the stake deeper. Puncturing and rupturing internal organs. Holy acclamations turn to terrified howls and blood curdling screams. Belching putrid vomit mixed with blood between the gagged breaths. The tip eventually protruding through the side of his neck.

Every gasping shallow painful breath his last.

Turks look up from their meals and smile then resume eating content the only good Infidel was a dead Infidel. Laughter echoed about the camp fires.

One of the men looks at Talbot laying impaled on a long stake. Thinking, something was missing.

"I have an idea." He suggests to another.

Taking a shorter rod lays it across the Infidel's shoulders. Binding the hands to each end. Having him appear crucified.

"Befitting your Christ!" The man tells Talbot in Turk, laughing at the ridiculous sight.

The words had no meaning to Talbot. Men struggled to stand the pole upright into a bore to support it. Falling into the hole with an abrupt jolt. Causing the stake to stab deeper into Talbot who cries out in ecstasy and pain. Rejoicing the name of the Lord. Salvation at hand.

With life draining from his body. Death could not come quick enough for those watching on. Each breath labored. Blood choked lungs gagged. Twitching and coughing blood over the men below who laughed and jeered at his torment.

“Does your God forsake you Christian man? ... Where is he to save you? ... It’s not too late to convert.” A muezzin speaks in foreign tongue offering a paradise beyond this world.

With eyes rolling in his head towards the heavens, Talbot sees the setting sun on the horizon.

‘Tonight I will be in heaven. With Christ.’ The divine thought comes to his dying mind, a smile forming over his face at the thought.

“Forgive me Lord. I am not worthy of this life... Take me!” Talbot beseeches an unseen God with a final wheezing breath.

“Praise to Allah will this man ever die? ...” Ismael spits on the ground. “...Someone put this fool out of *my* misery!” Ismael orders loudly.

Archers take up their bows.

Suddenly an arrow strikes Talbot in the open mouth. A blood covered tip protrudes from the back of his skull. If not to be outdone another archer fires a shaft into his mouth. Then another. Gagging for life. Talbot’s head finally slumps and falls silent.

An eternal peace over him, his prayers, and others finally answered.

Ismael walks away satisfied he has done Allah’s Will. Leaving the Infidel hanging on high as a warning for those who venture too close to the Ottoman border. Before taking his place in a boat that would ferry him across the river. Slaves rowed in unison as whips cracked across their backs. A caravan awaited him. To return him to his father. Safe from the Beasts that would roam the land of Transylvania.

The land of Vlad Tepes.

Looking to the ominous rising red orb, then below to the distant Carpathians. Imagining the terror that was about to be unleashed upon

them. Nicholas lay dead. Any plans of a truce buried with him. Why did Sigmund have to interfere with his father's plans?

Leaving the forsaken cursed land behind, clapped his hands sharply to initiate his journey home.

The caravan moved forward at a leisurely pace. Camel humps swayed side to side in rhythm with their large flat steps stirring up the dusty road.

A favorite wife swayed side to side stroking Ismael's swelling pride...

Chapter Thirty Eight

“Watch the boy! ... If he moves... Kill him!” Snaps Sigmund at the guard.

“Yes my Lord... With pleasure.” The heavily set guard responds looking down at the scrawny lad sitting quietly beside the grey wolf-hound looking back up at him.

The guard smirks with the thought impaling him on the tip of the pike. Unsure what to make of the relationship he had with the fearful dog. Unsure if the hound was watching the boy, or watching him. Something told him, something was not right. His pike the only assurance that he was in charge.

Having snoozed much of the day against the hound’s Sebastian waited for the sun to lower in the afternoon sky. In a few hours the mist would be rolling silently down the mountain and no one would be venturing out in the first blood moon.

Sensing it was time to leave. Sebastian stands and yawns and stretches his wee limbs. Almost squeaking as he did so, like rusty joints. Brushing away the dust from his patched pants.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Grumbles the guard angrily watching the boy’s sudden movements after two days on inactivity.

“Home.” Responded Sebastian, having tired of the game.

The guard bellows a laugh and reaches for his pike. Then looks at Sebastian with intent of using it.

Sebastian looks at the dog.

The dog looks at Sebastian.

The dog looks at the guard.

The dog snarls...

From the Monastery gates Ned could see an aberration through the raising dust of road.

“Is that who I think it is?” He asked, his mind struggling to believe what his eyes were telling him.

“Hmm... He’s late... We better get going soon.” Confirmed Zahra. “... Sigmund won’t be far behind.”

Sebastian squealed wildly clinging to the shaggy grey coat of loose skin of the large Hound galloping at speed down the earthen road. Pulling up just before the gates, slides off and pressed his head against the dog before it dashed inside the gates.

Frightening the approaching Geoffrey as it rushed towards him.

“You done good Sebastian... But how did you know?” Ned was left wondering.

“The Witch!” He giggled and ran off in search of Kristina.

“Of course... the Witch.” Said Ned to himself.

Ned looks about as if the Witch was watching him. Closes the gates behind him. Pushing the heavy wooden beam in place. Slamming thick metal bolts for added assurance.

“Where’s the boy?” Yells Sigmund at the man.

“He left... With the dog.” The savaged man answered.

Holding his arm, groin and neck. Punctured with teeth marks. Blood seeped between fingers.

“What do you mean he left *with* the dog? ...” Sigmund asked confused and sighed, “...At least we know where to find him... Get my horse!”

“But we don’t have time my Lord. The Mist will be upon us within the hour! We won’t make it back in time.”

“Damn the Mist! Get my horse ready!” Sigmund warns the man to move.

Riders rode like the demons to the Monastery.

Peering over their shoulders towards to the ever darkening woods. Faint wisps of mist beginning to emerge from within. Sigmund lead the way on his white charge. Men struggled to keep up to the larger horse. The sun suspended above western horizon, as though to keep the celestial conundrum in balance. A glowing red moon suspended above eastern horizon.

A lone wolf howled long and deep. Mournfully, as though it were to be its last. Sensing an anomaly in the celestial array of glittering stars above it.

Mounts breathed heavily as they were pulled up before the Monastery gates.

Agitated by hard riding, they fidgeted as they stood. A rider bangs his heavy pike shaft against the wooden gates. But to no response. He bangs again, louder.

The small hatch opens and a tubby bandaged head peers through.

“What do you want?” Asked Brother Geoffrey eyeing those present.

“The return of the boy... The theft!” Calls out Sigmund.

“The boy is not here...” Geoffrey responds, “...You can see for yourself.” Two fingers crossed behind his back.

Geoffrey steps back and allows the man a view of the yard. A large grey wolf hound looks up sniffing the air and growls lowly. Sensing a familiar scent at the gates. It stands and slowly approaches, growling audibly under its breath.

“No, no ... That’s okay.” The man cowers back from the opening.

“The boy is here!” Sigmund calls out refuting the claim.

Geoffrey remained silent.

“Where are they?” Sigmund asked curiously.

“I have no idea.” Geoffrey lied again, hoping Sebastian was not about to squeal involuntarily beside him.

Sigmund looks towards the woods and then to the sky. Time was running out.

They were on the move, and they were going for the Heart. But where? Thoughts crisscrossed his anguished mind, then he had an epiphany.

“The Witch! ...” He deduces, “...The Witch!”

Just then a series of Beastly howls echoed from within the woods. Looking to the glowing red moon ascending higher above the distant Carpathians. Pulls hard back on the reins, he turns his mount about.

“Back to the Castle! They be on foot...” Sigmund thinks aloud looking to darkening forest “...They won’t make ground tonight in *this*... *We* need more men if we are face the Beasts.”

“Face the Beasts... But my Lord, you can’t be serious of going after them... In there?” A rider spoke in haste.”

“You will go where I tell you to go! ... We don’t have much time... They have a head start on us... Find them and we find the Heart!”

Sigmund declared his simple plan.

Kicking heels into the flank of his mount galloped off. Leaving his men in his wake.

“They’re gone.” Said Geoffrey watching Sigmund and his men ride over the rise. Billowing cloud of dust and faded into the twilight of dusk.

Looking to the heavens, stars appeared in the twilight sky. Growing ever larger and brighter than usual.

“We don’t have much if we want to get ahead of Sigmund and his men.” Warns Zahra with a leather satchel bag over her shoulder looking to the heavens as to gauge the amount of daylight left.

“What you make of that?” Asked Ned, unsure of the cosmic anomaly.

“I’ve never seen it before...” Confused by the unusual appearance. “... It’s not right... God is not happy.” Geoffrey crossed himself at the site.

“What of Sebastian? We can’t leave him here... Sigmund would hang him the first chance he gets.” Asked Ned concerned for Sebastian’s safety.

“He’s coming with us.” She said.

“You said he can’t make it through the mist.”

“We can leave him with the Witch... Until he is old enough to make it on his own.” She lied.

Ned looks down at Sebastian looking up at him.

Wondering what was to become of him. Ned picks him up. The nearest he had to a son. The nearest Sebastian to having a father. If only he could take Sebastian with him, adopt him and show him the world.

But was the world ready for him?

Staring into his pale blue eyes, as though they spanned the centuries, there something mystical about him. Just as he had felt when he tried to unravel Father Michael, a force was blocking him.

“You saved my life Sebastian... And for that I am indebted to you... You are a very, very special boy...” Ned looks at him. “...The Witch likes you okay... You’re *kin* remember... Don’t forget that...” Ned recalls. “... Shame I can’t take you back and fix that squeal.” Kissing him on his berry stained cheek.

A gust of cold air wrapped itself about him, as if to hug the both of them. To bind them.

Thinking he heard words whispered on the breeze.

'Be careful what you wish for.' Heard only by him.

And he looks about for Lamia only to see those about him staring back at him.

Sebastian wraps his arms around Ned. Holding him close to say he loved him. Then grins and wriggles to be put down. Nothing could hold him captive for too long.

"No horses?"

"They'll only attract the Beasts. We take the path to the Lair and stay the night... Then to the Castle... From there we can reach the edge of the Mist."

"Let's hope we're not delayed... Kristina!" Zahra calls out.

Mother Superior appears with Kristina at hand. Final words had been spoken. Mother Superior had found the peace. Extending her hand to Ned who refuses to take it and steps forward to hug her.

"That's how we say goodbye in the twenty first century... Thank you for taking us in. It's been a very interesting six months... Take it easy on the arm... Call me okay?"

"It is I who should be thanking you *Ned Parffet*... There is something about ye I cannot place... Look after them. They are all I have left in this world." Mother Superior bravely stands staunch, fighting back a tear.

And with those final words kisses Ned on each cheek.

Then turns to her niece.

"We have already spoken. So I say no more... You know what you have to do." Hugging Zahra, it would be the last time they would see each other.

Turning to Kristina. And staring into her emerald green eyes. Eyes that seem to be beyond another century. Another time. Beyond this realm, and to the end of time.

"You have his eyes... Remember you are of noble blood. Let no one tell you otherwise... You have been chosen by God for a great destiny Kristina... Don't disappoint Him." Bending down to kiss Kristina.

A tear she could not hold back, coming to her eye.

"I won't." Said Kristina hugging her back.

Turning to face the blonde headed urchin.

"As for you..." Unsure what to make of the squealing blond little boy, "...Come here."

Wrapping her arms about him and holding him tight. Lost for words. Michael standing behind Sebastian his eyes fixed on Mother Superior. Unspoken thoughts exchanged, assurances made.

“You behave yourself young man?” She advises him kindly.

Looking up to Michael with his hands in his shoulders.

“You look after them... Understood?” She warns him, there would be hell to pay if He did not.

Sebastian nods innocently.

Grinning, she kisses his forehead and runs old fingers through youthful fair hair. Wondering if she was ever that young once.

“We must get going...” Said Zahra. “...I want to make the Lair by midnight. We have an hour before it gets dark.”

“Can we find it in the dark?”

“Lamia will guide you.” Advises Zahra.

“I was worried you would say that.” Looking about for her.

A spiral of dust twirls about the courtyard. He follows it with his eyes before fades and dies away. Then turns to Brother Geoffrey to bid him farewell and some words of advice.

“Take care of yourself buddy. No more fighting okay... Have Sister Rebekah to dress the wound.”

“You might need these.” Geoffrey hands Ned a leather bag of cloth balls.

“Thanks... I almost forgot.” Throwing the satchel over his shoulder.

Pulling Geoffrey in for a surprise hug.

“Oh!” He exclaims taken back before stepping back to avoid another.

Geoffrey opens the gate and checks if the way is clear. The dust had settled and sound of hooves long silenced. One by one they stepped out and crept into the forest.

Looking back at the monastery one last time.

“We’ll come back one day... I am sure it will still be here.” Ned assured her.

“I know...” Taking a sigh and turning her head on the sanctuary and headed into the forest.

It had withstood the centuries past. It would withstand those to come.

The sun below the horizon, evening crept long dark fingers across the land to strangle the remaining light.

Eerie sounds carried about the forest. The path barely visible, Ned felt a soft hand on his back pushing in one direction then another. Unsure if it was Zahra's or Lamia's. Wondering if he was imagining it, or if he wanted to know. Sebastian had disappeared into fog ahead of them. Kristina hung onto Zahra's dress and was being pulled along. Visibility but a few yards about them. The path ahead blinded by fog and mist and darkness. Only the terrain suggested they were heading uphill.

Stopping now and again to catch their breaths. To listen for sounds from within the forest. Red eerie moonlight filtered through the towering pines, illuminated the mist saturated air about them. Zahra dared not speak for fear of being heard by a Beast. Her breath restrained and quiet and fogging before her.

Suddenly a Beast howled loudly ahead of them. Then another. Two Beasts snarling at each other over something or someone. Fearing it was Sebastian, but the sounds were void of any squeals.

"Stay down." Ned whispers reaching for a cloth ball and his lighter.

Couching nervously they waited for the Beasts to leave, hearts racing with anxiety. Wolves wail in the distance. Drawing the Beast's attention. Crashing heavy steps sounded in chase of the canine trespassers.

They waited momentarily before moving again. A hand on Ned's back pushed him forward.

"Okay oaky... I going." Ned tells whoever it was.

Animals had long since borrowed beneath the surface.

The meager troupe of three pushed silently their way through bracken and scrubs. Watching their steps fearful of a breaking a branch or twig.

Behind them a scream could be heard. Stopping to gauge the direction of the sound. It came from the Castle. The voice carrying over the still night air into the thick pea soup of fog. Sigmund had staked a forsaken guard out.

Possibly as an offering. Possibly as punishment. Likely for entertainment.

A warning for others of his power and rule. The screams abated as the poor sod succumb to a gorging death.

The Monastery bell sounded and Zahra grinned.

“Brother Geoffrey, he’s giving us a bearing... This way.” She pushes on ahead away from the bell.

Zahra now leads the way. Crouching and running the best she could with Kristina holding on tightly. Sebastian was still somewhere out there. Unconcerned, she pushes forward. The sound of crashing water cut through the night ahead of them. Closer and closer it sounded. They would stop there and rest. Hoping Sebastian would appear sometime soon. It was unlike him to be gone for so long.

“Sebastian!” Kristina called out quietly.

“Ssh...” Warns her mother, “... Lest the Beasts hears you.”

Dark emerald eyes peer into the darkness, searching for him. Not a giggle, not a squeal. It was as though he had simply vanished. Swallowed up by the Mist.

Above the blanket of mist the sky was littered with stars.

A kaleidoscope of sparkling orbs. Appearing larger, brighter, more colorful, and closer. As if she could reach out and touch them. Pluck them from the sky like ripe fruit. Their clarity beyond description. Their brilliance adding to the celestial illumination.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Zahra is taken back by the brilliance.

“Me neither.” Ned took in the cosmic spectacle.

The moon had risen higher and not far from its zenith. A Beast howled some distance ahead of them. And thrashed through the bushes sniffing the air and growling wildly.

Its prey close at hand.

“They’ve heard us.” Zahra warned.

Ned reached for a cloth ball. But Zahra held his arm down.

“Save them. It is only attract the others... We have to get to the waterfall.”

“The waterfall?” Asked Ned, wondering how that would help.

“Trust me.” She said pulling him by the hand.

With the Beast behind them but getting closing, the trio made it to the waterfall. The crashing water drowning their voices and dampening their scents.

“Under here...” Directs Zahra indicating the falling water.

Ned threw the bag under a bush and stepped into the chilling water. Pushing through the thundering wall of water they stood huddled together. Water crashed onto the rocks, sending up its own mist. Suddenly hand reaches through the transparent wall of water for Kristina.

Its teeth bared and growling.

Kristina jumps as the hand grabs her.

“Surrender!” The blond headed Beast squeals.

“Never!” She squeals back frightened by his unexpected appearance.

“Sebastian! Get in here now!” Warned Zahra pulling him through from the other side just in time.

A Beast howls, meters from where they hid. Sniffing the air, its prey was close, but where? Looking at the water with distaste.

Sniffs the air again, a stench oozed from beneath a bush.

Clawing at the bag of foul smelling sulfur, tainted with human scent. Throwing the bag down in frustration.

Through the wall of cascading water Ned makes out the huge Beast’s features. Tall and black. A coat of thick black fur covered a thick canine looking body. With the head of a wolf. Red eyes that glowed in the moon light. Claw like fingers. Incisors exposed, snarling at the air. Hunched and muscular. Leg’s bent and bowed. Making out a disfigured human form. Void of any soul.

Possessed by a curse.

Thumping its chest and the Beast howls at the moon. Hearing the howls of other Beasts feasting on the castle carcass that had carried over the forest. Nostrils twitch and smells the night air. Incensed with the faint aroma of blood. Running on all fours, crashes through bushes towards the castle.

A distant bell faintly tolls again.

“We need to keep moving.” Pushing others out from beneath the wall of water.

Saturated but alive, Ned locates the bag of cloth balls and checks their condition. A powerful claw had torn at the bag damaging several of them. A cold hand presses on his wet back.

“I’m moving, I’m moving.” Ned whispers to Lamia.

The moon was directly above them.

Lighting up the entire forest with its brilliance. A soft red glow hung in the air. A twilight zone where even angels feared to tread, but one. The terrain steepened, as the track narrowed. Ned could make out a wolves trailing them either side. As though summoned to escort. Sebastian at the head of the pack.

“Friends of yours?” Ned asked Sebastian.

Grinning he runs off again into the darkness of the forest. The wolves follow him. Kristina clutches her mother’s apron. Wary of what lay within the darkness. Eyes searching for Sebastian. The scent of faint smoke lingered under Ned’s nostrils.

“We’re close.” He said looking about for a light.

Stopping hesitantly they hear something moving in the bushes behind them. Crashing louder as it got closer.

“Sebastian?” Calls out Ned slowly.

No reply. This was something larger than a small boy and a pack of wolves. Sensing the Lair was close. Frantically Ned reaches for a cloth ball and fumbling for the lighter that sparks and splutters a resistance to ignite.

“Come on! ...” He calls out. “...You two get to the Lair... I’ll hold them back.” Calls out Ned.

“Go Kristina! Run! ...” Zahra pushes her away. “...You know the way.”

“Go Zahra!” Ned warns.

“Not without you! ... Give it here.” Zahra reaches for the lighter seeing Ned fumbling helplessly.

Fingers groped with the strange device.

The Beast suddenly appears through the bushes and stops some away. Curious by the sparking. Defiantly it growls and crashes its way towards them. The lighter coughs and sparks. Then a flame appears, weak, but a flame. Shaking, Ned holds the fuse over the struggling flame hoping it would ignite. Suddenly a plume of smoke and bright light burst violently from the fuse and he throws the cloth ball towards the Beast.

Then they ran. They ran as fast as they could.

Without looking back, awaited the detonation that took forever to come. After what seemed like an eternity the cloth ball exploded behind them.

Then silence.

Stopping to look back. Seeing a large plume of grey smoke bellowing into the night air upward into the towering trunks. Through the plume staggers the Beast. Stunned but not dead.

“Shit!” Exclaims Ned.

“Run!” Zahra cries out.

Hearing the Beast crashing through the shrubbery behind them. In the distance rotating slowly above the Lair, a swirling pulsing kaleidoscope dome of blue and green and purple and yellow light.

“The Lair!” Ned calls out.

A hand pushes him from behind, followed by a howling scream out behind them. He looks back to see the Beast being lifted in the air. Debris of the forest floor rushing about it in a darkening mass.

“Quick inside... She can't hold it forever.” Zahra pleads to him.

Clambering inside the Lair closing the door behind them.

“Told you she likes you.” Grinning and composing herself.

“*Ouster... Hsst!*” Responds Lamia looking up from a book of spells.

Breaking her concentration. An ominous thud resounds outside as the Beast falls to the ground.

“Lamia...” Said Ned quickly connecting her part with the events outside. “... Thanks.”

Sebastian and Kristina had curled up in front before the glowing embers of a fire. The cat and rat nestled against them. Warm and content that they were safe within the Witches Lair.

Safe on hallow ground.

“Tea?” Asked the Witch dismissing to the agitated Beast howling its frustrations outside.

‘Dong! ... Dong! ... Dong!’ An old clock strikes three.

Ned looks over to the ancient clock whose pendulum had long since seized and gathered dust. The Witching hour. The dome of magical lights fades, and the Lair vanishes from view.

The Beast howls at the full blood moon with hunger pains. Annoyed its prey had escaped...

Chapter Thirty Nine

Sigmund swiftly volunteered fifty men to ride with him into the forest in search of the lair.

None would refuse lest they be staked out for the Beasts that evening. As had the unfortunate guard who had failed to guard the boy staked out. Perhaps as punishment. Perhaps for Sigmund's amusement. Sending a threatening message to his men that no one fails their Lord.

Time was being lost and Sigmund hurried his men to order. Light had turn to dusk, and the dusk to darkness. An ominous red glow shone through the windows and he looks up to the heavens on awe of its immenseness and brilliance. He had never seen anything like it before. Thinking the Gods were him this evening. A twang of guilt spurred his conscious. His father lying dead at the altar.

The devil distracts him, and brings him back to the task at hand. The Heart.

Stomping hooves, horses protest entering the mist. Sensing a menacing presence within. Nostrils flare at the scent. Men crossed themselves and refused to look at the staked out guard as the passed the field. It could well be them should they disappoint their master.

Reluctantly, one by one men and horses entered the forest. Neighing loudly, shaking their heads, heavy swords and bows slapping against their flanks.

"Fan out..." Ordered Sigmund. "...Call out if you see anything... They won't get far on foot."

Mist covered the forest floor like pea soup, as moon light struggled to penetrate the canopy towering trees.

In the distant something howls. Wolf or Beast it was unsure which. Men reach for swords and bows. Frantic eyes searching for unwarranted movements within the dark shadows.

“Keep moving!” Sigmund orders sensing a momentarily stagnation among the men.

What was he would expecting to find? A cave hewn into a side of hill? A cottage? Something that would give it away. A gust of cold air rushes over the men. Spooked, horses rear up. Sending several riders toppling backwards onto the ground.

“We must be close...” Anticipates Sigmund pulling back hard on reins to control his own mount. “...They know we are here.” Searching for shadows that did not belong.

Foot by foot. Yard by yard. Man and horse trod deeper into the menacing forest.

Leaving behind the safety of the castle. Few had ever ventured out during the mist. In the distance, they heard the sound of crashing water ahead of them. The path narrowed, the terrain steeper.

The rest of the way would be on foot.

“Leave the horses here...” Orders Sigmund dismounting, “...They will find their way back to the castle... Else leave them for the Beast.”

“How much further?” A man asked regrettably.

“As long it takes! They are here somewhere... *Somewhere.*” Informed Sigmund, looking about the mist.

Men followed their master, suspicious of his state of mind.

Rumors had begun to circulate that he had gone mad. That he had become obsessed with the heart. That he had killed his father to become King. None would dare speak such thoughts aloud. Lest they be the next to be staked out for the Beasts that evening.

Fanning out, if only to keep their distance from Sigmund. Somehow more fearful of him than they would a Beast. Crossing themselves as they cut a path through the bracken. Lashing out with swords, prodding with pikes and spears. Peering into caves and dark shadows. Hollow trees and burrows.

Nothing.

Then a faint smell of smoke drifted under Sigmund’s nose. Nostrils twitched. Stopping to detect its direction. Other men smelt it too.

“My Lord... Smoke.” One calls out.

“Fan out men... Find out from whence it comes...” Sigmund calls out.

Ned watched from the window.

“You sure he can’t see us?” He asked anxiously.

The Witch did not answer. And carried on stirring the large pot. Sebastian and Kristina, awoken by the disturbance outside the cottage, stirred with smaller wooden spoons. Stirring eddies in the bubbling broth. Lamia pushes the smoke about the air, leading Sigmund and his men away from the Lair.

“It’s stronger over here.” A man calls out looking to the shrouded darkness.

Others smell it too and go to investigate. Following him into a small gully where it had settled.

“Fools... They trick you... Tis here somewhere...” Sigmund muses the misdirection. “...Come out, come wherever you!” He calls out in jest as though it were a game.

A sudden gust of wind crashes into him pushing him to the ground. Clearing a path through the fog it twirls about them as if it were possessed by a Witch. Sigmund stands defiant and draws his sword to face down the force that had assailed him. A dark mass begins to swirl about him and takes grip of him. Lifting him from the ground higher and higher into the darkness. Illuminated like a devil in the red moon light. His men watch on in horror at the demonic depiction. Their bows drawn ready to shoot at the source.

“*Sigmund...*” A woman’s voice wraps itself around him. “...*Leave this land before it’s too late.*”

“Show yourself Witch... I mean no harm.” Sigmund lied.

“*Like you meant your father?*” The voice asks.

Dark sockets forming in the churning leaves. A hand formed and brushed his face and clenched itself about his throat.

“Do something!” He calls out to his men.

Men look up at him incapable of freeing him from the invisible hand.

Some firing arrows into the swirling leaves. Barely missing their master in the process. As though wounded, the wind drops and Sigmund

falls to the ground. Followed by a heckling laugh and a flurry of leaves rushing away from the cottage.

“This way men!” Sigmund picks himself up to pursue of the laugher.

Men rush off after him. Swords raised calling jeers of attack. What they were attacking was uncertain. Ned watched as the fiasco of screaming men ran off into the distance. Further and further from the Liar.

“How do you do that?” Ned asked Lamia.

“Why do you think it is I?” She lies, looking up down the book of spells.

“We will stay here until midday and make our way to the Castle...” Zahra begins, “... Hopefully Sigmund would have given up and returned his own castle... He won’t want to be caught in the mist a second night... Less so his men.”

“What do we do until then?” Looking about the confined room.

“Get your rest... You’re going to need it. You still have some distance to go.” Informs the Witch stroking Sebastian’s head.

Staring into the future, her mind seeing the unseen, the unspoken, lest it be changed. Her arms wrapped about wee Sebastian. Holding him as though to never let him go. Michael watched on from a corner of the room, knowing all.

His hands bound by divine Will.

Sigmund chased the ebony shadow deeper into the saturated fog until he was exhausted.

Fading some distance from the Lair. He realizes he had been tricked again. Looking back from whence he had come. Lost for direction he holds up a hand to order a halt to the false pursuit.

“We make camp...” Sigmund orders. “...They are close. We wait ‘til morning.”

“Morning? The Mist my Lord?” One man frets having to stay longer than he wished.

“They will come out from hiding... and we will be waiting for them.”

Sigmund understood their fear. But he would not be alone.

Could fifty men hold back a single Beast? Or two or more? Sacrificing men was a price he was prepared to pay to attain the Heart. His Empire was at stake. To appease his father's death and ease his vexing conscious.

If his men would not follow him, perhaps they would his father?

"For my Father!" He riles their loyalty and courage.

Heads nod. Seeing glimpses of Nicholas in him. Some recalled the Witch's words. Their suspicions confirmed. But to bite the hand that feed them spelt certain death. Their allegiances laid with the master.

And their master was now Sigmund.

"We leave at dawn... Sharpen your swords well... You will need them." He forewarns.

Surrounded by the voices of the forest, men kept watch as others went about lighting a fire. Cooking small game over it. Telling fearful tales of Beasts and how to counter them.

"In the belly!" A man gestures thrusting his sword upward.

"Into the heart! ..." Another thrust into the air before him. "...Aaaah!" He mimics the dying Beast, imagining it falling.

"Does it have a heart? ...Does it have a soul? ..." A man asked looking to others, "...Some say it is taken when it *turns*."

"The throat!" Another man interjects loudly not to be unheard lest his advice goes unheeded.

"Cut its head off! Lest it lives... Nothing lives without a head." Another speaks, looking to the others for reassurance.

"They don't die... They never die..." Another adds his thoughts. "... They're evil... Spawn of the devil himself!" Raising his arms as though preaching a sermon.

"Enough talk! ... They are animals like any other... If it bleeds it will die!" Sigmund assures his men.

Looking about his men, their eyes fixed on his. Then delivers his warning.

"If you be bit... Have your man kill you lest you turn like them... Understood? ..." Eyeing the men, each nodding their heads heavily. "... Lest ye be possessed by the devil."

"I'd be happy to kill anyone of you." A man boasts proudly.

Guffaws and boisterous laughter sounded among the men. Suspicious eyes gauge the other's ability to kill swiftly.

The moon glowed red, raised slowly above the distant mountains.

Stronger than the evening before. Small animals scurried about the forest floor into their burrows and hollow tree trunks. Hearing sounds only they could hear. Sensing vibrations only they could sense.

Senses long since lost by man.

"Stoke the fire... It's going to be a long wait... Take watch in rotation!" Sigmund bellows out.

Forming an outer and inner perimeter about the camp. Calling out to each other, in case one of them had been taken unawares. The camp fire glowed brightly at the center. Giving away their unwelcomed presence within the forest. Far from the protection of Castle walls. Men slept with one eye opened. Hands on hilts of swords. Mist saturating clothing and sleepless souls. To be awoken by the faintest sound.

Howls reverberated about the forest canopy. Men look up. Eyes darting in all directions. Waiting for a thrashing of branches that never came. Trees deflecting the source of the howls. Sigmund stared into the blazing fire. Memorized by the flames. Captured in thought of having the beating heart in his hands. Squeezing it as if to strangle it to near death. The fire warmed his old bones. And he drifts to sleep.

Suddenly, screams cried out suddenly from within the darkness, then another. Then silence.

Waking Sigmund he reaches for his sword. Men about him get to their feet and stood braced ready for an imminent attack. But from where would it come.

Another scream.

Heads and swords turn quickly in the direction it came from.

"You, you and you! ..." Sigmund volunteers the men and gestures for them to investigate. "...The rest of you stay here... The Beasts fear the fire."

On that advice men reach for flaring branches from the fire and hesitantly step into the wall mist. Being swallowed within the murky stain,

they quickly fading from sight. Only their flickering torches glowing. Soon, they too faded. Silence.

Sigmund orders another three to follow without torches, lest they be seen.

Violent howls greet the men, disturbing a Beast tearing at the body of a shredded guard.

Still alive. Pleading for comrades to end his misery. The Beast stands tall and overshadows the men. An archer fires an arrow into the chest of the black creature. Seeing it strike. To no effect. The Beast snarls wildly at the men. Annoyed by the infliction. Another arrow strikes. Only to agitate it further. Ripping the arrows out and snapping them in two. And pounces after the bowman. Now running for his life back to the fire.

Suddenly an arrow strikes him. Sending him crashing to the ground.

Men rush past him, their swords raised over their heads.

“Anyone runs... Shoot them down!” Sigmund shouts from behind the advancing men.

The Beast halts in its tracks. Seeing itself out-numbered. It howls to others nearby to feast. Arrows strike its thick hide. It looks about to those who had fired the splinters. And pounced towards a man without a chance to escape. Fearing arrow should he run. Drawing his sword swipes wildly at the Beast. Only to have the sword ripped from his grip. Sending it flying into a tree trunk. Others watch, fearful of getting close. Touches raised in front of them.

The Beast snarls in annoyance at their presence. The flames.

Lifting the man in the air over its head the Beast lashes at him with claws. Tearing at him as though a rag doll. Tearing at clothing and opening his belly. Gizzards spew from the gaping wound. Tearing savagely at the man's neck. Drinking blood as if from a goat skin, before throwing the man down in search of a new morsel.

Men with torches step toward and encircle the Beast. Its arms lashing out at the flames tormenting it. An arrow strikes its belly, another to its groins. Sigmund laughs as the Beast glitches with pain. Finding vulnerable areas. Sending the Beast into a state of frenzied anger. Stepping through the flames swipes its heavy arms across the torch men sending them and their torches flying.

Suddenly the Beast flitches and stands stunned. Men stare at it standing perfectly motionless. Its head toppling from its body. Its body soon after. Sigmund stands behind the Beast. A bloody sword in his hands.

“Now... That is how you kill them men!” He boasts to his men.

Looking about the wounded Sigmund assessed the losses.

Nodding to a man to dispense with them quickly before they too turn before dawn. Walking back to the camp fire, anguished pleas cried out behind him. Followed by gargled screams as swords removed their heads. Silence befell the camp.

Now he could sleep...

Chapter Forty

A dawn light rode the coat tails of the fleeing night sky. Silhouetting the distant peaks to the east.

“Tis’ is time! ...” Sigmund calls out the men to move. “...Check on the others... Ensure they stay dead.”

Kicking one a man heavily in the side to wake him lest he be dead. The man stirs from disturbed dreams of Beasts. The fire having died down to embers.

“You live man! ...” Sigmund kicks the man brusquely, “...Get up!”

In his slumber Sigmund had a vision, as though it had been planted. It was not his own, but he possessed it nonetheless and would not give it back.

“I know where they are heading.” He said pleased with himself.

“Where?” A man asked curiously.

“The Castle... Of course... How could I have been so blind?” He berates himself.

“The Castle?” The man asked, perplexed wondering why they had ever left.

“Bran Castle you fool.” Sigmund responds.

Silence fell over the men listening. They all heard tales of the Castle and the man who had lived there until his death. Until the curse. Fearful of stepping foot within the place. Fearful of disobeying their Lord.

Death would come either way.

“Quick men. Make haste... Let us surprise them.” Sigmund laughs.

Confused, the men roused from their graves and resurrected life to their wary bodies. A man wonders why they had not simply ridden there in the first place. Had their Lord gone mad in search for the heart? Vexed by its allure of power? Thinking he had seen a glint devil in his eyes when he spoke and why did he not fear the Beasts as they did? Sigmund kicks the man from his doubting thoughts, as though he had been listening.

And the man scurries to ready himself for another long march.

Ned awoke to the sound of Sebastian and Kristina playing.

In conversation with the white rat. Sebastian looks up and catches Ned watching him. Sebastian smiles, and rushes over to him wrapping his arms about him.

“Steady on young fella.” Ned catches him.

Picking him up by the ankles and taking him over to the large bubbling pot.

“Shall we cook him up for breakfast?” He asks.

“No!” Squeals Sebastian wriggling frantically fearful of becoming a boney broth.

“He’s not ripe.” Zahra responds catching his arm and squeezing it.

Sebastian squeals and Ned lowers gently him to the floor before disappearing under the table.

“What time is it? ... I must have snoozed off.”

“Tis nearly noon... We should leave soon if we are to make the Castle by midnight.” Zahra advises the group.

Ned looks out the window and sees the light of day smudged with the ink of the mist.

“The Heart is in the crypt of my father.” The Witch tells.

“Where’s the crypt?” Seeking a location.

“It lays beneath the Altar in the Chapel... Beside the Great Hall... Be gentle as not to wake him from his eternal sleep that he longed for...” The Witch warns, “...The Chapel is hallow ground... Where Beasts will no tread.”

“That’s good to know.”

The Witch stands before Ned. To say her parting and final words.

“You were always meant to be here Edward Parffet... Your dreams I see have faded. Your new life has begun... Take care of them.”

Ned turns to Sebastian and embraces him. Holding him back from leaving.

“I guess this it big guy... Going miss you.” Kneeling down to hug him.

Saddened that he could not take Sebastian wriggling and squealing into the twenty first century. Ned reaches in to his pocket and pulls out a red Swiss pocket knife.

“Here... It’s yours now... Be careful with it okay?” Handing it to him.

Sebastian examines the blades and squeals his delight.

“What do you say?” Asked Zahra.

Sebastian thought long and hard. Kristina whispered a word in his ear. Big blue eyes look up to Ned and spoke rare words.

“Thank you.” Sebastian smiles and runs off to beside the fire to show the rat his new prized possession.

“Take the path to the east and follow the breeze to south... Lamia and I will guide you... Now go, before time runs out.”

“What do we do with the heart when we get to the other side?” Wondered Ned.

“You will know what to do when the time comes.” The Witch tells Ned.

“What time?”

“You will know that too...” Speaking in riddles.

“Will I see you again?” Zahra asks.

“Close your eyes and I will always be there.” Said the Witch.

The two embrace one last time. The bond of mother and child.

“This is what you were destined to do...” She whispers, “...We have all been waiting for this day.”

“Hssst!” Hisses Lamia sensing a presence in the room.

Her eyes searching the corners and shadows.

“Leave him be Lamia... He hides not in the darkness, but the light... Come say goodbye to your sister... Lest you ever see her again.”

“*Goodbye* sister...” Lamia coldly offers her farewell. “...*Ouster...* *Hssst!*” Lamia turns about sharply sensing Michael and points a finger towards a corner, as though it were a wand.

“Now go... Make haste before they find you.” The Witch ushers them.

“Who?” Ned asked.

“Sigmund... He won’t stop until he has the Heart.” The Witch warns.

“How far to the Castle?” He asked.

“A day’s walk... and then some.” Zahra responds reaching for the satchel.

Ned looks out the window again. Eyes searching for Sigmund’s men among the trees. Opening the door slowly expecting an arrow or sword to be thrust through at any moment. Listening for sounds that never came.

Sebastian stands in the door way with the Witch behind him, her hands on his shoulders to hold him from going with them. And watched them being swallowed by the lingering mist.

“I hope you know where you’re going because I am completely lost...” Before feeling a push on his back. “...Maybe not.”

“Sssh... Sigmund will hear.” Zahra crouches thinking she could hear something.

Eyes scan the floating shadows of drifting mist. Shadows as though possessed. A distant howl crawled over Ned’s skin.

“This way!” Zahra presses east.

It had been years since she had been to the Castle as child, not much older than Kristina.

Long since abandoned and left to ruin. Her mind struggling to recall the last time she had seen her Grandfather alive. Before he went to battle never to return.

Before the curse.

The path faded, then ceased to exist. Following a winding creek that leaked down the mountain, a rush of cold air pushes them sideways. Halting them in their tracks. Crouching, they listened. Thinking she held faint voices behind them. The breaking of a twig. Listening for the next disturbance.

Nothing.

Only the sound of the rambling stream. A toad croaked beneath the undergrowth. Disturbed by the passing footsteps. Without looking back the trio trekked blindly south. Stopping briefly to drink water and break bread. Ahead of them a formidable mountain. Pushing themselves through bush and bracken. Tracks appeared and disappeared. Time passed with each wary step. Reminding Ned of how he had come to be there.

An adventure long since overtaken by another.

The day passed and darkness descended the forest again.

Mist tumbled down the mountain like an avalanche. Washing over anything that stood in its way. Burying everything beneath it. Everything but the Beasts.

The winding track cut its way through the forested hillside. A moon poked its bloody fingers between the tree canopies. Pulling them aside to watch their escape. Zahra looks up to an evening like no other.

Stars were aligning, enhancing their appearance ten-fold. And the moon seemed so close she felt she could almost reach out and touch it. Beasts howled, tormented by the celestial phenomenon. Burnt by the brilliant reflected solar radiance. Zahra wanted to howl along with them, her birthmark ached and she covered it with a scrawl.

“Quick...” She pulled Kristina by the hand. “...This way.”

Running blind, running into scrubs and bushes. Narrowly missing trees that appeared from no-where. Coming to a clearing, crouched at its edge and caught their breaths. Nestled into the hillside Ned could make out the ominous silhouette a castle. He cannot believe his eyes. No horror movie could have ever have prepared him for this moment.

Zahra could make out the castle’s features, now stained red by the moon. A wolf stands atop a turret and howls at the moon. Another joins in the mournful chorus.

“We’re here.” Declares Zahra fearful of what was to come.

A hand pushes Ned forward.

“I’m going. I’m going.” Said Ned.

A sunken path winded its way up to the Castle, overgrown with time. Gates long since rotted away. Collapsed stone walls, over grown with vines. Dark windows like sunken eye sockets watched the trio entering.

Standing before the foreboding castle, imagining its former grandeur.

Brilliant moonlight illuminated the surroundings as though it were day. Making out familiar structures features. Zahra thinks she hears a sound. Suddenly a flurry of bats burst from within. Disturbed by the uninvited visitors. Screeching and shrieking, their wings flapping frantically in flight. The sight and sound reminding Ned of Sebastian.

Thankfully safe at the Witches Liar.

“This way... We don’t have much time.” Said Zahra leading them deeper into the darkened interior.

Reaching for the lighter to illuminate the immediate area.

The Great Hall. Taking a touch from the wall, Ned lights it hoping it still contained life. Bursting into flame as though to welcome the reprieve from the darkness. Lighting the Great Hall as it once had done a hundred of years before.

Another sound echoed the hall. Then another.

“Bats?” Ned asks.

“Perhaps... Be on your guard.” Warns Zahra, her eyes searching the shadows.

Taking the torch she leads him down the darkened passageway. Passing doors that lead leading into chambers. Ned could only imagine the history within them. Five hundred years before his time.

Kristina held Ned’s hand as though to console him.

“Don’t be afraid...” She allays his fears. “...It’s okay.”

“This way.” Zahra whispers.

Arriving at a large door still on its hinges. Refusing to yield its secrets.

Zahra turns the stiff handle and it gives way. Pushing the door slowly open. Knowing what laid behind it. Hinges squeak in protest at the sudden movement. Flickering torch light engulfs the room to reveal the chapel. Gospel paintings hung from the walls. Covered with dust, cobwebs and time. The air dry. Un-breathed for centuries.

Their footsteps marked out in the thick dust.

Zahra took in the ancient family room, where once she had played as a child. Toppled pews lay about the floor. Sleeping. Awaiting to be woken for prayers. A large marble altar stands at the front.

Zahra stares at the altar.

“What wrong?” Ned asked seeing her hesitation.

“This is it.”

“What?”

“The crypt...” She said staring at the large marble sarcophagus.

Now it is Ned’s turn to stand in reverence of shrine. Struggling to accept he was but feet away from... Dracula. Suddenly the door behind them sounded on its moving hinges. Holding the torch out in defense to anyone that threaten to enter. A small hand appears. Followed by a small head covered in blonde hair.

A wolf stands beside him observing the people in the room.

“It’s okay.” The boy whispers to the wolf sending it away.

“Sebastian!?” Exclaimed Zahra.

“How did you? ... ” Asked Ned, taken back by his sudden appearance.

Sebastian runs to Zahra to hide as though it were a game.

“You can’t come with us.” Said Ned softly.

Sebastian grinned defiantly. And darted off into the darkness to explore the chapel. Kristina followed.

“Help me with this.” Attempting to push aside the heavy slab of marble.

Successive shoves moves the lid gradually open. Sending a loud rasping sound echoing about the empty chamber. A blacken opening begins to grow wider, and wider and wider.

Holding the torch over it Ned is startled at what he sees.

Zahra looks inside and smiles. Just as she remembered him. He had not aged a day.

“Is that who I think it is?” Said Ned standing back.

“Don’t be afraid... He won’t bite.” She comforts him.

“Yeah... Right.” Fears Ned.

“Meet my Grandfather... Vlad Tepes the Third.” She makes the family introduction.

Ned peers into the darkened interior. The legend was perfectly preserved. Unlike the decaying chapel about him. In his hands a dark small wooden box. Ned’s eyes fixate on the box. Imagining what it contained. And iff all that was said was true. Zahra gestures for him to retrieve the box beyond her reach.

He looks at her and then at the box, and then at her again. Hesitant to touch it.

“It’s only a box.” She tells him.

“Containing your grandfather’s beating heart.” He reminds her.

Zahra motions for Ned to hurry up. Kristina and Sebastian stand on their toes and peer into the dark crypt that could swallow them whole.

Taking a deep breath, Ned reaches in. The torch throws a heavy shadow. Momentarily Ned loses sight of the box, his hands are almost about it. Fingers now touch the holy relic.

Michael stands in the darkness unseen, watching destiny unfold.

Suddenly a hand reaches out and grasps Ned's arm.

Dark emerald eyes open and stare into Ned's frightened eyes. Vlad's lips twitch as though wanting to speak. Or bite. Ned freezes, incapable of breaking free of the vice like grip pulling him into the crypt.

Who dares awaken him from a century of sleep?

"Grandfather... It is time." Zahra softly speaks.

Vlad's eye's shift to the familiar voice and those looking down at him. Seeing Kristina, her green eyes flickering with the torch light. His Granddaughter Zahra. And an old friend with a hand on a boy's shoulder.

"Tis' time..." Speaks Michael unheard to all but Vlad. "...Tis' time." Patting the boy's shoulder.

Vlad looks to Sebastian. Then back to Michael.

And grins softly with approval.

Eye shift to Ned, unsure who he was.

Vlad closes his eyes to resume his eternal sleep, and releases his grip. Ned exhales in relief and carefully lifts the small wooden box out. Holding it out before him. He was touching the wood of the cross. Uncertain which degree of separation he feared most, Christ or Dracula.

Carefully handing it to Zahra who wraps it in a scrawl and tucks it deep in her satchel. It was time to leave.

"Not so fast!" A voice calls out from the doorway...

Chapter Forty One

“I’ll have that.” Claims Sigmund.

Men stand either side of him with swords drawn.

“I should have known it was here all along...” Shaking his head, “... Hand it over! ... Now!” He bellows loudly. His voice reverberates about the ancient stone halls and dies into the darkness.

“Over my dead body.” Ned steps forward.

“Ouster... Your woman won’t save you this time...” Sigmund threatens. “...Men!” Summoning his men to seize them.

Unexpectedly, the lid of the crypt begins to shift by its own accord.

Sending a loud ominous rasping sound of stone upon stone about the chapel. Men halt in their steps. All eyes fixed on the crypt. A hand reaches out. Men panic and run from the chapel. Ned throws the torch at Sigmund, striking him.

“Hurry.” Ned calls out for the others to follow leading the way.

Only to be confronted by Sigmund’s men in the Great Hall. With their way out blocked. It all seemed lost. Sebastian squeals from above, causing heads to look up to a small blonde head peering over a baluster rail.

“Get me that damn boy! ...” Sigmund calls out. “... The Ouster you are mine!”

Sigmund draws his sword.

“Tis’ not a fair fight Sigmund.” Zahra stands between the two men.

“Give him your sword... So I can kill him *fairly*.” Sigmund orders a man.

Tossing a sword to Ned’s feet, picks it up and feels a weighted shaft of steel.

Suddenly without warning, Sigmund lunges at him with sweeping blows. Ned raises the blade and blocks the heavy blow. Another lunge and

another block. Another lunge and another block. How long could he keep it up?

A man falls from a balcony above. Crashing with a dead thud onto the stone floor. Men look up to see Sebastian squealing with delight. A wolf stands beside him looking through the railing.

“Get me that damn boy!” He orders his men again.

Men rush up the stairs only to be greeted by a pack of wolves and an eruption of growls and snarls. And retreat in fear.

Sigmund steps forward with more sweeping blows. Ned counters with defensive blocks. Too weak to strike himself. Sweating and panting with the effort. He stops and holds a hand up as though to stall Sigmund’s attacks.

And hoping to catch his breath.

“I’m just playing with you Ouster... Now play time is over... It is time to die.”

Ned grins. And drops the sword to the ground.

“I will give you a swift death.” Puzzled why the Ouster had surrendered to his impending death.

“It’s about time the Cavalry showed up.” Said Ned.

“*Cavalry?*” Asked Sigmund confused.

Ned looked to what was standing behind Sigmund. Something not even his sword would stop. Sigmund turned hesitantly about to see what was there.

A cauldron of witches eyeing Sigmund and his men suspiciously.

Their ragged appearances obfuscating the power of their wands pointed at Sigmund and his men. A cackle shuffles among the women as each mutter incantations beneath their breaths. Their wands bent and buckled as themselves, moving in circular motions. Fire light flared behind their eyes.

Summoning powers not of this earth.

“Ha! Women? ... Is that the best you have? ... Archers!” Sigmund dismisses the gaggle of women.

A volley of swift arrows fly past Sigmund. Expecting to hear the thuds of their impacts and screams. Is greeted by the ricocheting sound of wood

and metal striking the stone floor. Sigmund looks about to see the women still standing.

“Is that the best you have? ...” One speaks pointing a wooden wand at Sigmund. “...Ehk-ehk-ehk!”

A ball of electrical blue-white light punches from the tip of the wand. Striking Sigmund abruptly, sending him backwards. Witches take aim at the archers now taking flight. Lifting them in the air.

Tossing them against stone walls.

From within the darkness of the Great Hall, wands flashed brilliant colors of light. Violently and viciously striking Sigmund’s men down. The air swirls ferociously. Picking up men and swords and throwing them from one stone wall to the next. Others try to run from the castle for their lives. Only to be caught by invisible hands.

And dragged back screaming to be subdued.

Then a silence befell the Great Hall.

A darkness return. Those that lived moaned with pain. Those that had not, remained silent. Sigmund laid unconscious. Broken but not dead.

Ned looked up to Sebastian.

“Friends of your?” He asked speculating what Sebastian had done.

“Actually... That’s my sister... Gello.” Zahra informs him.

Gello steps forward and stands before Zahra and greets her with a kiss on the cheek.

Kristina takes her hand.

“Zahra... Tis your man?” Gello sizes Ned up.

“Tis my man.” Zahra responds.

“Mother told me you would come... You have the Heart?” She asked keenly.

“We have it.”

“Go before it is too late... We won’t get another chance for another five hundred years...” Gello warns. “... And Sebastian?”

Zahra shakes her head. Words could not be spoken.

“Sebastian? ... What?” Inquired Ned. His question goes unanswered.

Gello looks to Ned as though to read his mind.

“He knows naught...”

“Naught...” Said Zahra with a grave look.

“I’m right here... I can hear you.” Feeling he was being left out of something he should know.

“Leave this realm... Before the dawn sun rises... Farewell sister.” Gello warns.

“Farewell sister... How can I thank you?” Embracing her.

“Lift this curse once and for all... And let us grow old and die.” Gello places her forehead against her sister’s.

Gello looks down to Kristina.

Knowing the future that laid within her. Kristina embraces her Aunt. They will meet again, in a field of wild flowers. Stepping back, Gello watched them leave into the darkness of the night.

She would stay a while longer and have a little fun with the men that still lived.

Ned looks back up at the Castle’s threatening silhouette set against the engorged blood moon.

Shrouded with mist. Colored lights flashed from within as the Witches tormented the living. Sebastian had mysteriously disappeared again into the darkness. Hopefully back to the Witches Lair thought Ned.

“You two okay?” He asked.

“We’re fine... You?”

“Yeah I think so. How much further?”

“Not far... All downhill from here.” She lied.

Re-entering the forest was not easy for Ned. Beasts could be lingering. More so after noise from the castle. Clutching his bag of cloth balls. Only a few remained. It may not kill them, but it would slow them down. The moon had shifted in the sky since they had entered the castle foretelling the precious time they had remaining to get to the border of the Mist.

“How much time do we have?” Looking up to the lunar sun.

“Not long... It will be close. We have to keep moving... No more stopping.” She warns.

Sounds came from within the woods and imaginary shadows moved.

Keeping one eye on the dimly lit track, the other searching for anything that did not belong. Ned panted for breath, and he wondered how the other two were faring. They were running on fumes.

He had no idea how much further they had to go. Minutes passed as hours, hours as minutes. He could sense it as though time had stood still. They were nearing the border lands.

“We’re nearly there.” He sensed.

“Ouster! ... Where are you? ...” Sigmund calls out from behind them. “... Come out, come out where-ever you are!”

“Doesn’t he ever give up?” Asked Ned, looking back to the voice sounding some distance behind them from within the mist.

“Ignore him... Keep going!” Zahra warns Ned.

Ned moved briskly as Zahra and Kristina tried to keep up.

Then there was a sound that halted him in his tracks.

A squeal.

A faint yet significant squeal. Ned’s head slumped.

“No.” He exclaimed denying what he had heard.

Zahra says nothing.

“Take the heart... I have to save Sebastian.” He instructs without thinking about himself.

“You can’t do anything Ned... It has been foretold...” Speaks Zahra.

“What’s been foretold?” He asked looking to her confused.

“This...” Said Zahra turning away.

Unable to watch. Pulling Kristina against her lest she witnesses the prophecy.

Sebastian comes running through the mist. Arms reaching out for Ned. Ned runs towards him and reaches out for him.

“*Thud.*”

Suddenly Sebastian gasps... And staggers ... Unable to move.

Looking down to see an arrow head piercing through his chest. Covered with blood. His blood. Pale eyes look up to Ned and blink helplessly.

Michael watched on.

“Sebastian!” Ned cries out rushing to him.

Catching him before he fell. Lifting him into his arms.

“No! ...” Ned cries out. “...You bastard Sigmund! ... You fucken bastard!” He curses Sigmund stepping through the Mist.

“Give me the heart or the girl gets one too.” Warns Sigmund. His bow aimed at Kristina.

Zahra shields her from the danger. Ned stands between Sigmund and Zahra. His eyes searching for life from Sebastian’s small body.

“I’ll get to you in due course *Ouster*... Now give me the Heart!” Sigmund demands loudly.

Perhaps a little too loud.

Sounds rebound from within the mist. There was the scent of blood in the air. Suddenly a Beast appears and Sigmund fires an arrow at it. Distantly recognizing the Beast as the man he had sent off that fateful day to retrieve the Ouster’s possession.

“You?” Sigmund cries out to the Beast seeks retribution. “I know you ... Stand down! ... That’s an order!”

The gabled words were meaningless to the man-turned-Beast. His authority lost in the mist of time. The Beast torn at Sigmund’s throat with snarling bloody canines. Arms thrashed at the thick black coat of fur. Reaching for a dragger that was no longer there.

“Run! ...” Calls out Zahra. “... We don’t have much time.”

They ran far as they could from the Sigmund’s dying screams before Ned stopped to examine Sebastian.

Laying him on his side. He had passed out.

“The arrow would have pierced his heart... Yet he lives... How?” He shook his head at the conundrum.

“The Mist...” Said Zahra reaching for an answer.

“He’s lost a lot of blood.... He needs a blood... If only I had my kit...” Exclaims Ned looking back into Mist.

Zahra reaches into her satchel and pulls out the medical box. Confused, Ned stares at the box and at Zahra.

“How did you know? ...” He asked staring at her with bewilderment. “... You knew all along?”

Zahra said nothing, and handed him the box.

Inserting a needle and tube into his arm. The other end he inserts into Sebastian’s.

“Let hopes this works.” Watching the blood flow between them.

Any blood was good blood for Sebastian. It would buy them time. Taking mouthfuls of water to compensate his own loss. Feeding some to Sebastian's open lips.

"Let's get out of here!" Lifting him up gently.

Moving as fast as he could. Hoping he would not faint from the loss of his own blood.

"Stay with be Sebastian! ... Don't you die me! ... Not on my watch!" Ned warned him.

Dawn seeped through the cracks of the mist.

Reaching for those that did not belong. Ned maintained the pace with Zahra holding Kristina's hand to keep up. Knowing that Sebastian could fade in his arms at any moment. Praying to God that he would not.

"We're almost there. At the bottom there's a road." Informs Zahra.

With the mist slowly burning off. The sun's rays biting at their heels. Staggering with panting breaths they collapse on the earthen road. Sebastian laid atop of Ned. His breath faint, eyes rolling in his head.

"Surrender?" Ned asked, checking on his patient.

"*Never!*" A weak voice responds to the challenge.

"That's my boy... Hang in there." Holing him close.

Ned feels tremors on the road. Horses. Hooves. Getting closer.

"The King's men... Fuck it!" He curses.

"Fukk it." Parrots Sebastian meekly.

"I'll give you that one... Don't let your Aunt hear you say that word okay?" He warns the wounded urchin.

A weak grin forms in the corner of his mouth.

Too weak to move another inch. Ned surrenders himself to what was to come. He had failed. It had all been for nothing. Blood leaking from his body into Sebastian's. Thunderous hooves sounded as horses galloped closer. Shaking the ground as they grew closer.

Standing over them. Neighing in agitation at the smell of blood. Horses stomp their feet.

"You okay mister?" A concerned voice inquired, looking down at him from above.

Ned looks up expecting to see swords pointed at him.

Instead, he discovers riders out for an early morning ride. Towering over them overhead powerlines appearing through the rising mist. He could almost smell the carbon monoxide in the air.

“We’re back...” Exclaims Ned, getting to his feet with new found energy. “...Where’s your nearest hospital?” ...

Chapter Forty Two

Ned rode as though he were veteran rider.

Whipping the horses flank. Cradling Sebastian in his strong arms. Cushioning the impacts of the galloping strides. Zahra and Kristina could barely keep up. Ahead they could make out a village and they cantered to the square to see faces looking at them unsure of their arrival and the injured boy in Ned's arms. Ned looks about for the Medical Center.

"Medic! Medic! ..." A rider calls out in Romanian. "...We need a doctor! The boys been hit with an arrow!"

People gather around the group as Ned dismounts, refusing to hand Sebastian to anyone. People thought Ned looked familiar. A grey haired old man appears at a door, bifocal's pinched half way down his nose. Peering over them to the scene developing outside his small surgery. Seeing Ned with a make shift blood transfusion connecting to the boy in his arms. This was serious.

"English?" Inquired Ned.

"Of course." The Man speaks gravely seeing Sebastian's fatal wound.

"I'm a doctor!" Exclaimed Ned. "... I need an E-Vac immediately to the nearest hospital." He pleads carrying Sebastian inside.

People pressed faces to the clinic's window. Relaying what was happening inside to those about them. Ned lays Sebastian carefully on the examination table and looks about for apparatus.

"Blood, blood?" Ned asked in hope.

The doctor shook his head looking up from the telephone

"Sorry... Not much call for it here."

"That would be asking too much I suppose... Saline?" Ned hopes.

The doctor raises a finger and disappears returning with two plastic bags filled with the clear solution.

"Hang in the Sebastian I'm just going to top you up."

Ned inserts more needles and tubes. Zahra and Kristina stand over Sebastian. Kristina holding his hand. She kisses his cheek. And rubs it.

“Don’t rub it off Kristina.” Her mother tells her.

“I’m not... I’m rubbing it in.” She smiles.

Ned overhears the doctor talking to someone on the other end of the line. And reaches out seeking to speak to whoever it was.

“Bucharest Hospital...” The doctor responds.

“Hello... Who’s this?” Seeking the expertise he was speaking to.

“Doctor Ned Parffet here... Head of Trauma, New York City...” Citing his credentials.

On hearing this old doctor off steps back as man in charge.

And listened intently as Ned relayed the situation.

“I need an E-Vac helicopter A-Sap. A small boy...” Ned guesses Sebastian’s age. “...Four maybe five... Arrow wound to the chest... Possibly the heart... Vitals unknown ‘till you get here... Bring blood... Lots of it.”

“What type?” The doctor on the other end asks.

“*Red*... Now hurry!” Ned hangs up and rushes back to check on.

“He’s fighter this one...” The old doctor notices. “... He should be...” But never finished the sentence seeing Kristina listing. “...And who might you be young lady?”

“Kristina... Kristina Tepes.” She said proudly.

“Oh... Any relation to ah? ...”

“He was my Great Grandfather.” She said proudly.

The doctor smiles thinking she was joking and realizes she was not. And the smile falls. Looking to Zahra noting she had the same green eyes. Identical faint birthmark on their necks.

“And you must be? ...”

“Her mother.” Zahra smiles showing her teeth.

“Oh... Ah...” The old doctor steps back bitten by the comments. “...I think we can dispense with any paperwork. We’ll leave that for Bucharest to handle shall we? ... I’m just a small practice.” The doctor steps back further.

Just then a large Alsatian pushes its way through the door sensing something was wrong with the world.

“Get out Mac!” The doctors gestures to push the dog away.

“It’s okay.” Zahra tells him allowing the dog to enter.

The dog trots to table begins licking Sebastian's small hand and fingers. He struggles to grin. Fingers reaching for the dog's snout and head. He feels a familiarity and comfort. The dog lays under the table and whimpering.

Watchful of those moving about the boy.

Cutting away the blood soaked shirt Ned examines the wound with interest. Cleaning away the dried blood. The arrow shaft had penetrated his back missing the vertebra by an inches and through his chest cavity. A menacing gothic arrow head protruded before him. Ned could only image the damage it had done to the heart.

"X-Ray?" Ned asked, already knowing the answer.

The doctor shakes his head.

"It's a small practice. Mostly old people. Never... this..."

"Hmm..." He thinks. "...We can't remove the arrow here."

And wonders how Sebastian was alive as it was. Ned looked about the meager clinic for identifiable equipment. A stethoscope. A mercury manometer. Basic but it would do, hoping the hospital was better equipped.

Nothing he recognized as modern from the New York trauma clinic.

"Shit." He mutters taking in what he had to work with.

Pressing a stethoscope over Sebastian's chest. A feeble rib cage rises and falls with each faint breath. Looking over to the read his blood pressure.

"Weak... but he's alive. He needs more blood... Where's that helicopter?"

Looking to the window only to see faces peering in inquisitively.

"Where's my nurse? ... There you are."

Catching Kristina looking up at him.

"You want to listen to some music? ... This is a very special kind of music... Put these in your ears."

Ned helps her with the stethoscope.

"Can you hear me?" Speaking into the bell.

Kristina's eyes light up with the sudden volume. She nods with excitement.

"Now see if you can find Sebastian's heart... It should be hiding somewhere... About here..." He points to a region near the arrow.

She listens intently and hears the beats. Looking up to Ned for assurance. She smiles and nods.

“That’s it... Keep listening... Let me know if it changes okay.” He encourages her.

Scanning the glass cabinet in search of sedatives and pain killers.

“Not the good stuff ... But should do the trick.” Reaching in to retrieve vile he identified.

Inserting a syringe needle into the bottle slowly draws out the clear solution. Squirting few drops into the air.

Kristina giggles at the sight.

“I need you to stay with me big guy to the chopper gets here okay? ... You can do that for me?”

Two weak eye lids blink in unison to say he had heard.

“What happened? ... The cat got your squeal?” He jokes.

The corner of Sebastian's mouth twitches again, as though he wanted to smile.

“The bleeding seems to have stop. I only hope the helicopter arrives in time with the blood. Then we hope they have adequate facilities at the hospital.”

“You’ve done all you can Ned... Tis in God’s hand now.” Zahra consoles him.

“I’m not done with him yet... Not ‘til after surgery, until then he’s mine... God will just have to wait.” Warns Ned.

Michael smiles.

“How did he make it through the Mist?” Asked Ned confused.

“Don’t you know?” Zahra asks.

“Know what?”

“He had Ouster blood... Yours.” She smiled.

“How did you know about ... This? ... You never told me... We could have avoided *this*.”

Turning to see Sebastian fighting for his life. He looks to Zahra as though she was still harboring a secret.

“Would you have allowed *this* to happen if you knew?” Looking to Sebastian fighting to hang onto life.

“Of course not! ... He could die!” Lowering his voice fearing Kristina would hear.

“Tis’ not over Ned... Everyone has a destiny.”

“You speak in riddles like your mother.” He said confused.

“Do you trust me?” She asked holding both hands.

Silent, Ned looks to Sebastian fighting for his life on the table. A witch speaking in riddles. Zahra speaking in riddles. Her crystal green eyes speaking a hidden truth that all would be well.

“I trust *only* you.” Pressing his head against hers.

“Do what you do best Doctor Edward Parffet...” She told him as she stepped back to stand alongside Michael. “...To believe in what you cannot.”

‘Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump...’

The distant sound of rotor blades punched heavily into the still morning.

‘Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump’

Villagers looked up and see the encroaching medical helicopter. Aging, but functional. The deafening stuttering kicked up dust and dirt and debris as it hovered to land in the village square. People crouch and look away, holding hats and covering eyes as it landed nearby.

Blades wind down, half dozen uniformed medics scrambled out to be greeted by Ned who briefed them on Sebastian’s condition. And placing him on a gurney hooked up with blood and electrical monitors. An oxygen mask covers his face. Kristina watched on in fascination the helicopter that looked like a giant flying insect. Guessing it was like a fat dragon fly with buzzing wings.

“He’s steady, considering...” A medic calls out to Ned.

“You fancy a ride in the sky?” He asked Kristina.

“Like a bird?” She inquired.

“Like a bird.” Said Ned.

Kristina nods enthusiastically.

“Let’s go!” He calls out over the sound of the whirring blades beginning to sound louder.

Leading Zahra and Kristina behind the gurney being pushed to the waiting helicopter.

“It’s okay they’re family.” Ned calls out to the lead Medic.

“E.T.A. 23 minutes.” The lead medic relays over the sounds of the thumping blades.

“As fast as you can!” Warns Ned.

“I’ll tell the pilot.” The medic shouts back over the deafening sound of blades.

The helicopter lifted into air and Kristina gasped.

Holding onto her mother’s arm she peered out the window, amazed she was flying like a bird.

“Like a bird! ...” She exclaims. “...Sebastian! ... You’re flying like a bird!”

He grins and squeezes her hand softly.

“You’ll be fine Sebastian... We’re almost there.” Ned assured him, but in his heart knowing it would be touch and go.

Ned watched Sebastian’s monitors closely, relaying irregular beats. Medics examined the ancient arrow protruding from his chest and look up at Ned hoping he could explain the events. A few had their suspicions.

“Long story... Let’s get him patched up first.” Informed Ned stalling their fears.

Noise flooded the interior of the helicopter only adding the Kristina’s exhilaration.

Less so for Zahra appearing terrified by the thought trapped inside the belly of a bird. It was unnatural. Ned grinned at her anxiety.

Holding her hand to comfort her.

“Almost there.” He lied.

The clumsy headsets making the experience more confusing. Distorted voices crackled through the head sets, like witches. Zahra looks about the interior expecting to see her Mother and Lamia.

A city begins to appear below them. Buildings upon buildings spread out as far as the eye could see. Kristina had never seen such a sight other than in Ned’s magic pictures.

Sebastian listened to the voices around him.

Drifting in and out of consciousness. The overwhelming crashing tremors of the helicopter jolting him and keeping him in this world.

A huge white building draws closer. A large circle with an “H” painted in its center grew closer. Kristina could feel herself falling.

“It’s okay... We’re going to land... Like a bird.” Ned comforts her, to Zahra’s relief.

Helicopter wheels bounces softly as they touch down. The sound of copter blades winding down reverberate through the interior as rear doors open.

‘Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump–Thump–Thump-Thump.’

The sound of the heavy blades flood the interior followed by a rush of fresh air.

“Lamia. Not now!” He calls out.

Medics look at him as to who he was speaking to.

“Get him inside... And give me an ABG, Chem 7, Cardiac enzymes, and a coag panel... A-Sap!!” Ned calls out to pushing the gurney hurriedly inside.

“Who’s your top Cardiothoracic Surgeon?” Ned asked the head Medic.

“Van der Meijden... But he’s at a conference in Belgrade.”

“Who else you got?” Ned exclaims reaching for a life line.

The Medic shakes his head to suggest there was not one. Sebastian’s life hanging in limbo. Hope fading with each passing moment.

“You have mobiles here?” Ned asks.

“Of course. Why?” The medic asked curiously.

“I need to make a long distance call.” Said Ned thinking aloud.

His mind reaching out to a colleague in New York hoping he would pick up.

Bright overhead fluorescent lights pass over Sebastian.

Catching his imagination that he was in heaven. Seeing Father Michael walking beside him, he smiles. Kristina looked up at the lights in wonderment. Refusing to leave Sebastian’s side.

“They *stay* with the boy.” Ned orders the nurses trying to remove Zahra and Kristina from the Triage.

Zahra watched on as destiny unfolded. What Ned must do he must do of his own free will. Such was the covenant Vlad had made with God. Michael stood quietly watching on.

Unseen and unheard to all but Sebastian who looks over to him.

His eyes opening and closing. He took in the in an alien room. People all dressed alike. Comforted to hear Ned's authoritative voice telling people what to do. Sounds echoed off the polished floors and walls. Nurses turning him over, undressing him, needles jabbing his limbs. Tubes and wires hanging above him, voices call out his vitals.

Ned listens on keenly.

"Pupils blown, BP holding." A nurse recites automatically.

'*Beep-Silence-Silence-Beep-Silence-Silence-Silence-Beep-Silence-Silence-Beep.*' A heart monitor tolled out the death knells between the beeps.

Ned listened to the beats as he held an x-ray up to the light. The arrow had penetrated the heart.

"Impossible." He thought aloud.

There was no time to lose. He looked down at Sebastian and knew he had only one chance to save him.

"How are you still alive?" He catches himself before Kristina could hear him.

"The boy should be dead." An assisting surgeon adds his unsolicited medical opinion aloud.

"I think we need to work on our bed side manners don't we? ... Now scrub up." Ned eyes the man.

"Sorry." And the surgeon leaves to scrub.

The arrow had punctured the heart. And fused with the heart as it crossed over.

"The *Mist*..." Ned said to him. "...Of course."

A nurse catches the word and looks at Ned suspiciously. She had heard rumors of the Mist. Stories handed down through the generations. Long thought to be a myth. Then looks to the strange arrow head protruding from Sebastian's chest.

"How old is he?" A nurse inquired, filling in a form.

"That depends.... Let's just say five-ish." Ned leaves out the hundreds of years between the then and the now.

“Family name?”

Ned thinks about it.

“Parffet... He’s my son.” Ned lies, “...first name Sebastian.” Looking to Zahra to cement the adoption. She nods her approval. “... Where’s my nurse... Ah, there you are... How’d you like to watch?”

Kristina nods her head and looks to her mother for approval.

“I’ll wait here.” Said Zahra unwilling to see anymore.

“Someone help this one scrub up.” Ned calls out to a nurse.

“And what’s your name sweetie?” Inquired a theatre nurse crouching beside her.

“Kristina... Kristina Tepes.” She said proudly.

“And who might this be?” The nurse asked looking to the small boy on the gurney.

“Sebastian... He’s my best friend.”...

Chapter Forty Three

Bright lights rolled over Sebastian as he was wheeled into theatre.

His eyes followed their strange hovering and passing.

'Star people...' He thinks to himself. *'...Ned was one of them.'* And surrenders to the comforting thought.

Ned and Kristina dressed alike in green gowns. Her head covered with an oversized green cap. Her face all but obscured by a large white surgical mask. Two large green eyes blinked at him through perplex goggles. Oversized latex gloves pulled up her arms. Flopping finger tips betraying their fit. Though the caps and white masks concealed their faces. Sebastian knew it was them. Nurses lift Sebastian onto the operating table.

A long distant connection had been made to New York. Ned was reaching out to a cardiothoracic colleague about to be awoken at an early hour of the morning. The phone rings longer than he had hoped, before it is eventually answered by a sleepy voice.

"Cameron? ..." Ned bellows down the line. "...Ned here... Ned Parffet."

"Ned? Is that you? ... We thought you'd fallen off the planet... Where are you?"

"Bucharest City Hospital."

"Bucharest? ...What the heck are you doing there?"

"Trying to save my son's life."

"Your son? ...I didn't know you had a son?"

"It's a long story mate, I have a situation here... I'm in theatre and I need you talk me through what I'm looking at."

"Sure big guy... *What are you looking at?*" Asked Cameron, desperately gathering his senses.

"Male, five... Vitals stable..." Ned was unsure how to describe the fatal wound. "... Arrow through the heart."

"What the? Say that again?" Cameron chokes on his coffee, disbelieving what he had heard.

“You heard me.”

“Shit Ned...” Cameron contemplates the situation. “...And you say his vitals are stable?”

“As they can be... I need to get the arrow out.”

“Impossible... If the arrow has gone through the internal damage would be massive... Nothing short of a miracle and a heart transplant can save him.”

Ned listens to Cameron’s cold prognosis and looks down at Sebastian looking back at him. Glazed pale blue eyes reaching out to Ned for hope. There was a silence that reached down the phone.

“Ned you there?”

“Yeah, yeah... You’re saying he needs a heart transplant?”

“Yeah... But where are going to find a heart? ... It’s not like they come in gift boxes.”

Cameron’s statement stuns him.

Then looks to Zahra standing quiet, waiting. Events had transpired for him to be in the forest. Had transpired to have Sebastian there at the vital moment. Had transpired to have Ned standing over Sebastian to give the heart a new home.

A home free from sin. To lift the curse.

“Say that again.” Ned looks suspiciously over to Zahra holding the box.

“They don’t come in gift boxes.” Cameron repeats.

“Thanks Cameron... You’re a life saver.”

He looks over to Zahra with full knowledge of what she had always known.

“The Witch... The bloody *Witch*.” Speaking to himself.

“What’s that about a Witch? ... What Witch?” Asked Cameron.

“Scrub up Cameron! ...” Ned exclaims down the line. “...We’re going in.”

“Where’s my nurse? ...” Looking down at her. “...Ah, there you are.”

Kristina smiles beneath the surgical mask.

“Are you ready Sebastian?” He asked with new found confidence in his voice.

Sebastian could sense it. The heart monitor doubled a beat. Ned nods for the anesthetic to be administered. Asking Sebastian to count backwards from a hundred was like asking him not to squeal.

So Ned asked him the only question he knew.

“Hey Sebastian? ...”

His eyes look to Ned, anticipating a question. A special question, only he knew the answer to.

“...*Surrender?*” Whispered Ned to him.

“*Never!*” Small lips moved beneath oxygen mask before surrendering to the anesthetic.

“He’s sleeping?” Kristina asked curiously watching Sebastian close his eyes.

“Yeah, he’s asleep... Shall we cut him open?” Wondering what she would say.

Kristina nods enthusiastically and watches as the scalpel drew a thin red line down a dotted line he had drawn. Intrigued by the bright red blood that leaked from the incision. Looking every part a surgeon. In his comfort zone, plied his trade of trauma surgery. Nurses reacting to his beckon calls handing him strange instruments. Only to be discarded moments later bloodied to a shining metal tray.

Kristina's eyes followed their every move. Listened to every sound as metal clanged on metal. Voices talking strange instructions to one another.

It was chaos, yet it was poetry.

Zahra watched on from the wall in silence. The Witch had told her all. Michael stood unseen beside her. Soothing the anxiety of those in the room.

Slowly wounding a metal clamp to open Sebastian’s chest so as not to break his straining ribs. Peering into the dark cavity to discover a small beating heart. A heavy wooden arrow shaft and metal head projecting from it. He could see how the wooden shaft had fused with the heart’s tissue. Kristina looks into the cavity.

Unfazed by what she saw.

“Light!” Ned calls out.

Suddenly the room is engulf in brilliant light. Others look about as to the source as though it was coming from thin air.

“That's good!” Said Ned without looking up.

Following Cameron's exact directions. Oxygen tubes protrude from Sebastian's mouth and a bypass tubes pumped blood from his body and back again. Kristina watches the machine's pumping round and round and round.

It was time to detach his heart.

With surgical precision Ned removed Sebastian's heart from the chest cavity. Placing the small lifeless organ into a stainless steel bowl. Kristina watches on amazed as Sebastian continues to breathe without a heart.

Her eyes take in magic of modern medicine.

“You got that *heart* handy Ned?” Cameron asked hesitantly.

“The *heart* if you please...” Ned looks to Zahra.

Stepping forward dressed in a gown and mask, Zahra holds out the small wooden box.

Kristina lifts the lid to reveal a beating heart. No one said a word. They were witnessing a miracle. Ned lifts the heart out and felt the warmth it still contained. As if it had been fleshly harvested. Strong as if it were hungry for a body. Washing it with saline, it protests the intrusion.

“We have the heart.” Said Ned down the phone.

“Dare I ask how?” Cameron asked curiously.

“It came in a box... But don't ask who's... You won't want to know.”

“If you say so big guy... Now comes the tricky part.” Informed Cameron about to describe the delicate procedure to connect it.

Ned gently placed the heart into the cavity. It fitted like a glove. And was about to suture it in place, when suddenly... Ventricles and arteries miraculously reached out like fingers and began attaching themselves seamlessly to Sebastian's body. Michael stands quietly holding the boy's hand watching on.

Bright blue eyes look up at Michael and he smiles.

“Surrender?” Whispered Michael looking down at him.

A brilliant flash of light swamps the theater. Life surges back into a fragile small body. Kristina feels Sebastian's hand grip and small fingers respond.

“Never.” Sebastian his lips move as though he were speaking to someone. Gasping, eyes opened momentarily before succumbing to the

anesthetic again.

“He’s back! ...” Called out Kristina. “...He’s back!”

“It has a new home?” Asked Ned looking to Zahra.

“It has a new home.” Confirmed Zahra.

“Magic?” Asked Kristina.

“Magic!” Confirms Ned accepting what he could not believe.

“Thanks Cameron... Go back to bed.”

“Take care of your son Ned.”

“Will do... See you when I get back mate... Let’s close him up.” He said relieved to the assisting surgeon...

Chapter Forty Four

“The heart has a new home... The curse has been lifted... And Sebastian has Dracula’s heart.” Ned surmises the events.

“You make it sound it as though it was a bad thing.” Muses Zahra.

“Is the world ready for *Sebastian*?” He wonders.

On cue a high pitched shriek resonates around the hospital ward.

“Is anyone?” Asked Zahra.

A doctor approaches looking puzzled over a medical clip board.

“I don’t understand... He’s made a remarkable recover. It is as though he never had the transplant... He’s even off his meds.” Said the doctor flipping pages of notes unsure if he had the right chart. Then looks over to Sebastian about to confront a boy twice his size.

“You don’t have to... You just have to believe.” Said Ned grinning.

“Unfortunately there is nothing we can do about the ... *Squeal*... Let hope he grows out of it.” Looking up from the chart to see Sebastian being held out by the ankles.

Wriggling and thrashing about. Snarling and snapping like an animal caught in a trap.

“Put him down Nico... Immediately! ... Before he bites!” The doctor warns wandering off to address the situation unfolding.

A thud sounds as Sebastian hits the floor. Shaking off the tumble, he runs away squealing. Kristina runs off to join him. A cackle echoes around the ward. Doctors and patients look up as to the source. A gust of air rushes over Sebastian like old fingers through his blond hair.

Before drifting out an open window to join the cackling sounds of Bucharest outside.

“The curse is lifted. No more Beasts...” Ned contemplates the events.
“... You knew all along?”

“The Witch saw all.”

“And Sebastian?” Asked Ned.

“We couldn’t tell you lest you save him before Sigmund...” Tailing off.

Ned sighs and accepts what had to be.

“So it’s all gone? The Witch, Lamia, Mother Superior, Geoffrey?”

“Depends how you look at life Ned... Maybe *they* carried on and it was *us* who ceased to exist?”

“You’re beginning to sound like your mother.”

A hand pushes him in the back.

“Lamia... This isn’t funny anymore.” He calls out.

“Who said it was Lamia?” Grins Zahra.

Ned looks about the ward for moving shadows. Then remembers what he had to say.

“I’ve spoken with the Embassy and arranged new papers for us to get to America. That’s if you want to come?”

“I’ve traveled five hundred years in time... What’s a few thousand miles to America?”

“He can’t fly, so I’ve arranged a cruise ship... Should take about a couple weeks.”

“Sounds wonderful... I am not sure it is natural to fly.”

“I thought Witches liked to fly?”

Another hand is pressed into his back.

“Now, that *was* Lamia... I think she likes you.” Said Zahra chuckling.

Kristina and Sebastian ran between deck chairs.

Oblivious to the Statute of Liberty as they entered New York harbor. In the distance the Manhattan’s towering buildings reached skyward. Standing at the bow. Arms out stretched as though they could fly. The air rushing over them. Hair waving in the wind behind them.

Ned embraced Zahra in his arms. A long way from Romania. From a realm now synchronized with the present.

The world was whole again.

“What’s that?” Asked Kristina excited pointing to the flashing lights and siren along the water front.

“A police car.” He told her.

“Police? ...” She asked curiously.

“Like the Shire Reeve.” Ned tries to explain.

“Oh.” She grinned. Following it intently as it rushed along. Weaving pass the other vehicles. Blaring a warning to get out of the way. It was as

though it was calling out to her.

Sebastian had ran off to chase a sea gull.

“At least you’ll have some mementos... Kristina gave me this back...” Pulling out the mobile, “...It seems she was busy taking photo’s... She’s a natural.”

Swiping through familiar faces and recalling his adventure.

Now a lifetime ago. Centuries had past. Faces that were now dust. Which only made them even more special.

“Oh my goodness... She even got one of Nicholas on his throne...” Continuing to swipe through the images, “... Geoffrey ...And Talbot... I wonder what happened to him ... He never did show again after Ismael left... Ah Mother Superior... We should get that one framed.”

Then he came to one of the witches. It appeared different to the others, as if it did not belong. Kristina and Sebastian stood between her Grandmother and Aunt. Their faces appeared to be staring directly at him.

“Not possible... Who took the photo if Kristina...” He began to ask with uncertainty.

Lamia’s arm begins to raise and points a finger at him. The image begins to swirl around and around and around. Like a kaleidoscope of spiraling colors. Then suddenly vanished from the screen.

Leaving a brilliant canvas of white light.

“What the...?” He exclaimed anxiously.

“Somethings are not meant to be captured Ned... Especially a Witches.” Said Zahra.

A gust of warm soothing air rushed over him and for a moment he thought he felt through a kiss on his cheek.

“*Take care of them Ned Parffet...*” An old woman’s voice whispered, before drifting away on the wind.

The sun breaks through the clouds and threw a ray of light onto the deck.

Kristina chases after it. And begins to dance. Her red cloak lifting gracefully in the air as she twirled about deck to a tune playing in her mind. The ray of light captured her, before letting her go.

It would be a dance she would dance a thousand times.

“Will you miss home?” Ned asked her.

Kristina giggled and smiled. And stared to the looming skyscrapers getting closer.

“I am home.” Replied Kristina...

About Edward (Ned) John Parffet

The main character of the book was originally named Nico after a good friend of mine. Then one day if by serendipity, or perhaps chance, I saw an image online of a young boy standing in Trafalgar Square. Curiously I read the story behind it. It told of how this young lad, Ned (short for Edward), a newsboy holding a poster of the Titanic tragedy. It told of how he was to die six and half years later, but two weeks before the end of the Great War. Ned had enlisted in the Royal Artillery in 1916 and was awarded the Military Metal and was noted several times for his gallantry during missions at the front lines. He was due to take leave. While in the quartermaster's stores to get clothes, it was hit by an enemy shell. Ned was one of those killed. He was buried in the British War Cemetery at Verchain - Maugre in France.

Somehow I felt he had been cheated of a life he could have lived. So I rolled God's dice again for him and give Ned a second chance with a romantic adventure of a lifetime. He saves the boy, he gets the girl and ultimately saves the world.

Wherever you are Ned, whatever life journey you are on, this book is dedicated to you. And all the young men in the Great War, on both sides, who died before their time. Lest we forget.

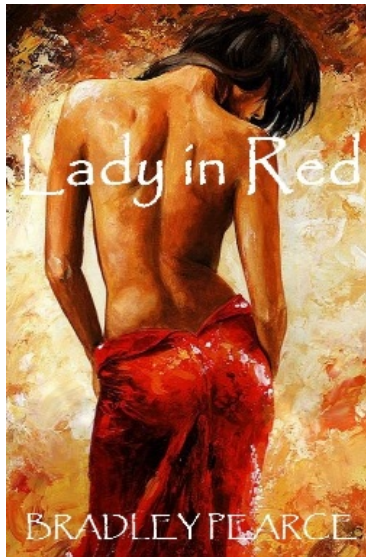


Edward (Ned) John Parffet, MM
1896 – 29/10/1918

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn;
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

Lady in Red

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The final book in the *End of Days* Trilogy...

A futuristic apocalyptic End of the World thriller. Centering on a Prodigy, a New York detective and the New World Order. Augustus Braun, Secretary of State of the Order, has plan to eradicate much of the world's population. Seth is working for the Order to develop a vaccine against a virus to protect the Order's chosen few. But he is secretly developing his own deadly virus. Kristina is a New York Detective by day. But by night she moonlights as an exotic dancer. Worlds collide as Kristina investigates connected deaths. One that involves Braun's son, Nero. Seth's life becomes entangled with Kristina's. Both reluctant to admit they are falling in love. Should Seth tell Kristina of his deadly plan? The end is nigh...

Alfred Nobel dreamed of building a weapon so powerful that it would
deter any future wars.

Einstein, Rutherford, and Oppenheimer would come to materialize his
dream.

“I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

J. Robert Oppenheimer

Prologue

All of us are capable of killing someone.

Or at least wishing someone was dead. Few of us are capable of killing everyone. Or at least wishing everyone was dead. Seth Adison was such a person.

On the rare occasion his parents had sex. Seth's mother fell pregnant.

At conception his soul descended from heaven. While other souls settled on the earthly plane. His would continue to the bowels of the earth. There to encounter God's greatest critic. The Devil. Filling the empty vessel with an all empowering knowledge. Before releasing it vertically to fuse with the embryo that lay waiting in his mother's womb.

Knowledge is a power. With it, one can create anything. With it, one can destroy everything. Oppenheimer had proven testimony to that. Freewill. The covenant between God and the Devil. Would ensure neither would interfere hence forth.

Would the seed grow to the light and bloom to a tender flower? Or would it grow to the darkness and flourish to a jagged thorn?

Seth would be passed between nannies.

Between Private Schools. And finally between the Ivy League Colleges of Princeton and Harvard. Exhibiting autistic traits as a child. In time these would passed as a misdiagnosis. Seth would never know his parents that travelled from one social retreat to another. A mere photograph in a frame. Never experiencing love. Only isolation from those that could.

A prodigy and insanelly intelligent.

Nothing was beyond Seth's intelligence. Or eventual knowledge. Knowing things without knowing why. It was as if he had lived a former life but had not left the memory of it behind. Initially difficult for him to assimilate with others. As he grew older, assimilated with the world about him. And silently blended into society.

As if he was one of them. Which he was not.

With multiple Doctorates in Bio-chemistry and Advanced Software Engineering. His unique record had attracted the attention of a secret research agency. There is a fine line between genius and insanity. As history has shown. Seth was being paid by the Order and as such, would be considered a genius.

Background checks revealed his father, despite being a retired Merchant Banker, had no criminal convictions. His mother, despite being a member of a Baptist Church group, had no ties to al-Qaeda. Seth was a loner. No political nor religious beliefs. Appearing on no one's radar. No one's but the Agency's. Unseen by the outside world. Beneficial, yet expendable.

The perfect candidate to head a clandestine research team at a subterranean laboratory in New York.

The year is 2048.

Medical advancements had slowed the death rate. The world's population had passed 17 billion people. And continued to climb. The earth groaned with each new birth. Skies stained with industrial emissions. Oceans saturated with human effluent and toxins. The planet struggles to feed the existing mouths. Only to have a million new mouths begging for food each new day. And the next. The earth a finite petri dish overflowing with multiplying human microbes.

America, crippled by reparation payments. Just as Germany had been a century and half before. Oh how the wheel had come full circle. America and North Korea had rattled their sabers. One taunting the other to cross the line. America blinked first.

The United Nations had collapsed.

Having failed to address world issues it had been established to prevent. Preferring to pamper the militant Security Council, than to aid the passive majority. Members abandoned the impotent institution.

A new organization. One they was said never existed. Emerged from the shadows to take control. The New World Order. Its ever-seeing eye stamped on the blood red banners hung from government buildings around the world.

It had won, not on the battlefield. But in the boardrooms.

Its headquarters based on the shores of Lake Geneva. Comprised of seven global economic provinces. Known as the G7. Controlling much of the world's wealth. Industrial dynasties governed the vast territorial Provinces. Lessor nations now reduced to subservient puppet states. Indentured to their big brother. Too weak to argue otherwise. Surrendering democratic rights in exchange for protection and economic survival.

If Dante had envisioned nine circles descending to the frozen pit of hell. Then the Order had echelons that ascended to an equally sinister pinnacle. At the peak was the Chairman. John Patmos. At the base. The plebs living in limbo.

Patmos had maintained the G7 in a state of harmony. Ruling with an iron fist, crushing anyone who opposed him. Growing social unrest was proving disruptive to the Order's authority. Underground resistance movements had surfaced. Demanding freedom and rights. The Social Network was unplugged. Leaving the world disconnected for the first time in half a century.

The people protested and global civil disobedience was on the rise.

Augustus Braun was the Order's Secretary of State.

And John Patmos' right hand man. Braun was a mysterious man of substantial wealth. He had an origin into which no one dared to inquire. His father had crawled from the rubble left by the Allied bombings to forge a dynasty of industrial wealth and power. His own son Nero was equally as enigmatic. Having a reputation as a playboy and womanizer. Braun's position having protected him on several occasions.

Braun and Patmos were cut from different cloth. Though Patmos ruled with a firm hand. Braun preferred a more ruthless approach. His henchman Alex Noren, head of the Order's Secret Service. With impunity to interrogate and kill. The Bogeyman as he had become known, effective at infiltrating the Resistance. But even Noren was struggling to stem the growing tide of agitators pounding at the Order's door.

Patmos and Braun were the two most powerful men in the modern world.

They were facing a situation growing out of control. If left unchecked, the ants would soon over power the Beast...

About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton New Zealand. Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book *E is for Effort*. That led to his debut novel *The Ring*. And so began the trilogy of Kristina. The apocalyptic *Lady in Red* is the final installment. Stepping aside momentarily to write *Puppet on a String*. Before embarking on the soon to be released second installment *The Mist*. Each book stand on their own. Characters and passage of time stitching them together as one. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, romance and adventure. When not writing, he enjoys innovating new products, golfing and hearty workouts at the gym. Or hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children. Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at a local tavern talking to complete strangers unravelling the mysteries of Life.

Please visit www.obooko.com to discover other books by Bradley Pearce:

E is for Effort

The Ring

The Mist

Lady in Red

Puppet on a String

Alfie

Three Wishes

Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty One
Chapter Twenty Two
Chapter Twenty Three
Chapter Twenty Four
Chapter Twenty Five
Chapter Twenty Six
Chapter Twenty Eight
Chapter Twenty Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty One
Chapter Thirty Two
Chapter Thirty Three
Chapter Thirty Four
Chapter Thirty Five

Chapter Thirty Six
Chapter Thirty Eight
Chapter Thirty Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty One
Chapter Forty Two
About Edward (Ned) John Parffet
Lady in Red
About Bradley Pearce