



DARK HARVEST

THE LEGACY OF FRANKENSTEIN

TALES OF PROMETHEA

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Dark Harvest: The Legacy of Frankenstein

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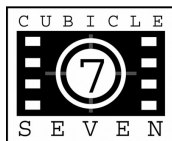
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This book is dedicated to all Prometheans everywhere.

From Hawaii to the Philippines, from Poland to Japan,
from Brighton to Aberdeen.

Thanks to all of you we have all of this.

Here's to a whole lot more!

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Foreword

In 1974, everything changed.

It started in America, of course. Everything changed in Britain in February 1975 when a couple of young games-obsessed ex-school friends (one called Steve Jackson - the other name escapes me) founded a company in their flat that they called Games Workshop. After reaching out to the world via their modest fanzine *Owl & Weasel*, a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons* arrived on their doorstep. It had been sent to them by its creator Gary Gygax. The brown box contained a set of three slightly less-than-impressive-looking booklets, but it opened up a whole new world; an amazing interactive fantasy game world for the imagination that was to change their lives forever. Ignoring the non-believers, they committed everything to Games Workshop, living out of a van for three months so they could afford to rent a tiny office, before finally opening their first shop.

Dungeons & Dragons came from a desire to tell stories. It was a fantasy role-playing game, created out of a desire amongst some players of traditional wargames to tell the stories of individual characters, rather than of whole

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armies. D&D was an incredible success that spawned a whole industry.

Things changed again in the UK in August 1982. The same two ex-school friends wrote and published an entirely new kind of book. The Warlock of Firetop Mountain was the first Fighting Fantasy gamebook. It was an interactive novel, a complete solo role-playing adventure with branching narrative and a game system attached. It was a book in which YOU the reader were the hero. All you needed was two dice and a pencil (and a great many fingers in pages) and you could tell your own story, make your own decisions, and have your own adventures. You could also be sucked into the pits of Hell, according to some slightly unbalanced individuals writing to Nationwide to give the books the kind of publicity you just couldn't buy at the time. The FF gamebooks went on to sell over 17 million copies in 28 languages, and were the reason why so many people got into the hobby. Thirty years on and you can still buy the books, and now the apps. The FF story continues and this year saw the release of Blood of the Zombies to mark the 30th anniversary.

Gamers play to tell stories. It doesn't matter whether they do it on their own with a book, dice and pencil, or in a group around a table, or on a smart phone, PC or console connected to the amazing possibilities of the Internet.

Dark Harvest: The Legacy of Frankenstein continues this fine and noble tradition. Storytelling is at its heart, from the short stories that have featured in role-playing gamebooks, to the stories those books allow you to tell. With this book, you can simply submerge yourself in the tales of Promethea – the country created and ruled by

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Victor Frankenstein. When you come out at the other side,
I am certain you will have a few stories of your own to tell.

May your imagination never fail!

Ian Livingstone

November 2012

Introduction

What if Frankenstein got it right?

What if Victor Frankenstein had embraced his discoveries rather than seeking to destroy them?

Rejected by his peers and his family, hunted by the Creature, Victor slips into the background of history. Manipulating people, events, whole countries, Frankenstein slowly plans and executes his revenge.

Carved out of the Balkan conflicts of the mid-1800s, Victor Frankenstein hijacks the unification of Romania and creates his own country - Promethea. Though established on high ideals of equality and scientific advancement for the good of all, in Promethea and beyond, the reality is very different.

Creating Promethea saw Victor make deals that compromised the integrity of his vision. Almost entirely walled off from the rest of Europe, Promethea is a nightmare where some of the rich elite feed off the beauty and strength of the poor. While incredible advances across all scientific disciplines promise a bright future, the land is blighted by a new feudal regime – the Harvest.

Even as Frankenstein moves to bring Promethea in line

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with his original vision, so he is stalked by the Creature. Seeking to destroy all of his creator's works, the Creature and the resistance movement he leads often find they share Frankenstein's goals. Both Victor and the Creature know that Frankenstein's gift must never escape the fortified borders of Promethea, bringing the dark harvest to all the world.

Driving Ghierghiev

By Andrew Harman

So, how do your first impressions of this country, Promethea, sit with you? Do we live up to the expectations you have heard, the prejudices you live under? Have you cast eyes upon the freaks of nature that populate our hills, witnessed the stitched-together creations roaming our towns, smelled the sewn-up sub-humans gathered and re-animated from long dead cadavers? No?

Have you felt the mountains shake beneath the weight of the steam-belching metal leviathans, which hurl themselves along our rail links? Do your lungs burn with the acrid smoke from the stacks of industry as they poison the skies and strangle the sun from the very heavens above? Again, no?

If you have the slightest belief, Mr Howard, that I am unaware of how the world beyond our borders regards us, then that mistake sits squarely upon your unadorned and humanly fragile shoulders. I admit some of it is quite inventive - even somewhat amusing. If such groundless truths are held in the same regard as that of elves, trolls and river maidens whose singing causes sailors to beach

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their ships, then the children can sleep happy. Promethea is the monster under the bed. With unfathomable teeth, the wildest of claws, but a myth below the mattress. Your eyes are currently unaccustomed to seeing what is clearly before you, struggling to adjust, happier to believe in the fanciful rather than accept the substance of fact. It takes time, Mr Howard, to see Promethea with anything approaching true clarity. Not the marauding and mythical joke beneath the bed, but the malevolent and actual threat, peeling back the bedclothes of sleeping innocents. At least that is, in the eyes of the detractors, the scared gossip mongers who choose not to understand. It takes years before those unaccustomed can look directly into the glare of scientific discoveries made here. Decades of gradual enlightenment and focus on the burning phosphorous of discovery before the untrained can, without having to stand bedazzled as would a Neanderthal emerging from the hibernation of centuries, look upon the pantheon of Promethean achievement. And even then, prepared, it can be a step too far. Many have been overwhelmed to a state where sanatoriums are the only real choice. With my guidance you will learn to spot matters worthy of fixing upon. Your eye will learn to see what is hidden to all but the chosen. After all, is that not why you are here - to learn to envision the glory that is ours - the aching envy of the combined outside world?

Take no offence that I care not to enquire as to the comfort of your journey across country, Mr Howard, it is not that I am unconcerned with pleasantries, just that they consume valuable time. Time which I find others have in such short supply. It should not be considered as a personal affront. Since I am more than well acquainted

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with the fittings the coach affords, I am in no doubt you were unduly well treated during your journey. That you have arrived, complete and in an apparent state of health suitable for purpose is enough, at present, for us both to know.

I must admit to finding your arrival here somewhat worthy of note, Mr Howard. An effort of will that would be considered, by what fraction of me remains the romantic within, on a level par with that of a drone ant hauling the thorax of a wasp back to the hive. Driven, straining and yet utterly trivial in scale and meaning. Bravo and pip pip, as you English so quaintly exclaim at such times. Europe I hear, is far from the most comfortable, or accommodating of areas for the traveller. Nonetheless, such hurdles and hoops of inconvenience have proved no deterrent. Noteworthy, you will agree.

I find however that it is your voracious curiosity, which is most agreeable. That fevered drive to discover for yourself, the hallowed truth. To throw back the padding of gossip and supposition and dive hungry and raw into what lies beneath the skin of Promethea. Your most powerful attribute it would seem. But crude and naive, Mr Howard. This voracious curiosity inhabits you like lust. As desperate and clammy as a hormonal teenager, eager to throw back the pale legs of any girl who would let you in and dive, throbbing and raw into what lies beneath the skin of her. You must learn a degree of self-control if you are not to find severe peril and lasting personal discomfort are your new waking companions. That you have such casual disregard for personal safety, subsuming it in favour of pure knowledge, is somewhat impressive. Foolhardy. Reckless in the extreme. Kitten curious, but still

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impressive. Many have found themselves raised on spikes, eviscerated, face to face with their own entrails, for far less interesting endeavours. Reined in, your lust for knowledge will take you far. Assuming you last sufficiently long enough.

That you have such high regard for your achievements in arriving here, deep within our impenetrable borders, far from the checkpoints, square within my province of Vrancea, I can also find worthy of mention, if only for its simplistic over-confidence and misplaced naivety.

To what level do you consider that your arrival here is entirely your own doing, Mr Howard? Your own steam? Take, for a second's fraction, your papers, checked, stamped, examined, rechecked in triplicate at the border crossing. Do you truly believe they should have allowed you the relatively unhindered entry you experienced? As to your incessant repetition that you had legitimate business, genuine cause, to cross into Mother Promethea, should that have convinced the most stringent of guards going about their detailed security checks? And the personal strip-searches, did you not sense unbridled relief that they were less personal, intimate and thorough than reputation had led you to expect?

A raised hand of protest from you, Mr Howard? You were just awaiting the right time to rise indignant and fuming at the barbaric and degrading treatment which foreign visitors must endure at the borders. Am I correct to halt you before the snippy tirade begins? Swallow your indignation, terrier. Believe me when I assure you that the cursory internal examination of your person was necessary. It was essential that your entry to Promethea had about it the appearance of degrading and ritual

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humiliation expected. Easy passage into the country is a cause for deep suspicion to those who may witness it. And suspicion of any level is a dangerous cancer.

You appear dissatisfied with this matter? Then consider the incident to have been, as it were, a rite of passage and let it rest. I confess, I found it amusing to test the resolve of your curiosity once again. Many would have turned back to the shadows of blissful ignorance when faced with the ordeal of the cavity examination. I offer congratulations at finding you more than the man for the job. But allow me to enquire if you did not, even for a moment, consider how your entry to the most tightly stitched of countries, the most impenetrable of territories, was accomplished with such relative ease? You did not see the queues you miraculously bypassed, the files of paperwork settling like snow? Eyes, Mr Howard, open them and use them both.

Your face shows confusion and doubt. Suffice to say that, had I required your exclusion, had you failed any of the tests, shown the slightest weakness in your resolve, your body would have been found, years from now, pinned to the floor of the River Prut. Yes, Mr Howard, even this distant from any of the borders, my fingers unlatch certain doors, influence particular guards, line whatever pockets I choose. Are you beginning to see the sticky webs upon which you have stepped? The strings of influence tightening around your pitifully trusting neck? Are you beginning to adjust your eyes to the simplest of truths - you did not make your way here unaided, Mr Howard. The doors were already open to you, unlatched, unlaced, the borders available to penetrate by you and your thrusting, hormonal curiosity.

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I sense you are considering this, doubting my words. Not unexpected at this juncture. You are wondering how this may have been possible. Look to that double portrait above the fireplace, you will recognise one of the men. It is a reasonable likeness, although I consider it fails to show my inner strength of character, but the other man, slender, authoritative, you will have heard his name in rumour, faceless, mysterious - the founding rock of Promethea. I give you, the Baron. He and I share that frame, you see? Frankenstein and I upon the same canvas, made immortal with the same oils. Oh, how that phrase drips with irony lost upon you. But you will learn, Mr Howard.

I see you flinch with disbelief and incredulity. How could this be even close to the truth? How can I claim that image can be the likeness of the Baron you have heard so many legends and rumours regarding? Even now you are doubting your eyes, measuring those brush strokes against what you believe to know of his appearance and finding them at odds. Surely it cannot be. The man is too young. A great-grandson of the great man, perhaps? After all, the Baron's greatest works were carried out long before the last century had even begun. I see agreement with my speculation, growing behind your eyes. But before the cement of certainty sets, a pair of pertinent questions.

How sure are you that the works you have been allowed to hear of were indeed his greatest? And, have I at any point mentioned precisely when that double portrait was painted? I see you doubting, questioning. That is good, Mr Howard. Second only to suspicion, here in Promethea, your worst enemy will be assumption. If knowledge is said to be power, then certainty is the currency that can buy it.

And here is a shilling for your reassurance. Do not

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doubt that you are in the presence of a man close to the ear of the Baron, near to the centre of it all. You cannot see how, cannot sense the strings I purport to pull? That is as it should be. I would be sorely derelict in my duty if your untutored eyes witness anything other than what I intend. Have no confusion. You are here, exactly as I wished you to be. Now, I take it you have your pen, Mr Howard? And, sufficient light for your note taking? Then it is time for you to listen.

Here are the Rules of Engagement. I shall begin simply with broad and so called, 'phrases of low provocation' - that way you may find you do at least comprehend some of what I say and, perhaps with more importance, accept that it is the utter truth. Otherwise... Well, suffice to say I have witnessed many whose mind could not grasp this new and advancing truth, or that could not wish to grasp it, struggling against acceptance of what is plainly fact. Those that fight it veer inevitably towards madness. You can believe me when I say that. The truth cannot be fought against no more than one can stand against the rising seas.

Very well, how simply shall I begin? I offer a statement. A fact. Three words only and I shall observe your reaction. Flinch and I may not continue. Prepared? Very well.

I was there.

Promising, no sign of disbelief in you as yet. Perhaps something a little stronger to push the bounds of your credulity.

I was there, when it all began.

You are weaning well, young reporter.

I was there, when it all began at Lake Como.

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Bravo, you hide it well. But I can tell immediately that you don't believe me. I can hear the quickening of your pulse, smell that spat of perspirative fear you have just released. And even were I to be blindfold in the depth of the darkest night I would still see it all over your face. The doubt, the incomprehension. I can taste the chemicals your hasty brain is releasing as it is gripped by the measure of it, trying so hard to work out something as simple as the mathematics of dates and times. Spinning and returning in futility to the simple old rules of ageing, the outdated belief that we cannot exist beyond our allotted time.

Well, your reactions hold no surprise for me. Believe me when I say I have seen such incredulity worn on many a face, in many situations, many, many times. I forget the number of those who have struggled to even begin to wonder how they could ever start to believe the New Truth. The Baron's New Truth. And, I can understand that. We Prometheans have come so far in such a short time that for others to begin the process of catching up seems a challenge in itself. Indeed I pity you, attempting to comprehend these sciences is bewildering in the extreme. But I feel I should offer you a scrap of comfort, do not concern yourself unduly in the architecture of the science the Baron has built, just witness the power of it all, revel in the unstopppable strength of it all. Gods only know I do.

Very well, you currently have three choices, Mr Howard. You can choose to accuse me of spinning untruths and attempt to leave, heading back to England to convince anyone that would listen that you have a story of fantastical madness the world must hear. Portray that correctly and you may enjoy some success as a novelty

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author for children and the simple of mind. Or, you can choose to close your own small and terrified mind and attempt to disbelieve what I have to say and again attempt to leave. Take that path of denial and I can guarantee you will not be rid of the doubts and questions that will haunt your midnight thoughts. The rumours and gossip that has brought you here, to me, could they be merely a fraction of the real truth? Could you live, discomfort free, knowing that you still have no understanding of our Promethean endeavours? Is it true or untrue? I can guarantee two things. You will never know and that insecurity of thought will unravel your mind to madness. Or, your choice can be to accept that you are poised on the edge of hearing a truth to shake your world irrevocably and, in so doing, remain here to be reborn with a radically altered view of what is true.

Do consider carefully though your position. It was you that came to me here in Vrancea, you that purport to show interest, you that will perhaps be attempting to leave this room, if you are able. I can, if you choose, close my eyes for a few moments and remove my knife belt if you consider that may make your exit any less difficult for you. But of course, in doing that you will be disbelieving what I know you have already heard, that the man sat opposite you, talking to you, has abilities and senses beyond the wildest of fictions. Do you trust your disbelief to that measure? It is, Mr Howard, your choice, and your life.

That you have remained seated and listening is a good sign, Mr Howard. I do dislike the smell of blood so early in the day. I find it lingers.

Very well, what have I given you to this point? Well, you know that I was there, in Lake Como, at the birth of

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Promethea. At least, that is what I have claimed and I expect you will be requiring some evidence of validation. Well prepare for disappointment. There is no proof. Not of that day in the Autumn of 1828. No list of attendees exists. All travel documentation of all the delegates has been burnt. In point of fact, all evidence of that seminal gathering by the shores has been wiped clean from the face of the Earth. Although some do say that if the weather is suitable and the boards upon the floor are sufficiently dry you can still see the desperate scratches of human fingernails in the wood. Romantics even go so far as to say the trees still echo with the screams of that dying man resurrected. I confess I have not returned to that desolate lake house to check on such trivial matters, but I do suspect that such evidence would remain. As to the lingering screams... Well, if such screams can indeed remain bound and chained to the spot they were first heard then I can attest that the screams issuing from the throat of that dead man being dragged back to life are more than worthy of such a supernatural honour.

But speculation aside, the Baron is very particular about the hiding of such momentous details. Even then he knew how high were the stakes with which he was playing. Such foresight. Such an eye for the long game.

So, in lieu of documented proof, such as the trivia of dates and times, you will have my words. The words of a man who was there, approaching a century ago, when the seeds of Promethea were scattered before a bewildered group of terrified delegates.

Yes, that's a hard one to swallow down is it not? Approaching a century. Four score years and five to be precise. I see you struggling to comprehend how a man of

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my apparent age can really be that old. How old do I look to you, mid-thirties? Yes, I would prefer something a little older, a better air of authority, but the surgeon was a little overzealous. He won't have that chance again. Augmenting the rank and file soldier doesn't require the artistic flourishes of age reconstruction.

Do not ask me to explain any of the sciences involved in any of the Baron's works. That is another Rule of Engagement. I cannot begin to comprehend his methods. Indeed they are as unfathomable to me as the very existence of life itself. I could no longer attempt an understanding of the works and thinking of the Baron Frankenstein as could a worm turn and, by its own means, fly. Although that does put me in mind of a tale I recently happened upon from the University in Targu Mures, where a group of particularly bright and adventurous trainee Augment surgeons had indeed succeeded in making exactly that scenario happen. It was a short and ill-fated flight by all accounts, but made no means less remarkable for its brief duration, do you think?

No, it is beyond me to understand the science behind the wonders. I need not comprehend how His Science can be made to work. I simply need to understand what such wonders can be made to do. How I can make all of it work for me. In fact, witness, if there is proof of validity required, this very situation, this very moment in place and time. Here you are listening to a man who, if the normal laws of nature were to have remained unchanged, would long since have been interred to a grave, sitting comfortably in a house built by money and influence gained by that man from over a century of dealing. A position I could only have achieved due to my continued

association with the Boyar Vladimir Ghergiev and his loyalty to the Baron.

Of course, this could all have so easily been so different. It is hard to imagine I grant you, but there were many times, many moments when Ghergiev could and would have gratefully turned and fled from all of this. Until, that is, he was minded to see how great the potential of the Baron's science promised to be. A minding that, as I'm sure you are beginning to comprehend, was resultant in no small part from my actions, my persuasions, my direction. It took seeing but a glimpse of what Frankenstein imagined, back by that cold lakeshore in 1828, to ensure that a part of that future would be mine... Be ours. I cannot enlighten you as to how precisely the fortunes of myself and the Boyar Ghergiev would have developed had not I ensured that we took the Baron's offer, save other than to say we would have remained insufficiently wealthy and unsatisfyingly short lived on this plane. Oh yes, and it is almost certain that we would have lived to our bitter end still extracting salt in the shadow of the Urals.

1828 had failed to start in the most prosperous of manners. In January the miners finally broke into the underground brine we had been digging towards for two years. They began extracting gallons of the liquid. Excitement rose as we saw just how concentrated was the brine - little boiling needed, no need to invest in more chrens. There was a chance, a feeling among the Ghergievs that we could put a dent in the Strogonov's profits from salt, take them head on, strengthen our name around Solikamsk, maybe even donate a church or two. But the wave of enthusiasm was soon dashed. The salt

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was tainted, too impure for any use. Too high in phosphates or some such, again the science I do not understand. The tonnage would only be sellable if we were to invest in purification systems. I advised Ghergiev to my most thorough, offering choices and schemes that stretched even my more optimistic of financial outlooks, but it all looked unfavourable, too much had been invested on top of what had already been sunk in. It looked dark. Mother Russia would soon lose a saltery and, along with it, the Ghergiev fortune. Built on hard labour and sound investment, it would be as worthless as the brine in that buried lake. But while Mother Russia could afford the loss, the Ghergievs could not. The business founded by Vladimir's father, the fortune, would be gone. And such a financial disaster would reflect badly on me Anatoly Rudek, my currency as financial adviser would be measured in tens of kopecks. By the end of that miserable January, vodka was looking to be the only solace.

I confess now that I almost dismissed the man that entered my office unannounced as a young retard with no knowledge of his business. That he was intelligent was in no doubt. That he had a bearing, a presence about him was also indisputable, that he knew anything about the salt trade was plain for all to doubt. Beyond simply tasting the tainted brine and knowing its lack of worth, he subjected it to numerous tests in many small vials and shining apparatus, almost seeming to find delight in uncovering other more and exotic impurities. Metals, organic compounds, lithium salts... The incomprehensible list grew with every test. If it was designed to impress it did not. I was forced to accompany this time wasting buffoon whilst I should have been putting my shoulder to saving

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our investments and reputation. Already the Ghergiev name was becoming a source of ridicule around Solikamsk.

To my sheer surprise the young man closed down his apparatus and immediately offered a price for the brine. The brine, hear. Unprocessed, straight from the ground to the barrel and to ships on the Kama River. Madness at a price I could not refuse, or so I thought. Had I known then who he was and what he was to do with that liquid, the negotiations would have been very different. But there were no clues that this man with his apparatus was the most influential scientist the world could ever see. He left with a contract and a hint of more to come. And a list of other, more exotic chemicals he suggested I sourced in quantity for much reward. Borohydrates of saltpetre, saltashes of caesium metal, the list was incomprehensible save for the offers made per ton. These offers seemed like wild promises coming from this slender youth, but there was something about him, something stronger, deeper that I sensed in him - a wise-ness, shrewd and driven, and a sense of intelligence, which no young man should possess.

Of course in Vladimir's eyes I was a godsend. I had sold piss to the bewildered and saved the family fortune. That night the vodka flowed almost as freely as did the tainted brine into barrels.

As the spring rolled into summer and ship after ship was loaded with our god-awful brine, some of the dissenting voices were quieted. But for others, this shipping of foul brine was an insult designed to destroy the reputation of the finest of salts in all Russia. Solikamsk was a town built on the pure crystalline reputation of its salt - a huge business in which the Ghergiev saltery was

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regarded as palatably as a turd in the sugar bowl. The attacks came with almost predictable inevitability. Mobs set upon the chrens, holing the vital boiling trays with picks and burning the saltery to dust. Had we been processing the brine we would have been ruined. Fortunately it barely affected the loading of liquid into barrels. More damaging was the wall of enmity that grew against anything associated with the Ghergievs. Employees were targeted, pressured not to attend work on pain of a broken limb. Solikamsk closed ranks against us.

When the invitation to Como arrived, hand couriered, its timing was almost miraculous, in my eyes at least. Vladimir, however, took a little more persuading.

Of course he had suffered no dealings with the mysterious young man and so, when presented with an invitation to travel to Lake Como, Italy, within a fortnight, he was less than willing to attend. After all, what benefit could it be? I reread the invitation, adding subtle embellishments to the enigmatic communication. Vladimir began to hear what I wanted him to. It was a ground floor deal, an offer held open to select hand-picked entrepreneurs from across the most powerful of European countries, the formation of a consortium of like-minded business and political powerhouses the breed of which the world had never seen. And the rewards would be equally momentous. Of course, back then I had not the faintest inkling of how world shaking those benefits would prove to be. The founding of a new country in which scientific advances could be encouraged at paces the world had never seen. And what of those advances? Near immortality? The stuff of fevered dreams, surely? Surgical and medical techniques to enhance every

aspect of human physical prowess? Utter bewildered fiction, beyond doubt. Not in Promethea. Those and more, far more... Advances in almost every aspect of human and technological development.

I see you looking at me more closely now, Mr Howard, trying and failing to find how I differ from you, in how many ways I am superior. You will need the use of glasses of magnification for their detection. Not for me the sporting of scars as fashion items. Sensory enhancements should be hidden, no? Or would you have espionage agents dressed in the subtle stage uniform of the circus clown?

But what of the Como expedition, I sense you ask? Persuasion alone seemed insufficient to extract Vladimir from his increasingly regular rounds of drinking and whoring. How obvious the effects of a sudden excess of money on the weaker willed amongst us. I was certain that to miss this tantalising opportunity would be of maximal regret. Yes, I admit it, that mysterious brine-buying benefactor had burrowed under my skin. In all my years of business I had never seen such unusual behaviour and witnessed such exquisite timing as to be there in almost the instant the rancid brine spilled forth from the Ural rocks. This man interested me. I sensed he held keys to doors, the like of which I could barely imagine, passes to vaults of secrets to astound the world. I had to be at that meeting.

Attend on my own? Impossible. The invitation was clearly for Vladimir Ghergiev, saltery owner; without him, in person, there would be no access. His reluctant inertia would have to be overcome. It was to happen sooner than he would have suspected. Three hours after midnight, that

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night, in fact.

Returning from an evening's gambling in the East end of Solikamsk, the coach wheels clattering in noisy disregard for the sleeping residents of the area, we were suddenly halted. The three women accompanying us, their services won on a succession of minor bets of twenty-one, were the first to grow nervous. Outside the coach we could hear angry voices. Our driver shouted for them to clear. The coach lurched backwards as the horses were provoked and in almost an instant the door was snatched open. Flaming brands held by the mob lit the streets. Give him some credit, Vladimir stood his ground, but simple bluster fuelled by an excess of vodka was no match for the anger of the mob. Before I could react they had him out of the coach, disappearing under chants and bodies, pinning him to the cobbles. Then the chanting... I can still hear it. 'Turdgiev! Turdgiev!' Quite imaginative I thought. The women were hauled out of the coach, and whisked away. Then the crowd parted around Vladimir, pinned to the ground under four men, helpless. A masked one approached, container in hand.

'A reminder,' he said, his voice muffled beneath the folds of cloth around his head. 'This is what salt should look like.' He pulled a large handful from the container. 'Recognise it?' Ghergiev struggled. 'Have a closer look. See? White. Pure. See how it tastes.' The handful of salt was rammed into Ghergiev's face, pressed into his mouth. He struggled, gagged, spat, but another handful followed. The mob jeered and parted reluctantly as a barrel was rolled up. 'Compare it to this,' shouted the one with the salt box. At his signal the barrel was upturned. Gallons of acrid brine emptied over Ghergiev's prone body, cold,

alkaline and burning with concentrated salts. The mob parted as quickly as they had appeared.

I helped Vladimir up. He took the vodka I offered, filling his mouth before vomiting noisily in the street. He downed the rest of the bottle in moments, trying to rid his mouth of the salt taste, raging angrily against a mob that had vanished. As the coach carried us through the streets he ranted about the purchase of guns and other weapons, of retaliation, finding the perpetrators and bringing them to humiliation and justice.

It took the best of my diplomatic skills and most of the next day to convince Vladimir that such deeds would only inflame the matter, and that no good would come of such action. If, perhaps, the Strogonovs were to add their influence to the mobs then everything the Ghergievs stood for could be destroyed in a wild night of flame. His best course of action would be to let tempers cool, angers calm. Remove the catalyst of their fury for a time by simply being unavailable. Say in Italy, not far from the shores of a large lake, perhaps. Under the circumstances I was surprised it took him quite so long to see the wisdom of my advice. But then, I was still somewhat unskilled in the arts of persuasion.

It was to take another attack on the saltery and a firebrand mob stoning the mansion to winkle the hermit-crab from his shell. But finally, under cover of darkness we raced from the estate by coach. The pace was relentless. We had little time and a vast distance to cover if we were to make this life-changing meeting. Some nights we would attempt sleep on the move, pausing only at remote inns to change horses for extortionate fees. It was almost impossible to sleep with anything approaching restfulness,

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with the incessant clattering of hooves and the jolting of the coach. Only by hiring a second driver could we maintain the pace, one sleeping somehow whilst the other spurred on team after team of horses. It seems a miracle to me that they weren't driven so hard that their hearts did not rupture with the strain. Now, of course, we have horses especially augmented for such high speed flights across country, their extra hearts capable of pumping blood at unnatural rates allowing them to barely break sweat at speeds other horses could never attain. Enough with the disbelieving glances, Mr Howard. We have such creations and, should you need convincing of that indisputable fact, I can mount you upon one and let it take the very breath from you, let it pound hooves until the living air you are trying to breathe is snatched from your inferior lungs as if by a howling gale. Ah, would that our coach had been strapped to a pair of those monsters, the journey may have been days shorter. But, we were forced to settle with non-augments. And as mountains and plains sped past outside the coach window, somehow we managed to talk. Short, stilted conversations above the sound of metal-bound wheels on dirt, the more interesting of which were fuelled on vodka, taken I might add, to aid our sleep.

Among some of the many matters that came to light during our seeming endless incarceration in that racing cell, was the vitally important fact that Ghergiev's preference in women was for the darker of hair and fuller of figure. In his words, 'gingers rut desperately, like feral cats with minutes to live and I fear that I should break the skinny blondes, like the dried sticks they resemble.' Other useful opinions I collected for the future were that he

completely loathed his father's decision to stake his future wealth on salt extraction. Vladimir, surprisingly confessed one night after an evening meal of vodka and betel nuts taken at high speed over another nameless mountain range, to being painfully aware that he was far from being the most forward looking of men, but that even he could see that the State would control the salt prices in Solikamsk. His father had, in his eyes, knowingly placed the fortune of the Ghergiev's into the hands of faceless and spineless bureaucrats with no knowledge of what made good salt. Something about the way he spoke of this, gripping the vodka bottle as one would hold a neck one desired to strangle, made me believe that Vladimir took this choice as a personal spite. His father all but castrating the business. Brief though some of these conversations were, and even without any actual concrete admission from Ghergiev to actually confirm this, I was surprised to build up a growing impression that he knew exactly how much the future of his fortunes depended on my choices and actions and, while I sensed how much he deeply loathed this reliance on me, there was a current of relief that I was there, filling in for his ignorance in money matters and futures markets, and somehow side-stepping the worst of his father's fiscal sabotage. He knew that he needed me, could recognise my worth, but hated himself and me in equal measures for all of that.

Then, late one evening, after what seemed like an interminable prison sentence, we cleared the mountains and looked down on the expanse of Lake Como. It was a beautiful sight, not just for the geography, the light and the colours of the trees in full autumn colours, but, for me, it was beautiful for what it represented. Though I still had

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no clear idea of precisely what this meeting would offer, I knew that it was the promise that had brought me here on a breakneck dash to this lake. The promise of a new future.

As we drove toward the shore, the sun heading towards the far mountains, I began to see other coaches, their doors sporting crests and coats of arms clearly not of local origin. Leather curtaining flicked at the windows as occupants from distant provinces glanced secretly out, attempting to get a measure of precisely what they had entered into. As we were driven towards a small jetty, Ghergiev glanced around, his face adopting the expression I have come to know well over the years. The somewhat uncomfortable look, the pensive furrow between the eyebrows, the one he thought he hid so well but was so clear to me. The one born of insecurity and inferiority, and a lifetime's frustrating underachievement. The coaches that were already parked and waiting, and the ones still arriving, all had about them the air of success, of money and power. As we stepped out of our coach for what felt like the first time in an eternity, I began to recognise some of the family crests. Austrians, Germans, French and more, powerful families from across Europe had sent representatives to this tiny corner of Como, all here on the invitation of the Baron.

From the wary and uncomfortable glances dancing between the gathering strangers, it was clear that all were unsure of their situation, surprised by how far the Baron's invitation had reached and, almost certainly, above all, they were as clueless as I regarding the precise identity of our host. I can only guess that a final coach had arrived for, as the occupant stepped out, a representative from

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Prussia, if I recall correctly - just like the Prussians to be the last to arrive - there was a movement from behind the row of poplars that headed towards the jetty. All eyes turned as a dozen uniformed men stepped from behind the trees. They said not a word but their intention was clear, it was time for us to board the four boats that were steaming towards the shore.

As we approached I studied the uniforms of the men. It was new to me, unknown. As was the crest on each shoulder of the... Suddenly I was at a loss. What were they? Soldiers, ceremonial guards of honour, the concierge's team of wine waiters? Certainly they were not openly sporting any weaponry, no swords at their sides, no firearms or clubs, but they had about them an air what I can only describe as solidity. One has surely seen circus performers, acrobats and those that can lift unfeasible weights? They have about them a certain density of stature. These twelve men had all of that in finely tailored uniforms sporting a crest that was unknown to me. A flame cradled by an open hand.

Yes, this symbol is known well to the world now, the symbol of Promethea, the flames of creation. But back in 1828, it was utterly unknown. That these twelve men in uniform were sporting no weaponry was not an omission or error, they simply did not have to. It was a chilling show of strength, subtle to the maximal, but unforgettable. These men carried no weapons because, I came to realise later, they were the weapons.

The four steam boats nudged gently against the jetty and the gathered crowd edged forward. I walked with Ghergiev but suddenly, silently, my path was blocked by one of the strangely uniformed men. If I needed evidence

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that they were not wine waiters, I had it there and then. I felt my fists tighten in annoyance. What was this man doing? I had every right to be there, to attend. I had raced across Europe to be there and he was blocking my entry to the boat. He matched my move as I stepped sideways and as he did so I caught the smell of him, unclean and unwashed, the smell of stale sweat. And, almost as soon, I realised I was wrong. It was something I had smelled before, true, but not from any man's body. I found myself recalling the moments after Ghergiev had been assaulted back in Solikamsk. I had to endure a coach journey with the man, clothes sodden with the contents of a barrel of brine. I recognised the smell again, here on the banks of Lake Como, this guard was issuing it from his clothes like stale sweat, the smell of our foul brine at the temperature of a human body. As I was attempting to make any sense of this, another of the guards ushered Ghergiev forward. I started to form an objection, an argument as why I had to be on that boat, that I carried vital medicines for my master and that... I never completed it.

I heard the sound of a scuffle over to my left. Voices were suddenly raised in fluent Russian, the distinct accent from the lands around Yekaterinburg. A hand was raised and struck out at one of the uniformed men. Lightning fast a white-gloved hand enveloped the fist, halting it and the attack. The Russian, an aide to a fellow delegate, cried out as joints cracked in his fist. The message had been delivered to everyone. The boats were open for only those invited. Even then the Baron knew how to deliver a message simply and clearly and with no room for misinterpretation.

As the boats filled up we were pushed back from the

shore, the guards, for that was indeed what they were, formed a silent line between us and the jetty. The aide, nursing his hand, cast his eyes around for a way onto those boats, but it was never going to be possible against such bulk of resistance.

I still recall the anger and frustration I felt, even now. It burned through me, indignant, powerless. I had engineered my own attendance, ensured that it had happened, suffered the lunatic flight across Europe and only to be halted so close to the meeting I knew would change my life. I knew I had to be there, to understand everything that Ghergiev could not, see the subtleties I was certain would be offered, recognise the chances that were to be taken and used. My mind raced with wild schemes. I knew I could never come close to overpowering those guards, even could I rally an army of those waiting for the boats to return I feared, no, I knew that we would still be no match. Not physically at least. I headed back to our coach, filth stained from the road, listening to the steam engines on the boats as they faded. It was then I realised the sound of pistons was not where I expected. I looked from behind the coach wheel. The boats had turned and, just visible in the deepening night, were heading, not out to a distant and inaccessible island in the lake as I had expected, but were propelling themselves parallel to the shore. I looked into the darkness between the trees on the wooded bank, calculating. If there were more of those guards out there standing sentinel then... There was but one way to determine it. Attempting to look like a man in need of relieving himself after a long coach journey, I headed for the tree line.

The uniformed bulk I expected to step silently into my

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path failed to appear. I stood in the dark of the wood edge listening to the boats' pistons growing ever more distant. I knew I could wait no longer. Slowly, but with ever gathering speed I moved after the boats, ducking between the trees. I can admit now to being utterly in terror for my safety. I expected the feel of heavy hands around my throat at any point, but mercy smiled on me - that was to be another's fate, along with the twist and snap of a fragile neck.

I heard the boats slow and turn in toward the shore. Through the trees, far ahead I could make out the dark shadow of what turned out to be a desolate and broken building, the shattered and age-decayed skeleton of what had once been glorious. As I approached, nervous tension making every footfall, every brush with branches sound ten-fold louder than reality would have, I paused to wonder momentarily as to the reasoning behind the choice of this location. I had no doubts that if you wanted a meeting to not be overheard by the casual passer-by then such a spot, removed as it was from other habitation, would be ideal. It was not until many years later that I was to discover the personal significance of that ruined carcass of a building to the man who had instigated the events of that autumn evening.

I often consider that no small part of my destiny is being guided by the hand of one who knows, one who recognises my worth, one who is purpose set to ensuring I am present to carry out his bidding. Just as I was about to move forward once more, approaching that building with ever more vigilant caution, I was halted in mid stride. Away inland, close but impossible to see through the night and the undergrowth, something erupted from cover,

accelerated rapidly and ploughed through the trees, moving like the most powerful of hunters. The sound of a brief doomed struggle came to me, terminated by what sounded like a muffled human cry and the crunch of bone. I stood, frozen to motionlessness, struggling to convince myself that what I had heard was nothing more than the ritual of nature, of hunter and prey playing out their roles, animal against animal. Indeed, I may have managed to convince myself had it not been for the unmistakable sound of something large and bipedal moving toward the house, caution abandoned, footfalls heavy as if carrying a burden. Choosing my movements with ever more vigilance and stealth I crossed the final distance to the house, edging myself behind a shrub that had grown outside a long shattered window, daring not to consider that a similar fate was destined to be mine.

Hidden as I was by night and by undergrowth, I found myself able to see some of the interior of the building. Although I was unable to witness the whole of the scene I was able to determine enough and hear sufficient to satisfy some of the curiosity that burned through my veins. The group of gathered delegates stood in a rough semi-circle, casting wary glances around them in the light from a few storm lanterns. Their main attention however was fixed upon a single man who addressed them in measured and authoritative tones. Only when he paced towards me was I able to see a small fraction of him. Although his face remained tantalisingly obscured from my view, I felt a growing sense of familiarity, as if I had seen and spoken with this man on a previous occasion. The whereabouts and reasons behind such an encounter did, at that point, remain out of my grasp. Indeed, I spent little thought on

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such matters, I was transfixed by what I was able to hear of the man's speech.

He spoke with utter assurance, of a future so radically different from our mundane present as to be almost the realms of wonder. He spoke of sciences born of reason and taken to levels of craft that would rival the powers of God himself. Feats of engineering that would shrink the world, applications of knowledge and intelligence to gain complete understanding of the very laws of nature itself - power indeed to control the very war of life and death, to determine the outcomes, and push back the dark forces of fatality.

At these words I sensed a growing unease amongst those gathered. It was as if their host had crossed an unseen barrier and stretched their powers of belief beyond breaking. Indeed, as willing as I was to hear more of what this man promised, I too considered this to be a claim somewhat wilder than the average. It was one thing to suggest the founding of a country dedicated to the advancement of science, another to propose the nurturing of technological wonder, but a claim of a far different league to purport to offer controlling power over life and death. And yet, even as I listened to my doubts, gave them air to multiply, there was an aspect to his voice, his confidence, his sheer self-belief that did much to convince me, if not of his validity, then at least of his determination to succeed. I was convinced that this softly spoken man was very possibly the only human being capable of at least approaching an understanding of the mechanisms that gave life to the inert matter of dead flesh. When I think back to that night it should have been of utmost clarity to me precisely where the build up was leading. I should have

anticipated that such bold claims would have to have the support of the most undeniable of demonstrations.

Silently, with the ease of an athlete, an unnaturally large figure stepped into the room and dropped a limp and lifeless body on the floor. It had slunk back into the shadows even before the squeals of outrage erupted from the Russian delegate. It was his aide that lay for all to see, the life strangled out of him from the neck. Somehow I recognised in an instant that the snuffing of his life was what I had heard mere minutes ago and that there, but for the grace of luck, could I have been laying, twisted and destroyed. The body would surely still be warm, blood unclotted in the dead arteries as complete as you or I save the one vital and unfathomable spark that is life itself.

The Russian was working himself up toward unbridled outrage, his fingers reaching for the sword at his side. The host faced him down, reminding the Russian, as if it were of little importance, that all present were instructed to attend alone. A chill ran the length of my spine. That such a minor infraction of a rule should have such drastic consequences. Since when had Mother Justice behaved so severely? The death sentence issued for eavesdropping? I began to like even less the position I had placed myself in.

As vulnerable as I was, I found myself completely captivated by what was about to unravel. The host, with an almost academic disregard for the importance of what he asked, insisted that the Russian confirm the fact that his aide was dead. I sensed the revulsion surging through the Russian as he knelt and was made to check for signs of life. Finding none, as expected, he stepped back, anger rising, desperate for a chance to act, if only for honour's sake. I watched as the shadowy figures of unnaturally

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large men moved towards him. At the same moment, with almost a theatrical flourish, the host produced a large syringe, the like of which would surely have use with cattle. As he approached the body I could, for the first time, see clearly the man at the centre of this extraordinary night. In a moment I knew I had indeed seen him before, but still - and how could my unimproved mind have been so slow - still I could not place where it was I had met him. Looking every inch the medical doctor, he ensured there was no air contained within the syringe, tapping it expertly and expressing some of the fluid it held. As the liquid hit the night air the smell of it carried. I recognised it in a moment, the sharp acrid bitterness of the brine we were barrelling out of the ground. But it was changed. Something else was there, something dark and organic. I watched with growing abhorrence as the man plunged the needle into the corpse's neck. What sickness was this? What need had he of such abuses of the dead? I am certain that an attack would have been made upon him had not two of the unnaturally enhanced guards stepped menacingly from the shadows – a gesture that spoke clearly enough.

I found myself revolted but unable to look away as, the contents of the syringe were emptied into both sides of the dead man's neck, and the host began pressing rhythmically upon the corpse's chest. He pressed, paused, continued. All very deliberate, very practiced and very incomprehensible. Again I was mystified as to the techniques being employed. Quite how he determined that he had completed his work is beyond me to fathom, but, seemingly satisfied, he stood, stepped away from the motionless corpse and, indicating that all there should

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continue to observe events, simply stepped back into the shadows. I believe that none there realised he was leaving, his business complete. I alone heard him leave that desolate building, and I was the sole witness to hear his whisper, almost an incantation in the night air, a single phrase breathed out of him like life itself. 'Promethea awakens.'

Promethea. I could not even begin to realise then what that word would come to mean, the power and the awe it would command, the opportunities it would bring to my reach. That was the moment I first heard the name of the country in which we now stand, but it was to become more than the name of a country, it is a state of mind, a profound way of life - and it began that night. Promethea. A word so powerful as to act in the most unforeseeable of ways.

It was as if that whispered phrase in the night was the life spark to catalyse the action within that darkly lit room. It was impossible to mark the start of it, but the aspect of that corpse changed. The creeping greyness of death seemed to mark a retreat, and the pallor of decay was pushed back. The most impossible of events unfolded. The dead flesh of the deceased man clawed its way back from the black abyss, hauled itself somehow, impossibly, back into life. The man's body was gripped by sudden spasms, writhing uncontrollably, nails clawing at the floor. Then, without warning, he screamed. As if screaming was the method to cast out the final vestiges of death, rid itself of the last miasmas of decay. It was a sight, a sound, a moment engraved upon my memory. I was appalled, disgusted, nauseated by what I could see, and yet I was enthralled, overwhelmed and wild with a heady

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excitement I have felt but a few times since. I had witnessed a scientific miracle. And I was greedy for more.

I sense disappointment within you, a withering knot of dying excitement. You must learn to hide your inner feelings from the muscles that control your facial expressions. Your inner turmoils are exposed as if across banners in full gale. I sense the questions lurching to the forefront of your thoughts as you attempt to readjust to this new and unexpected mundanity, stripped as it seems to be of all spectacle of wonder. Are the rumours you have heard, of a creature reborn from the fires of electricity, of a wild enigmatic scientific genius who sparked life into inanimate flesh, are those rumours just the stuff of gossip fired imaginings, of hyperbole? Well, take heart, Mr Howard, I can inform you of the fact that much of what you have heard is at least true. There is more validity to those rumours than that of, say elves and trolls and river maidens whose singing causes sailors to beach their ships. That monster beneath the bed had about it some substance.

But, what now? Here races the secondary wave of questions, hunting for the truth like so many baying hounds. I believe I know what queries plague you with harpies of confusion, poor child. Where are the lightning rods pricking the sky, harvesting volts, channelling current into corpse? Why is not every hilltop surmounted by collectors of vital life-giving electricity? Where are the elves and the trolls with biscuits and milk? Would you have Promethean science hampered still by such crude and primitive technologies? We are beyond the archaic theatrics of lightning storms now. Continue to listen and perhaps you may see some small fraction of just how far

we have advanced since then.

That electricity is the very essence of life is undisputed. That such mysterious forces can galvanise unreactive cells into being is, at the same instant, truly wondrous and intangibly incomprehensible. That there are more efficient ways of so doing, new developments to shock-start and maintain life, is known to the most basic level student of Promethean science. Imagine if we still had to await the chance meteorological conditions necessary for issuing forth lightning storms each and every time a procedure was called for. Ask me not to explain any of the science. It is beyond my will or indeed urge to understand. Suffice to say that we have moved beyond reliance upon unpredictable surges of static electricity. The potential of ionic fluids has been harnessed to provide the jolt now, charged molecules aligned and arranged in volumetric formulations. The days of the double-pole, open switch arcing on stormy nights are long passed, replaced with careful concocted solutions. And with it comes a new breed of refined skill capable of the control of life itself.

But if you consider that such advances have removed any of the dangers, any of the overwhelming potentials opening up every day, then, again, you are mistaken. The Baron's science is hunting down answers in the darkest corners of ignorance, Frankenstein's hand is guiding his Promethean dream forward to an ever more powerful future. Thus have we replaced lightning bolts with silent needle points. A step closer to the very essence of nature itself would you not agree? After all, how inconvenient for the rest of mankind if every conception was accompanied by the discharges of arcing electricity. I fear prostitutes would have to ground themselves with wires of copper.

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Although, it would perhaps raise the dance of copulation to something more of a spectator event, no? Imagine the powers released during the finest of Roman orgies... Where was I?

I reached the coach moments before the boats steamed back to the jetty. The delegates disembarked in almost silence, just a few muted comments passing between them. I noticed, with some amusement, that each of them kept a good ten feet distant from the recently resurrected Russian aide, eyeing him with a curious mixture of fear, wonder and suspicion. But the overwhelming impression given off from that returning group was that they were far from the same people that had departed that jetty. They were changed, irrevocably. They had witnessed the impossible and were now having to judge how they were going to react to it. Some, I suspect, were taking it more rationally than others. Ghergiev's first action upon entering our coach was to immediately snatch at the vodka bottle and gulp down almost a full quarter of it. He sat there, eyes unfocussed as the other coaches pulled away in various directions, attempting to make sense of the conflicting thoughts and emotions racing through his mind. Even then I had an accurate idea of how he would be attempting to regain clarity of perspective. I had no doubt that the offers made, the promises suggested, the carrots dangled before him would hold a great deal of attraction. I am quite certain that were it not for the enormity of the incident with the Russian aide, then Ghergiev would have embraced the Promethean dream there and then. I gave the driver the order to move off, watching Ghergiev struggle. I felt I was observing a herring gull in its attempts to swallow a fish too large for its gullet, sure that the prize

was too great to abandon but of almost insurmountable difficulty to claim. I knew he was balancing potential opportunity with an almost superstitious fear. Weighing the gains of power and position against the all-pervading fear that, by stepping into the realms of life and death, he would be in real and tangible danger of reprisals from any or all of the Gods. Mere humans should remain incapable of resurrection and life giving, otherwise they are promoting themselves to the rank of God himself and such promotion is one of the worst excesses of blasphemy.

I realise, Mr Howard, that such words may give you the misapprehension that Ghergiev is a fiercely religious man. The truth is quite the contrary. His relationship with God is based more on numbers and politics than on any fervent belief in an all-seeing deity. If it were to be boiled down and served with as little adornment as possible then it would go something like this. Far too many people appear to believe in something for it not to have the risk of being true. As the saying goes in the Urals, there is no vodka without potatoes. Also, and probably more immediately important, the Church is a powerful monster to be used advantageously. Even the smallest of chapels can buy a lot of good will from the people. It wouldn't do to be seen dabbling in blasphemy if you are attempting to impress the Church. Me, I have a far more pragmatic approach to the whole matter of religion. I will believe in whatever benefits me the most. After all, if I were created in His image, then surely He would be most happy for me to be as successful as I could possibly be. And yes, I have added to that the all-encompassing caveat, 'whatever the price.'

I began the conversion of Ghergiev to the Promethean way as soon as he started expressing opinions regarding

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what had happened in that derelict lakeside house. It was very obliging of him to line the objections up as if ducks at a fairground attraction. One pop and each was down. His first, and I am disappointed to say, surprising objection was that the whole stunt - his word - was anti-Russian, since it was aimed squarely at killing a Russian aide. After I made him recount the events that unfolded regarding this dead man's fate, it wouldn't have done back then to have had Ghergiev know to what extent my ability to eavesdrop stretched, I simply noted that far from being anti-Russian, the resurrection of one of our citizens proved that we were a nation worth the saving. He had other objections, but as the miles wore on, as we headed home, he came around to the real understanding. That meeting with those, hand-picked, delegates was an invitation, a chance to join a visionary process, to shape and form a country dedicated to the greatest of all the sciences and benefit from the findings, discoveries and new advances that would inevitably come out of it. In short, the offer of more power and wealth than a man can imagine had been made. Admittedly by a man we know almost nothing about, but power is power. There was a simple choice, take what had been presented, or let the opportunity pass to someone else and spend your final days pumping foul brine in Solikamsk.

The fact that he was persuaded to accept is clear to see, Mr Howard. Look around you at the small slice of Promethea I have carved for myself. My only disappointment is that it took until Salzburg to make him see sense. In my defence, I was younger and far less persuasive back in 1828.

To all outward appearances the journey home was

utterly uneventful, an interesting diversion towards Vienna for an expensive evening of gambling aside. But in my mind it was far from settled. Thoughts were aflame, guesses and theories being sought to attempt to find answers to so many different and unanswerable questions. The most stubborn of which was simply, 'Why Ghergiev?'

Invitations to that meeting at Lake Como had been sent out to carefully selected heads of houses, hand chosen leaders of industry, commanders of heavy fortunes. And Ghergiev. We, they, were all offered the same deal, bring your power, skills, wealth to support the founding of Promethea and reap the vital and many rewards. Power, skills and wealth? At best, even looking with the most benevolent of eyes, back then Ghergiev could only be considered to be in possession of one and that wealth would barely even pay for the gold-emblazoned coach driven by the Austrian delegate. That our invitation was dependent upon something else was clear. But what?

I am afraid to admit, that the part of the answer I came upon, eluded me until we were almost back into Mother Russia. That I failed to see a link between the identity of the host that had called the event and the bewildered broker who placed the order for our tainted brine is understandable. After all, the night at Como's shores was dark, I barely saw the man's face fully for more than a second or two and, frankly, I was more concerned about what he was attempting with that sinister syringe. Six months at least had passed since that broker rolled up at the salt works. It was an almost impossible connection to make. Almost. It may have remained hidden to me had not the vital final ingredient appeared in the form of brine. The smell was there, crossing more than half of

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Europe, a reeking link from Solikamsk to Como, a scent trail that could have its origins from nowhere else, but the underground brine from our lake.

That our invitation was extended due to that brine was looking more than probable. As to what purpose the visionary leader of a nation-to-be would wish to put such foul liquor, would remain a mystery to me for many years. Suffice to say at this point, Mr Howard, that I would be far less of a man were it not for that brine. Far less, indeed.

Now, Mr Howard, I sense you need rest for your straining pen. A drink, perhaps, for the weary scribe? I have a Cognac Hennessy from 1779, which I find is particularly excellent upon the palate. Even you should find the subtleties of its age more than unusually appealing.

The Immigrant's Confession

By Greg Stolze

They have told me things will go easy on me if i confes but when i sed i was no catholick they sed no, a legal confesyun not with a preest. I sed i did not know what that was & they gayve me paper & sed i was to rite down how i caym to this land & what i wantid & how i past the border.

I told them that i had no use for pen & ink before & have no grate craft with words but they sed i should just rite my best & leev no thing out. So this is that & i am riting it so well i can.

They ask how we caym in & i say & they ask agin as if they did not under stand my words tho they are in playn frankish speech. My mam & me set out from our home two months back on account of her problem & caym to the gayt at tulseea & the gards there told us we could not enter promeefya. So we put what coyns we had in a bundul & shewed it the gard with the most ill-shayved cheeks, as my mam sed that a man who cared nawt for his tidyness was more like to care nawt for his duty. But the ill-shayved gard did tayk our coyns, & did beet me with the pol of his speer & rayseed it to my mam to & at that tyme

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we did depart. He sed that we were trying to brybe him & that promeefya had no such filthy comerse & yet he did still tayk our coyns so we had nawt.

We walked then to iysackseeeya for mam sed that our chanches were imprueved in a small playce with fewer gards & in iysackseeeya tryed to hyde in a hay wayn. But your land is no welcomeing playce & buys not many goods from else where, & the gards did check the wayn & poke with speers until i cryed out stop stop & gave in & spun a false taylor for them of how we had fell asleep in the hay. It was good luck for us that the dryver sed this was true & that the gards did not beet us.

At this tyme the harvest was comeing in & the farmers did pay me for day work & in such way my mam & me did eat & travel & caym at length to ohwanseeeya. At that playce we met a mister striygel who sed that with some coyn we might cross into promeefya upon some thing he naymed a pass dock ment wich at first i took to be some type of cart but wich was a payper. mister striygel sed that with this payper the gards let him by & his servants to. I shewed him what coyns i had & he sed more & i sed i would be his servant in truth & he sed that was all ways part of the deel.

Then my mam did say to mister striygel that if he did not take us in as we were with the coyns at hand that the gards of promeefya mite heer of his offer & then he would get it. So we did come in with mister striygel & my mam did cook & mend for him & londer his things & such while i did tend his horses & wagon & carry this & that.

When we had got so far as braylya my mam sed to me that it was tyme to depart from mister striygel & to take what goods we could handle off his luggage. I sed that we

had not worked the term we swore & mam sed her tyme was short & we had to lift our boots. That is why we did steel from mister striygel & i no that is a sin but mam sed he had first stole from us with his taking of coyns & this was but corse justis. My mam sed we had to get our selfs to bucrest.

The rodes were more open in syde promeefya but gards did still block us at this point & that such that we had to go over farm land & hill & threw forest. My mam sed that her problem was back & wurs. I saw that this was so when she did rise urlly to londer her skirts in streems & they had marks of blood that she had wantid me to not see. But see them i did & knew her tyme was short in deed.

After much walking in feeld & woods we caym to the walls of bucrest & the gards at the gayts were monstus. They had not only scars & many a stich, but one did have a lyne of lumps on his arm & that lyne was noses & he did snif at carts & persuns who caym to the gayt. Gards with miss mached eyes gayzed at us & demanded our paypers wich we did not of corse have. My mam sed we forgot & that we would re turn with them.

But mam was ever so pale & sickley & now could not hold down her food when we could get it. She sed the wonder doctors in bucrest would mayk her good as new if we got in syde. But the gayts were all ways garded & the walls too thick to dig be neeth, even if we could do so unwached.

Then i saw that one set of carts was not checked. They caym to a gayt with a clowd of flys over them & were called the harvest wayns. We did go up the rode a stretch & see a playce where harvest wayns caym to have snow heeped on them & where too wagons of snow caym from

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the alps to the north. I did ask after work at that playce & was told that i mite do well were i man enuf to take the stink. For the harvest wayns were filled with all types of meat & limbs from close playces. I sed i could do the job but on my very first day i did hyde my mam in the cart under the legs & arms of women & men & did cry to see the flys crowd & clammer & buzz atop her as she hid. When that cart had gone i did depart from my playce & follow & say to the drover i had been told to go with him & he did trust me.

We caym to this playce & two oxen walked a tread mill to turn a moveing path over a grate wooden disk like the millers water weel back in our village where we did live before mam had her problem first. Each harvest wayn would come & dropdump its truck of arms & legs & bloody snow on the path wich did then pull it insyde. My mam being in no way to fall from the weel, i did look to the drover to stryke him with a leg or arm or bone or other thing but he did say the unloading was to be on me & he was payed to dryve oxen not sort flesh. So i did pull my mam out of the parts. All red & so cold she did shayk & her teeth knocked top on bottom as fast as a dragon flys wing. I carryed her to a dark corner of the yard & took off my shirt so my warm self could touch her & did wrap her up best i knew how until the warm sun let her settle.

That is how we were found & is the story i have told & now it is writ down. My mam said you would take out her bad part & put in a good part & stop her problem. We did not never meen to steel or rob or sin or mayk mischeef. We are good people & just caym to stop the problem.

-Fedir

To the attention of Sándor Farkas, Superior Armaş of the Bucharest Polis Defense, from your colleague Lajos Balogh, Border Vornic and Vătaf of Harvest Enforcements.

Greetings, friend and comrade, I hope the turning seasons find you well and Piroška as beautiful as ever?

I have reviewed the document provided by the captive, who names himself Fedir Fillopovich, and asserts that the woman with him is his mother, Dariya. She is unable to confirm or contradict his statements, as her illness has left her quite fevered and debilitated. She does look up from her bed at the name Dariya.

The boy's story, while unlikely, is far from impossible. I have sent messages to the Moldavan and Ukranian borders, and particularly Oancea, alerting them to the possibility that this Mister Striygel might be bringing in illegal foreigners, but without the proper spelling used on his documents, we're unlikely to find him.

Gaining access to the harvest facility is shocking, I agree. Perhaps this will galvanise those close to the king and show them the need for a border wall. But regardless, a willingness to be submerged in snow and unprocessed tissue is far from common and not something foreign infiltrators or our great enemy are going to be able to accomplish in great numbers. The process needs to be tightened up, certainly, but it's not the colossal security failure András seems to think.

For all her desperation to get here, Dariya has been rewarded with a vicious ague and I suspect her life's portion of days is all but spent. An examination easily revealed that her uterine vessel is cancerously distorted

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and that the corruption has spread throughout what she modestly calls her 'conception parts.' Her bodily humors are so fouled that I doubt any aspect of her can be salvaged even for cosmetic padding or structural sediment.

It's quite a repulsive situation, really. This peasant woman forces her son to bring her here, all the while rotting like a fruit too long off its branch, and arrives expecting us to give her the sort of miracle cure that a Boier would be lucky to procure. In her lucid moments, she has tried to offer us the boy, in all his splendid parts, as a payment for her repair. I'd dismiss the thought as a fever fancy, if it didn't seem to have motivated her entire lengthy incursion into Promethea.

After reading his account, I attempted to interview the child personally, only to find that he had been separated and processed on the orders of a Body Chelar named Marko Dudik. A formal request for his reprimand is attached.

As always, your friend and affectionate servant,

-L.

Control

By Iain Lowson

Târgu Mureş was deceptive. As the de facto capital of Promethea, it seemed appropriate that it should be. All capital cities lie to some degree or other. They all do what they can to put across an image of being confident, carefree and, most of all, of being under control. Târgu Mureş told its share of tall tales, but the stories it spun were new twists on old themes.

Though ancient, and despite having once been the administrative centre of Transylvania when the region still belonged to the Hungarians, Târgu Mureş was a new capital. It was a precocious youth. The signs of building and expansion were everywhere, from the new military base on the outskirts to the public and private construction within the town. Even the centre, under strict instructions from the king himself that it be preserved, was witnessing a flurry of restoration, conversion and continual subtle improvement.

In the midst of such activity, the one image that Târgu Mureş put across with assured confidence was that it was very much in control. While Bucharest often had the

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fragile look of a courtesan who had realised that time had caught up on her, Târgu Mureş positively glowed with youthful promise. It strutted, while Bucharest stumbled. The atmosphere in the leafy town was carefree. Though there were patrols, pairs of guards marching their assigned routes or watching their assigned approaches, they were polite, even smiling. It was all a deception, of course, but a necessary one.

To approach Târgu Mureş was to approach a microcosm of Promethea itself. Once you were in, your safety, and perhaps even your prosperity, was guaranteed, so long as the rules were obeyed. Getting in, however, was the issue. Even for Filip Gyôrfy, head of the Domestic Security Forces, getting in to Târgu Mureş was a long and slow process. Certainly, the stresses were alleviated to a degree by the comfort provided by his private train. Nonetheless, a visit to Frankenstein required that even Gyôrfy had to endure a degree of personal discomfort.

All trains approaching Frankenstein's hometown had to pass through the military base. This created a bottleneck that, at busy times, caused long delays. It was always busy, of course, with civilian, military, Ministry and cargo trains all receiving the same intensive investigation. All but the highest-ranking individuals had to disembark and join the queues of people waiting to have their papers checked. Those foreign guests attending conferences or those of suitably high standing in Promethea were not required to exit their carriages. However, stern guards and often-haughty officers came aboard and subjected everyone to a degree of scrutiny that none of those so examined could ever grow accustomed to.

Filip understood the need for it, and had even advised

on some aspects of the process. This, after all, was the country where Augmentation opened up all sorts of infiltration options. A face might look familiar, might be the one in the photograph on the paperwork, but was that face still attached to the correct body? Road travel, something Filip would never have contemplated, was no better, and a ring of fences and patrols ensured those on foot were not missed.

As a result of all of those precautions, actually arriving in Târgu Mureş itself was a considerable relief. The relative tranquillity could be something of a shock. Gyôrfy left his staff at the railway station at the heart of Târgu Mureş, the only stop after the military base. They worked with their usual efficiency to transfer his luggage and suchlike to his private accommodation in town. Filip delighted in the opportunity to leave his bodyguards behind and, in this unique place, they raised no protest. So it was that, true to habit, Filip began the gentle thirty minute stroll from the station to Târgu Mureş' ancient fortress heart, home to Victor Frankenstein, King of Promethea.

Normally, and particularly on a cool, bright day like this, the walk was a pleasant chance to forget about any of the issues he had to deal with. It was one of the important skills Filip Gyôrfy had, that ability to fully put aside work, to drive it out of his mind entirely. That ability had, Filip knew, likely saved his sanity. This time, however, Filip barely noticed his very pleasant surroundings as he walked towards the old fortress. As he reached the first security checkpoint, one that was still some distance from the walls themselves, Gyôrfy gazed up to where the bell tower of the old church in the fortress could be seen rising above

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the reddish-brown bricks of the fortifications. Despite the fact that he had attended a number of dances and other frivolities within those formerly hallowed walls, the sight of the tower made him shiver. Filip grew angry with himself. This would not do! He snatched back his papers from the startled guard, stormed past the checkpoint and on up the road to the fortress.

Though not obvious to anyone approaching, the houses and other buildings immediately around the Târgu Mureș fortress had been completely taken over when Frankenstein first came there. There were no soldier's barracks there. Rather, the buildings housed many of those who visited Promethea for the scientific conclaves Frankenstein regularly hosted. There were demonstration and lecture facilities within and without the walls of Frankenstein's domain, and all were used by both the conclaves and the University of Târgu Mureș; the third such institution in Promethea, but easily the most august.

With their barracks in the fortress itself, the soldiers that did patrol the immediate area around the fortress home of Frankenstein cast a considerable shadow over the area. There was no missing them. Their heavy tread could be heard on the massive walls, coming from high overhead. Their figures loomed large, chest high over the parapets above, and utterly dominating the doorways at street level. These were the Promethean Royal Guard, Frankenstein's most loyal troops. In the Promethean army, that was quite a claim. The Guardsman at the gatehouse smiled and took Gyôrfy's papers between fingers each twice as thick as Filip's own. When he spoke, the Guardsman's voice rumbled exactly as anyone seeing him would assume it should. It was a voice you heard in your very bones.

‘Welcome, sir. The king is waiting for you at the church.’ The Royal Guard barely looked up as he deftly shuffled through the papers.

Filip Gyôrfy always compared standing next to one of these seven foot creatures as being the equivalent to standing in a rock fall that has somehow frozen just before it landed on you, leaving you no idea when you might be abruptly obliterated. As he took the papers back, Filip made a point of calmly replying. ‘Thank you. Has anyone else arrived?’

‘Mister Cristescu, the Information Minister, is already with him, Mister Gyôrfy,’ the Guardsman rumbled. ‘He arrived yesterday.’

Filip was not surprised. ‘Yesterday, hmmm? To be expected, I suppose. Anyone else?’

‘No, sir.’ The Guardsman stepped to one side, quite unnecessarily, and swept his arm out to indicate the passage under the gatehouse bastion out into the fortress grounds. ‘Please, sir. His Highness was very specific.’

‘Quite right. Quite right.’ Filip Gyôrfy looked down the tunnel. Despite the bright day, despite the whitewashed walls of the wide passageway, it all felt very claustrophobic. Gyôrfy absentmindedly tapped his little bundle of folded identification paperwork and passes against the knuckles of his left hand.

‘Sir?’

The Royal Guardsman’s insistent tone quite startled Gyôrfy. Ashamed of his reticence, he smiled to the behemoth beside him and walked smartly down the tunnel. His footsteps sounded loud on the ancient cobbles.

When Frankenstein had first come to the old medieval

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fortress in Târgu Mureș, the area within the walls had been much abused over the years by a number of occupying armies. The walls and bastions themselves, rebuilt over more than twenty-five years during the early to mid-1600s, had been kept in good order, with the exception of large sections of the northern wall which had to be rebuilt. The heavy brick walls, designed to withstand cannon fire, were some 250 meters long on the east and west sides, and 200 on the north and south. Within the space they defined, a mishmash of buildings had sprung up over the years. Built on the site of a Franciscan monastery, the settlement around which the fortress was built, the former Reformed Church was the only building Frankenstein left largely untouched. The rest were converted or, in the case of the more modern buildings, removed entirely.

The long building that dominated the eastern side was given over entirely to the Royal Guard. A building of similar age close to the church became Frankenstein's lodgings. These were relatively modest by the standards of some in Promethea, but needed to be taken as part of the whole. Frankenstein was more often seen in the other parts of the fortress. The large, thick-walled bastions, formerly home to various trade guilds, became laboratories and operating theatres, workshops and test-beds, demonstration and lecture rooms. An old barracks block on the west side became living quarters for the more senior students, while the elegantly appointed u-shaped building to the north played host to the majority of meetings during the numerous scientific conferences held in Târgu Mureș.

The ground around the buildings was immaculately

landscaped, with the central area given over to lawns on which many large marquees could be thrown up to host parties and balls when science gave way, however reluctantly, to internal politics and the need to occasionally acknowledge the existence of the decadent nobility. At other times, the grounds and the covered arcades that ran along the insides of the walls were places of quiet contemplation and conversations both casual and intense.

A constant, looming presence over all of this was the Royal Guard. Though their principal barracks and training grounds were out at the military base beyond the town's edge, the fortress of Târgu Mureş was their home. For the majority, this was also their place of rebirth. Frankenstein himself presided over or conducted many of the surgical procedures that took specially selected volunteers and turned them into the gigantic Guardsmen. As a result, their extreme Augmentations enjoyed a near hundred per cent success rate. Justifiably, they were the most feared and respected military unit in Promethea. Two of their number, the Captains, were rumoured to have been with Frankenstein for far longer than Promethea had existed. Certainly, those under their command treated the Captains with a deference normally reserved only for their creator.

From the moment he passed the guard station well beyond the fortress walls, Filip Gyôrfy always felt the eyes of the Royal Guard settle on him and follow him. Within the walls, he could see them watching him openly. While those who lived and worked in the fortress precinct might eventually grow used to them, Gyôrfy never had. He had been fortunate enough to see Royal Guardsmen in action

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on two separate occasions, and the images of what they were capable of were seared into his mind. Filip only had to hear one laugh for his blood to chill.

Gyôrfy walked along the northern wall of the students' quarters, turning right to follow the direct path toward the church. A few of the students nodded a greeting to him as he passed, though Filip ignored them. The people, men and a few women, who studied under Frankenstein varied in age though none, to Gyôrfy's certain knowledge, were over forty years old. Filip quietly envied them. He'd seen their casual intimacy with Frankenstein, the way they talked as equals with the great man. Filip tried not to resent them, but it was difficult. He worked long and hard to protect these people from the harsher realities of life in Promethea, but he'd seen many of those smiles they gave him turn to contemptuous smirks when they thought he wasn't looking. Such was the lot of the civil servant, he told himself.

As he neared the white walls of the church, Filip saw Royal Guardsmen posted at the north door and at the bottom of the covered steps leading up to the more private area to the rear of the building. Where the priests, choir and other church functionaries once held sway now Victor Frankenstein, the King of Promethea, held his more delicate meetings amid baroque splendour. Filip saw the Guardsman at the stairs step to one side, long before he reached the church, indicating that this was where he was to head for. Gyôrfy stoically endured the knowing smiles of both Guardsman as he passed them, but the sweat was flowing freely long before he climbed the stone steps and knocked for admittance.

The quarters Frankenstein made use of in the old church had been remodelled from their original state to take full advantage of the architecture. Though the chamber was subdivided, none of the new, dark wood walls reached to the ceiling, affording an uncluttered view of the high dome, pristine white with minimalistic, elegant, swirl-tipped lines decorated with gold leaf. A small antechamber, almost ridiculously filled by the Royal Guardsman on duty there, led to a corridor that ran along the length of the office the king used. Following along the wood-walled, thickly carpeted corridor led to stairs that went down to a side door into the body of the church. Half way along was a modest door, unguarded. Filip could already hear quiet voices as he strode toward that door. He knocked as he entered, fully aware that those within would already have been informed of his arrival.

It always surprised people that there was no desk in the room. There was a small table in one corner that bore paper, a pen and some ink, but that was reserved for the use of one of Frankenstein's clutch of secretaries. The great man himself rarely took notes at meetings, nor did he use this room as a workplace. Instead, there were a number of oddly mismatched pieces of furniture around the room, with a low table in the middle on which refreshments could be set if required. The chairs, Filip knew, were there to accommodate the preferred comforts of those fortunate enough to be invited here regularly. The stick-thin figure of Silviu Cristescu, for example, was perched on the edge of a simple four-legged stool, though he managed to look quite relaxed doing so. Filip preferred the more padded, cream-coloured two-seater by the table. He could sprawl comfortably in that.

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Victor Frankenstein himself had, in Gyôrfy's experience, only very rarely used any of the chairs in the room. The tremendous energy and drive within him meant he was almost permanently moving, pacing or at his least mobile, standing and listening intently while his fingers drummed on his arm. True to form, Frankenstein was already crossing the stone floor to meet Filip, a wide friendly smile brightening his otherwise severe and thin face. Victor's eyes sparkled with delight, both hands held before him to take Filip's in a firm, enthusiastic handshake. Still, Filip fancied that Victor's eyes were darkly rimmed, and he wished even more fervently that he had better news for his friend and king.

'Gyôrfy! How are you, dear fellow?!' Victor enthused, pumping Filip's hand with characteristic vigour. 'I trust your journey wasn't too onerous?'

Filip smiled back, as best he could. 'No, no Victor. It was quite alright, really.'

From behind the king, Silviu piped up, his clipped, almost bird-song voice carrying straight to Filip's nerves. 'Did you enjoy your walk to the fortress, Filip? My driver says you went right past him.'

Gyôrfy's face hardened as he turned to hang his coat on the stand near to the door. He regained his composure as he faced Silviu again. Filip was particularly annoyed as he had genuinely missed the man. He would have liked to have refused the offer.

'I'm sorry, Silviu. The station was extremely busy,' Filip said.

As Frankenstein returned to where he must've been standing before he arrived, close to the large fireplace, Gyôrfy poured himself a tall glass of water from a

decanter beside one of the three tall, arched windows that lit the room. Heavy red curtains hung there in anticipation of winter cold. Filip took his glass and walked to his favourite seat, sitting down with a sigh.

‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘I wanted to take the time to gather my thoughts after the customary distractions of the checks.’

‘Yes,’ Silviu chirped. ‘I have heard they are quite irritating.’

Gyôrfy tipped his head, giving Silviu a look as though to ask if that really was the best he could do. Victor, meanwhile, chuckled good-humouredly. Filip decided it was time to get to business.

‘Now then,’ he began, glad to see Cristescu immediately adopt a more serious expression. ‘You had better tell me what information you have been able to recover.’

The Minister nodded, eyes closing for a moment as though he were drawing the facts from some deeply buried part of his memory.

‘None,’ he abruptly declared.

Gyôrfy slumped a little.

Silviu continued, ‘My officials have interviewed all of Petru’s friends and associates, both here in Târgu Mureş and elsewhere. Iaşi, where he first went to university. The family estates around Balaci. All the staff were spoken to, along with his family.’

At this, Frankenstein spoke up, his concern clear. ‘You were suitably circumspect, Silviu, in your approaches to the Dodrescu family?’

‘Indeed. To be frank, they fell over themselves to help us. They had drawn up lists of Petru Marin’s friends and anyone else they could think of who might have

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information on him.’ Silviu sounded impressed. ‘Of course, it was the same list they gave to the private agency they hired in Bucharesti.’

Silviu tipped his head quizzically and looked to Gyôrfy. ‘I believe you had some dealings with them... Filip...?’

The head of the DSF shook his head, smiling almost reluctantly.

‘Ahhhh, I thought I had one on you there. Until your man spoke to my man...’ Filip waved his hand dismissively. ‘All very... mmhhh.’

‘As you say, Filip, as you say.’ Silviu’s eyes flicked closed again as he tracked through his memory. ‘To date, the Ministry has conducted more than two hundred interviews’, he recalled, his eyes snapping open. ‘Formal interviews, that is. I personally have had innumerable conversations with...’

Gyôrfy interrupted, smiling to Victor, ‘Innumerable?’

Silviu sighed. ‘Sixty one, if you include this meeting. We know all of Petru Marin Dodrescu’s habits, and can safely and unequivocally state that he has broken with them all in an instant. Of his current whereabouts, however...’ Silviu actually slumped. ‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing.’

Cristescu looked to his king, ‘I’m sorry, Victor.’

Frankenstein nodded. The atmosphere in the room became solemn. Fragile. No one could look at anyone else. Shifting uncomfortably, Gyôrfy felt he should say something.

‘Well, yes. I have... That is, the military command and my department have done what we can. His description and picture have been circulated where appropriate. The search teams, as you know, have worked outwards from his last known location and looked everywhere, both logical

and fanciful. Nothing.' Filip glanced to Silviu again. 'Nothing through diplomatic circles, I take it?'

'Neither official nor unofficial,' the Minister confirmed. 'There have been no new tourist groups on our borders for some time. Even Baba Vida has had no visitors worth speaking of. If he is looking to sell his services to...'

'No!' Victor said, abruptly and a little too loud. He looked ashamed for a moment, but then gathered himself.

Silviu and Filip exchanged a brief, telling look. Gyôrfy broke the threatening silence.

'Victor...' he started, then paused. 'Your Highness,' he continued, 'We have considered everything. Examined everything. No man on his own...'

Frankenstein threw out his hand to silence his DSF chief.

'No! Petru would not...' Victor began, but Gyôrfy was merciless.

'No man on his own could vanish off the face of the Earth. He had to have...'

'I will neither accept nor entertain...' Victor insisted, even as Gyôrfy went on and Cristescu joined in.

'Your Highness, he must have had help! You cannot...'

'I have to agree with Gyôrfy on this. He-'

'No!' Victor bellowed.

The others immediately fell silent. Frankenstein seemed to have grown in stature with his rage. He quivered with anger, his hands straight down at his sides, claspings and unclaspings. He looked even more hawkish than usual, positively deadly. Looking down on those he so trusted to maintain the security of his creation, Victor abruptly let out a great rush of breath. He diminished and, for a moment, Filip and Silviu caught a glimpse of the weight

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of the years, knowledge and experience that crushed down on Victor Frankenstein every day.

Victor had put one hand on the mantle of the great stone fireplace, his head bowed. For a while, the only sounds were of Victor breathing and the small fire in the grate gently crackling. Silviu had retreated into himself, but was watchful. Gyôrfy fidgeted in his seat, uncomfortable, on edge. Finally, he stood in a rush and went to where a brandy decanter and glasses were laid out. He splashed a generous measure into one glass, then a second into another. He drank one down, and then carried the second to Victor. Filip stood holding it out for a full minute before Victor noticed him. With a sad smile, Frankenstein took the drink. Gyôrfy returned to his customary seat, shooting Silviu a troubled look as he did.

‘I cannot believe Petru would... Would go to him. I will tell you why.’ As he walked to the drinks stand, Victor continued. He talked quietly, but with an intensity that brooked no interruption. Frankenstein put down the glass of brandy without tasting it and returned to the fireplace. ‘In all these long years, I have hoped for an ally. No, not an ally... An equal. A true equal.’

Silviu mused how, from any other man, those words would have been the height of arrogance. This, however, was Victor Frankenstein.

‘You both know something of my history, but you cannot hope to understand my isolation. The rejection of family, of friends, of my so-called peers. The years of planning, of secrecy, and all the time watching for signs of pursuit. Then, even as those plans bore fruit, to see some of my erstwhile supporters so abuse the gifts they were given! It is as though he were constantly at my shoulder,

showing me that my work could only bring evil.'

Frankenstein shuddered visibly, staring into the fire as he spoke again, 'I have lost so much. And yet, I have gained so much. Promethea draws closer to becoming all that I intended it to be. But achievements of the past elude me still.'

Victor held his own hand up, turning it over, studying it as though it were new to him. 'I have lost so much,' he murmured. He clenched his hand to a fist. 'I needed a... A muse. Petru became that muse. Can you understand?' he said, looking to his two friends, almost begging. He looked on Filip and Silviu with a pitying expression.

'How could you understand?' Victor showed his frustration now, becoming more animated as he continued. 'Others I have trained could grasp the method, but not the meaning of my work. They could parrot and mimic what I had done, but they could not innovate. They could not truly create. I had begun to despair. Then... Petru Marin Dodrescu.'

'His potential was evident from the outset. He surpassed his fellows within months of his arrival here. Soon, I had someone with whom I could truly reason and debate. We talked, often long into the night, as around us slept those who had sought to keep up. We began to work together, he and I. I began to feel I was closer to breaking down the barriers in my mind than I have ever been. I was... No. We were, he and I, closer to regaining that which I have lost, than I have ever been. And then...' Victor threw up his hands. 'This.' He sighed, his energy spent.

The silence returned as Frankenstein once more stared into the little fire smouldering in the oversized grate. Silviu

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watched him intently. In turn, Filip Gyôrfy watched Silviu. Both knew what needed to be said. It was the bird-like Minister who spoke.

‘Victor, we must plan for all eventualities,’ Siviú began.

Frankenstein groaned with frustration, but Siviú was insistent, ‘Please, your Highness. Victor. I would rather you were involved in this. We need your guidance. This situation is unique. A decision must be made.’

Gyôrfy knew Silviu was stretching the truth of the matter. This was, sadly, by no means a unique situation. If Frankenstein’s protégé had gone to the Resistance... Well, the punishment for high treason was well established. The Minister of Information, empowered to act on his king’s behalf and in his name, was playing a dangerous game. He was asking his king, not his friend, to make a decision on Petru’s fate should he be found to have gone to the Resistance or to have tried to escape the country. At the same time, he was offering his friend, not his king, a way out. The chance to play favourites, regardless of the price to be paid. Either way, a precedent would be set.

After his initial near-growl when Silviu spoke, Frankenstein had turned away. Silviu and Filip watched him, breathlessly. After a moment, Victor began to nod. Then, to the surprise of both men, he turned back with a broad smile.

‘You are correct, Silviu Cristescu. Thank you. You too, Filip Gyôrfy. I have to make a decision and I will do so by this evening. Filip, we have been too cruel to you. You have only just arrived. Silviu and I are tired already, and we did not travel much more than from bed to plate to bottle today!’

Both Silviu and Gyôrfy stood, relieved, smiling. They

knew Frankenstein had made his decision, but needed time to study it and to resolve it into words that others could hear and use without them being easily twisted and abused.

‘Let us resume this later, over dinner. Shall we say seven o’clock, gentlemen?’ Frankenstein guided both men to the door, darting ahead to open it for them. ‘I promise this shall all be resolved by this evening. Tomorrow, we can turn our attention to other matters.’

‘Until this evening, your Highness,’ Gyôrfy said.

Silviu nodded his assent, clearly content with the way things had been settled. The men left, pausing to briefly argue as each insisted the other go first through the door from the corridor to the antechamber at the top of the stairs. Behind them, Frankenstein had already closed the door to his chamber.

Frankenstein heard his colleagues walk down the stairs outside the building. He heard the gravel of the path crunch under their feet as they headed off to the gatehouse, bickering good-naturedly over whether to walk to their accommodation or take Silviu’s car. Victor dismissed them from his mind, choosing to no longer hear them. Instead, he focused on the silence within the room, save for the gentle crackling of the fire. He crossed the room to the fireplace.

Collecting a cast iron poker from the stand, he absentmindedly prodded the smouldering coals into greater exuberance. Swapping poker for coal tongs, he squatted down and added a few lumps to the flames. Replacing the tongs, he knelt in front of the fire, watching as the flames licked around the new coals. They flared and

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crackled, dancing around the blocks. Grey-black smoke flowed, and then lessened as the coals caught fire. Frankenstein gratefully lost himself in contemplation of the moment.

Something tinkled to the stone floor behind him. Victor turned to see. The faceted crystal top from the brandy decanter rolled to a stop, resting against the leg of the stand. Victor frowned, walking across to it, conscious of the slight chill of having stepped away from the fire. He picked up the ball-like crystal stopper, setting it back in its place.

An electric thrill of fear ran prickling from the hair on his head to his feet as Frankenstein realised he was no longer alone in the room. He had heard nothing, felt nothing, but he knew. He knew, also, what it was that loomed now beside the fireplace. A chill bit into him. Rooted to the spot, his hand still on the brandy decanter, Frankenstein could not move. Finally, the effort Herculean, he turned his head until he could see the slight shadow cast by the thing blocking the light of the fire. Frankenstein drew a shuddering breath.

‘I... I don’t know what it is I should say to you.’

Victor was aware now of a deep, regular and calm breathing from behind him.

‘Face me.’

Victor flinched as the deep bass voice sounded, and shook his head.

‘I cannot,’ he said, but his body betrayed him.

As though mesmerised, Victor turned slowly. He inhaled sharply when he saw the Creature. If the long years since their last meeting, far out on the ice sheets of the Arctic, had not touched Victor, they had shaped his

first and greatest creation. The Creature's powerful frame was wrapped in a tailored greatcoat reaching almost to the floor. Heavy boots stuck out from the bottom, with trouser cuffs visible too, made of a thick fabric. The scars that had once stood out so livid and fresh on his face and hands, even during the initial years of pursuit, had moulded into ridges. His head shaved, the hulking figure yet had an air of nobility. The Creature's mouth was set in a grim line. His eyes caught and held Frankenstein. They blazed with hatred.

Victor was trying still to frame words when the Creature stepped calmly to one side. Immediately, Victor felt his legs go out from under him. He hit the stone floor hard, but felt nothing. All his senses fell away save sight. Collapsed to his knees, all he could do was stare. From the flames, the sightless, opaque eyes of Petru Marin Dodrescu stared blankly back. Already, the fire was blackening his flesh, cracking and peeling it back from smouldering muscle and bone. The hair was burning. Petru's tongue was hanging too far forward. He had bitten almost through it in the agony of his death. Frankenstein could still see the ragged line at the throat where a long blade had hacked the head free over several strokes. A little of the spine had been left to allow the Creature to dig it into the coals. He had planned this moment, this unveiling.

The Creature's lips curled in a soundless, contemptuous snarl as he watched Frankenstein reach out to the burning head. The Creature stalked towards Frankenstein, stopping beside him. Victor looked up to him, his eyes pleading.

The Creature spoke again, 'Pitiful man. I once swore I

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would take everything from you that you held dear.’

Victor slumped down to the ground, sobbing now. The Creature reached down with his left hand and dragged Frankenstein up by his clothes. Still Victor looked to the ghastly, sizzling, spitting flames.

The Creature pointed to the head and spoke again, his voice booming in Victor’s ear. ‘Know this, my creator. He came to me.’

Victor, shock etched in his face, looked now to the Creature seeing the truth there in his eyes.

‘He came to me.’

The Creature dropped Victor. The man scrambled back and up onto his feet. Frankenstein stalked to the fireplace and ripped the poker from its stand. He turned, wild-eyed and panting, glaring at the Creature who merely smiled grimly back. Turning, the huge figure walked to the door, his heavy footfalls thumping. Throwing it wide, the Creature paused in the doorway, his head dipped down to pass through. Glancing sideways to Frankenstein, he spoke once more and then left.

Alone now save for the thing in the grate, Frankenstein heard the Creature’s parting words echo in his mind.

‘We will meet only one more time, Frankenstein. I will choose that time. You will know it when my hands are at your throat.’

Victor stared down at Dodrescu’s head, unrecognisable now in the sputtering, stinking flames. He raised his arm slowly, the poker gripped tightly. Then, methodically, with precise, mechanical strikes, he beat it into a pulped mass that splattered his legs and doused the fire.

A Rending Crack of Thunder

By Stuart Boon

The old man crashed through the trees. Branches heavily laden with snow cracked violently about him, spinning to the ground, sending up white, glittering clouds in his wake. He didn't hazard a look back. He didn't turn. But he knew it wouldn't be long now.

The wintry landscape around him was reduced to a sickening blur of white, green, and grey. He hurled his body forward with all the strength he could muster, but that strength was rapidly diminishing. Now each footfall came at a terrible cost. Nonetheless, the old man ran, tilting into the wind, ignoring the acidic taste of copper in his mouth.

He darted between two tall spruce trees into a wide, white meadow, accelerating down the powdery slope ahead. The snow was deeper here and each step kicked up a gleaming spray as he fled across the open ground. Ignoring the aching and burning in his legs, he pushed hard. The slamming, irregular beat of his heart was the greater worry, but he couldn't give up now. He'd come too far for that.

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Midway through the clearing, the ground dipped suddenly into a snow-packed gully. The man leapt awkwardly, calling upon what little reserves of strength he had left, and landed unevenly on the bank opposite. His arms flailed out as he tried to maintain his balance, but it was not enough. He slipped on the incline, grunting involuntarily, his right hand sinking through the snow to the muddy bank below.

No, he cursed silently, not here, not yet. Exposed against the stark white of the wide meadow, the old man could feel the eyes of the hunter upon him. The harsh staccato of his laboured breathing punctuated the silence of the mountain. He stood up, wincing in pain, and willed himself forward. Every muscle seemed to cry out as his lungs strained to suck in enough oxygen to power the next step. Heaving himself out of the gully, he accelerated.

Finally he came to the opposite edge of the meadow, crashing into evergreens once more. Pine needles and rough bark slashed across the back of his hands and tore at his face as he powered into the forest. The ground was uneven now, rocky and jagged. He ran on, occasionally stumbling and slipping over bare rock and ice. His shoulder connected painfully with an exposed trunk and his knee caught the edge of a cracked stump, but he forced his tired body forward. He mustn't stop. Not yet.

The old man narrowly avoided a thicket of snow-covered brambles, stumbling left then right toward some patchy light ahead. Behind him, over the violent beating of his heart and his rasping breath, he could suddenly make out the sound of another. His pursuer was close. The hunter was closing in on its prey. Panic and adrenalin offered the old man a sudden burst of speed and he took it

gladly, throwing himself headlong into the coming trees.

Behind him, the hunter reacted, sacrificing stealth for speed. The forest thinned ahead. Fighting against the pain in every limb, the old man made for the diffuse grey light ahead as though it might offer him some salvation. But it offered something else. Squinting against the growing brightness, he recognised his peril too late as the sloping ground gave way beneath him. Unable to stop or slow, inertia propelled his body over the edge of the cliff into open space.

The world of white below was replaced by a world of grey above as his body tumbled end over end. A split second later, he hit the forest floor. The impact pushed the air from his lungs and his body became as lead. Time slowed.

In that moment, he observed the world around him as though he were somehow detached from it. Lying spreadeagle like a child having just made a snow angel, he watched as individual snowflakes reeled and danced in the air above him. High above, he could hear quiet laughter. The sound grew distant as his vision blurred and faded. At the last, there was only quiet laughter and darkness.

Rivulets of rain streaked down the stained glass panes as the storm outside intensified. Ciprian Lior pulled his elegant dinner jacket tight around him, turning from the window, and walked slowly across the marbled floor to the fireplace to stoke the last, dying embers within. The fire sparked to life weakly. Replacing the poker, Ciprian sat down, reaching for the glass of cognac that Nikolai has placed on the ornate oak table nearby.

He leaned back into the armchair, his left hand sliding

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across the soft, beaten leather, familiar with every seam, every stitch. Ciprian raised the crystal glass to his lips and downed the cognac, coughing quietly as the alcohol burned his throat. He glanced down at the empty glass, turning it in his hand, watching the crystal facets reflect and amplify the dull firelight.

A moment later, he looked up, his eyes focusing on the slow, undulating flames in the fireplace. 'Nikolai! More cognac and more goddamn firewood!' he barked angrily.

Through the thick door at his left and down the stone stairs beyond, Ciprian could hear the servant start, his wooden chair squeaking against the slate floor of the kitchen below. 'Bring the whole bottle,' he growled, pushing back into the high-backed chair.

Ciprian placed the empty glass back on the table beside him, letting his fingers linger over the cut crystal. The cognac did little for the pain, but offered some help against the cold. He always seemed to feel cold these days. Bowing his head, Ciprian reached up over his bald crown and massaged the base of his neck, wishing distantly that he could somehow curl up and make the world go away.

There were footsteps on the stone steps outside, followed shortly by a knock at the parlour door. Ciprian straightened up and glanced angrily at the closed door. 'What are you playing at, man?' he called. 'Come in!'

The door began to open slowly, almost playfully, and then stopped. Suddenly, there was a commotion on the stairs outside.

'Ah, I think he expects you, not me,' said a familiar baritone.

'Master Sorin, I didn't... I was in the cellar.'

'I see, well best not make the old man wait then.'

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The door opened wide and his brother Sorin stood towering over the bent figure of his servant, who quickly scuttled into the room with a basket of firewood and the requested bottle of cognac.

‘Did he keep you waiting, brother?’ Sorin sneered, his white teeth bared against blood-red lips. ‘I could have him beaten... Or worse.’

Poor Nikolai knelt near the fireplace, building up the fire and hurriedly piling the remaining wood neatly to the side. He rushed to his master’s chair and loosened the cap on the bottle of cognac. His hands were shaking so much that he threatened to spill its contents. Luckily, he did not.

Still standing in the door, dripping from the heavy rain outside, Sorin drew in a breath through his clenched teeth. Nikolai stopped at the sound, carefully replacing the cap on the bottle and standing before his master. ‘Is there anything else, master?’

Ciprian reached for the freshly poured glass and waved the man away. ‘Leave us.’

Nikolai fled the room, rushing past Sorin and down the stairs to the relative comfort of the kitchen. Sorin watched him go as a hound watches a coursing hare.

‘And me, brother? May I come in?’ Sorin asked at last. It was not spoken as a request but more as a jest, for there were few in Promethea that could deny him.

Ciprian did not get up, nor did he look at his brother. ‘Of course,’ he said, taking a small sip, ‘And to what do I owe the pleasure of my celebrated brother’s company?’

‘Celebrated?’ There was a hint of surprise in Sorin’s voice. ‘Indeed. So you have heard then?’

The hard leather of Sorin’s boots clicked on the marbled floor as he made his way around Ciprian to sit

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opposite him. His brother did not bother to remove his thick, rain-slicked leather overcoat, which bore the bold insignia of Promethea's Domestic Security Forces. Ciprian could no longer imagine his brother in civilian clothing, nor remember the last time he'd seen him free of a DSF badge. Across from him, Sorin finally came to rest, his rough hands slowly gripping the overstuffed arms of the chair, pulling at them, testing them.

Ciprian looked up and Sorin held his gaze. The two old men looked at one another. Though Ciprian was the elder by two years, Sorin looked considerably older. His face was worn and rigid, weathered by the elements. His skin was rough, scarred, and pitted. It was the face of a man who had seen and survived much. Much more than Ciprian cared to know or imagine.

'One of Promethea's most favored sons and my noble brother, Sorin Valentin Lior, receives one of the highest commendation in the land and I should not know?' Ciprian said at last. 'Word travels fast in Târgu Mureș, brother.'

Sorin smiled wryly. 'Among the elite and your pampered clientele especially it would seem. I wonder that you didn't know of it before I did, brother. Or maybe you did. Tell me, which pretty socialites' face were you stitching up when you heard the news?'

Ciprian scowled and remained silent. His brother's wry smile remained, undaunted. A droplet of rainwater slipped down from Sorin's bald head, running slowly down the length of his scarred face before dropping to his coat below. Sorin didn't move. His cold gaze never left Ciprian.

'A new pair of eyes was it?' Sorin pressed on. 'A more

talented tongue for boyar lies, perhaps? Or something all together more vulgar?’

Ciprian’s face flushed hot. ‘Don’t-’

‘Don’t what, brother?’ Sorin countered harshly, threateningly.

Ciprian looked into his brother’s dark face, wary of Sorin’s flashing eyes and flaring nostrils. Did it always have to be like this? So much anger after all these years. So much hate. ‘Please, Sorin, I’m tired. There is no need to mock.’

‘Mock?’ Sorin bit back, feigning shock. ‘Was I mocking? Is it mocking now to speak the truth in Târgu Mureş? Truly, have things changed so much? Perhaps I have been gone too long.’ He laughed loudly. It was a measured laugh, designed to put Ciprian on edge.

‘You are my noble brother, Ciprian Aurel Lior, are you not?’ Sorin asked, mimicking his brother. ‘Renowned surgeon and much-lauded physician. Celebrated and celebrity alike. Promethea’s elite hold you in highest regard, do they not, and reward you accordingly for your great works? Just look around you.’ Sorin threw his arms wide, gesturing to the many luxuries around them. ‘Indeed, is it not true that you have drawn the attention of the great Victor Frankenstein himself?’

Ciprian looked away, refusing to rise to his brother’s taunting.

Sorin sighed heavily, settling back into his chair. ‘For all my hard work and tireless effort I have not been so richly rewarded nor recognised — not until now that is. Some might debate whether my actions, my particular services to Promethea, deserve such a reward, maybe even my dearest older brother would debate it, but just or unjust I

will take what I can get.'

Sorin paused momentarily, his eyes moving from Ciprian to the open fire. 'You have not congratulated me, brother.' His tone was hard and menacing.

More annoyed than frightened, Ciprian sighed. Nonetheless he adopted a tone of deference. 'I do congratulate you, of course. For your bravery and long-standing service to Promethea, we all thank and congratulate you.'

'Exemplary bravery, outstanding dedication, and lifelong service to Promethea,' Sorin corrected him.

Ciprian glanced up at his brother. 'Precisely. Congratulations.'

The two old men looked at one another, neither of them sure where the conversation might go next.

'To each his own rewards then,' Sorin said finally. 'I think we can drink to that.'

Slipping forward in his chair, Sorin reached across the intervening space, grasping the bottle of cognac. The fire crackled quietly as he removed the cap and brought the bottle to his dry lips. He drank hungrily, tilting the bottle upward. Finally Sorin gestured that his brother should do the same, indicating the crystal glass that Nikolai had half-filled.

Acquiescing, Ciprian lifted the glass to his lips and drank slowly, watching his brother pour the expensive cognac down his throat. Before he had finished his half-glass, Sorin emptied the bottle. An uneven smile crossed Sorin's wet lips. He looked for a reaction from his older brother, but received none. Disappointed, he tossed the empty bottle carelessly into the open fireplace.

Ciprian finished his own drink and replaced the glass

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on the oak table. ‘You never did tell me why you’ve come, Sorin.’

‘And you haven’t guessed then?’ Sorin asked, letting the moment drag on, his smile widening as he noted his brother’s growing discomfort. ‘It is simple, brother. I have come to employ you.’

The old man opened his eyes to a dull, grey circle of sky above, haloed by evergreens. His body screamed out, pain in every limb and tissue singing a song of fire and ice. He groaned involuntarily, closing his eyes against the pain. How long had he lain here? A growing awareness of his situation came unbidden and unwelcome.

To his left snow crunched and a shadow passed over his closed eyelids. Warily he opened one eye, then the next. The hunter stood over him, looking down at him with obvious disgust.

‘You will be eviscerated,’ the young man said, letting the word hang menacingly in the air. ‘For your treachery against Promethea, your body will be slowly torn and pulled apart. You will pay for your betrayal with pain and you will be kept alive as long as possible to experience it fully. I can assure you that the pain you feel now will be as nothing to the torment you will suffer.’

The hunter glared at him. The old man tried to speak, but his voice cracked and his body was wracked by a fit of coughing.

‘This is how you resist, old man? This is how you rebel against Promethea?’ The young man spat. ‘A life of comfort, riches, and accolades thrown away for what?’ He snorted derisively.

The old man looked up at him, unable to answer.

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‘You will die an old fool. And what difference have you made? What contribution to the Resistance can you claim? Nothing... None.’ The eyes of the hunter flared defiantly. ‘There is no Resistance. Only fools pointlessly railing against progress, against fate. Promethea grows stronger. The world bows at her feet. Your Resistance can do nothing. You... You have done nothing. Nothing but throw your life away.’

There was no pity in the young man’s voice, only anger and frustration. Lying on the frozen ground, the old man cleared his throat harshly, coughing up scarlet blood.

‘Any yet,’ the old man sputtered, his voice full of blood and pain. ‘The DSF’s greatest hunter comes to Maramureş to stalk me... Only me. An old, dying man.’

‘What choice did I have in the face of such betrayal?’ The hunter scowled, kneeling down to the old man’s side.

The young man shook his head. ‘I warned you. I told you what would happen. You had to know how this would end. You had to know that I would be the one to come for you.’

The old man nodded weakly. ‘I knew.’

‘Then you know also that there is no clemency. All that awaits you is evisceration and death. There is no mercy. You have betrayed your country, your people... Your family.’

The old man looked up at the hunter, at the mask that he wore, and tears filled his eyes.

‘We are all of us betrayed, brother. The dream of Promethea is nothing but betrayal.’

Ciprian looked up from the firelight. ‘Employ me?’

‘I have been awarded a rare privilege, an honour,’ Sorin

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began. 'An opportunity to do away with this dying machine. Full consciousness transfer.'

Ciprian sat up, his eyes locking on his brother's face. Was this some kind of deception? Full consciousness transfer was a procedure usually reserved for the inner circle of Promethea's elite, her brightest scientists and tacticians and her most noble families. Most people thought the procedure a myth, only a few knew it was a reality.

'You needn't look quite so surprised, Ciprian. You're astonishment does me no credit. For the past thirty-five years I have played a key role in ensuring the safety of this country and Victor Frankenstein's vision. I have given my life to the DSF and to the protection of Promethea-'

'As an assassin, a hunter,' Ciprian interrupted.

Sorin looked at him darkly. 'I think we both know I am much more than that.'

Ciprian observed him quietly. He could see that his brother was deadly serious.

'My contributions to the safety of the country have finally been recognised. We can put it that way. Recent revelations, if you will, have given the Promethean elite cause to reconsider the importance of my role in the DSF and the significance of the specialised functions that I so expertly carry out.'

'And why is that?' Ciprian asked.

'For one simple reason, brother. I am dying.'

The two men beheld one another in the flickering amber firelight. For a moment, neither of them spoke and the only sound in the room was that of the crackling fire in front of them.

'Surely some sort of surgical replacement-'

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Sorin snorted. 'Not for what I've got, Ciprian. My body is riddled with it. I may not look like a dying man, but I'll be one in a few months, maybe less.'

'But full consciousness transfer? How can that be justified?'

'How touching,' Sorin sneered. 'Apparently the talents I have developed over the past thirty-five years are quite unique - specialised, highly effective, and, more to the point, necessary. There are no others to take my place, not in the DSF, not in the whole of the Promethean military. Not as yet, at least. For that reason, the DSF would rather I did not retire at this time.'

Sorin laughed humourlessly. 'A full transfer is the only thing that is going to stop me from very shortly becoming a rotting corpse.'

'Then why come to me? You know I have nothing to do with consciousness transfer,' Ciprian interjected, growing increasingly alarmed. 'I deal in emergency surgeries, augmentations, cosmetics. I have no experience or training in consciousness transfers.'

'I know, and I am not here for that...' Sorin paused. 'I have asked for and been given some additional privileges. Namely choosing my next body and having it augmented prior to consciousness transfer. And I want it done by someone I can trust.'

Ciprian shrank visibly. 'You should not ask me to do this.'

'Why not?'

Ciprian shifted in his seat, avoiding his brother's gaze.

'I'm an old man,' he answered at last. 'I'm not the surgeon I used to be.'

'That's not what I hear.'

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‘Age has not been kind to me either, Sorin.’

‘That may be true, dear brother, but it begs a question I have long wished to ask. With all your wealth and access to the finest medical minds, why have you never chosen augmentation? There are men and women decades older than you or I running around like children with augmented hearts and lungs. What stops you from doing the same?’

Ciprian shook his head, color rising to his cheeks.

‘Come now, what stops you? Why suffer when you have the means to avoid it?’

Ciprian looked down, glancing at the fire, his eyes focusing on the flames slowly curling around the blackened glass of the cognac bottle.

‘What is it that makes you different from other men, Ciprian?’

Ciprian looked up to his brother. ‘Conscience,’ he admitted.

A moment of silence passed before Sorin began to laugh quietly, almost venomously, leaning forward in his chair. ‘That... That is too perfect! After all these many years growing rich and fat on the vanity and petty fears of the elite, the great Ciprian Lior, surgeon to the noblesse, has an attack of conscience?’

Ciprian glared at his brother. ‘I was never a proponent of the Harvest.’

Sorin’s laughter rolled on. ‘You profited from it! And greatly.’

‘I did not know what it had become. I did not see what was happening!’

The laughter stopped abruptly. Sorin stared fixedly at his elder brother. ‘Now that I believe.’

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Ciprian retrieved his handkerchief from within his silk dinner jacket and mopped the sweat from his brow, avoiding his brother's dark eyes.

'And now that you see,' Sorin continued in an accusatory tone. 'Now that your eyes have been opened to the truth. You don't like what you see, do you, old man?'

Ciprian glared at him again, defiant now. 'No... I do not, truth be told.'

Sorin nodded, leaning back into his chair. 'Truth be told. Truth? Truth gets men killed, Ciprian. Many a fool has died clinging on to ideas, to what he or she believes to be true. Trust me, I have seen it. I have been party to it.'

'But do you know what the Harvest has become, Sorin? Do you know what the Promethean elite and the military are doing?'

'Can you imagine that I do not?'

Ciprian looked at his brother, realising suddenly that he had said too much.

'I know more than you dare dream of, brother,' Sorin said. 'And I live under no illusions. I know exactly what beats in the heart of men. It is my job to know everything - and nothing. I must know... So that I can protect Promethea from truths and lies, internal and external.'

'So yes, I know that the Harvest is no longer the merciful, God-like tool it was meant to be. I know that the great and the powerful use it at their whim to ensure their power, their dominance, and wealth. I know, too, that this is a truth that must be kept from the masses. That too is part of my job.'

Sorin paused a moment, measuring his brother's reaction with cold eyes. 'And I know that you have lost faith in the Harvest, in your... Profession, and perhaps

even in Promethea. I know that you have stopped accepting clients, that you shun society, and that you drink too much. I know that you have associated with Zoltan Banica and Ioan Dalakis, both of whom have ties to the Resistance.'

Ciprian grew still, his eyes widening with fear.

'I know this because I have seen the records kept in the DSF headquarters here in Târgu Mureş. The records that implicate you, records that mark you as a conspirator and collaborator.' Sorin glowered at him in the firelight. 'The records that I have had destroyed, at some considerable expense.'

Ciprian remained silent, not knowing what to say.

'You have been very foolish, brother. For all your great intelligence, you never did possess the wisdom to keep yourself from trouble. But this? You have dishonoured yourself, your family... Me.' Sorin shook his head slowly. 'You can hate the Harvest, the powers that abuse it. You can hate your work and the feckless, lazy sycophants that come to you. You can hate this country, the military that rules it, Frankenstein himself — all of us and everything in Promethea. But know one simple fact, Ciprian...'

'You will never escape it. You will never be free of these things you hate. The DSF will continue to watch you. There is nothing I can do about that now. You and your conscience can cry yourselves to sleep at night, but during the day you must now be a model Promethean. You must show yourself to be useful. I have done what I can. Any deviation and you will be targeted. And you no doubt have heard rumour of what follows.'

Ciprian gave the slightest nod.

'So this is what you are going to do, brother,' Sorin

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continued. 'You will return to your work. Your recent inability to take on clients will be attributed to the special work you are doing for me. It will, I am sure, take some time. When that is done, you will return to society. You will smile, laugh, and shake hands with those you've come to despise. You will sever all ties to anyone or anything connected to the Resistance. And we will never speak of any of this again.'

'Do this and perhaps you may win back some of the honour you've lost. Do anything else and you will die,' he said finally.

'How,' Ciprian croaked, 'How can you live like this? Being a part of it?'

'You ask as though I have ever had a choice.'

'You have a choice.'

'No, brother, I have no choice. None of us has a choice. You may believe you have a choice, but perhaps now you are seeing the truth. There is no choice for us. The sooner you understand that, the better.'

Ciprian shook his head weakly.

'You want choice... Do what I say or you will die. I will not save you again.' Sorin moved forward in his chair. 'Find me a body, Ciprian. Augment it.'

Ciprian looked at him, confused. 'How can I?'

'Do it.' Sorin stood up, reaching into a jacket pocket. 'Here is a list of priorities, of augmentations that I require.'

He placed a folded piece of paper on the small table beside Ciprian as he passed to the door. 'Do this... And both of us may yet live a while,' he said and pulled the door closed behind him.

The snow was beginning to fall heavier now, blanketing his cold body, blotting his vision. The hunter crouched over him, rifling through his pockets, shifting him roughly right then left. The young man's dark, unkempt hair crowded his thin, pale face. The old man watched him, but made no attempt to move or resist. The pain was still too great.

‘His name was Petre Brezeanu,’ he said weakly.

The hunter stopped. ‘Who?’

‘The young man I found, the man whose body you wear. You never asked.’

The hunter, his brother, Sorin looked back at him, bemused.

It was like watching a ghost inhabit and possess another man's body, Ciprian thought to himself. The external features were those of a young man in his mid-Thirties in the prime of health, but every motion, every nuance, was that of his brother just two years his junior. To watch him was both fascinating and horrible.

‘I never cared,’ Sorin said, unmoved. ‘But now that I think about it, I never asked you how you found him or how you killed him?’

Ciprian made no answer. Sorin shrugged, ‘Nonetheless, I should thank you for finding him, and for the impressive augmentations.’

‘I had no choice — you gave me no choice, remember? But a final choice came to me when I found Petre,’ Ciprian replied enigmatically.

Sorin did not respond, but took off his heavy backpack and proceeded to remove a thick bundle of rope from it.

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He laid the rope down and reached again into the backpack, this time producing what looked like a large, folded bag. Sorin looked over to Ciprian, smiling. 'Don't be too alarmed.'

Sorin unfolded the bag, end over end, until it was large enough to encompass a grown man. 'I presume,' he said, 'That you are going to find it difficult to walk back to civilization so this will have to do. When I can't carry you, I will drag you behind me in this. It won't be the most comfortable of journeys.'

He began to undo the ties on the bag. 'But then there won't be much comfort in your future,' he added spitefully. 'What little future you have, that is.'

'Not much,' Ciprian said solemnly, 'Only time enough to pay for the choices we've made.'

Sorin huffed loudly, continuing his work.

'The future should be left to better men. We've had our time-'

'Speak for yourself, old man,' Sorin barked angrily.

'I speak-'

'Enough! No more pointless riddles.'

Sorin stopped suddenly. He glanced round the mountain glade, scanning in a broad circle from the cliff top to the forest edges around them. He grew still, listening for the smallest sound.

Half a minute passed, maybe more. Ciprian coughed and Sorin slowly and cautiously reached into his fur-lined coat with his right hand to retrieve a small, black pistol. His left hand slid down to the leather scabbard in his belt, slipping a long blade free.

'I speak the truth, Sorin.'

Suddenly all around the glade there was movement.

Tales of Promethea

The tips of rifles and the keen edges of knives came first, poking out from the evergreens and appearing over the cliff's edge. Men followed, many men. Trappers, hunters, farmers and tinkers, young men and old, all encircling slowly, watching him. Sorin watched them in turn, realising with every passing moment that there was no way he could escape all of them.

'Throw down the weapons,' a voice called out from the circle.

He scowled at the closing circle of men. There was no way out. Standing slowly, Sorin threw the pistol and the knife into the clearing, where they disappeared beneath the snow. What choice did he have?

'Petre Brezeanu had a brother,' Ciprian said suddenly. Sorin glanced down to him. 'Anton was his name. Anton Brezeanu. Petre's twin... His identical twin.'

There was movement in the circle. A young man stepped forward and Sorin gasped. He watched the man move inward, a mirror image walking towards him. After the consciousness transfer, it had taken Sorin some time to get used to his new young face, to the coloration, the various markings, the tiny flaws. He'd spent hours looking in the mirror. Before him now Sorin saw a perfect reflection of the mask he now wore.

Realisation gripped him. Here stood a man who could walk unchallenged into any DSF or military headquarters in the country, who could access almost any secret or resource unchecked, and who could hunt down and kill virtually anyone outside Frankenstein's inner circle with little need for justification. And he could do it all in the name of Promethea.

The twin, his perfect double, Anton looked at him, his

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eyes full of hate, but sadness also. ‘Welcome to the Resistance,’ he hissed bitterly.

Sorin’s heart thundered in his breast. He suddenly felt as though he would be sick. The muscles in his legs threatened to give way, but he willed himself to remain standing.

‘I underestimated you, brother,’ Sorin said, his voice wavering. His face flushed red and hot. ‘This is an inspired deception. But it will never work.’

‘It will work, Sorin.’

Yes, it would work, Sorin had to admit to himself. The freedoms and powers he had fought for and built up over thirty-five years would make it work. He had made this possible.

Another wave of nausea hit him and Sorin took a step back. Before him, Anton Brezeanu raised his revolver, levelling it at the body that belonged to his dead twin. Sorin shivered and the world lurched about him. How many times had he escaped death before? What now?

‘Forgive me, Sorin,’ Ciprian said, his voice weak and distant.

Sorin tore his eyes from the reflection in front of him and looked down to his brother. ‘To Hell with you, Ciprian,’ he cursed, boiling with hatred and despair. ‘To Hell with you all!’

Ciprian coughed hard, blood spilling from the side of his mouth. ‘I am already there, brother. For what I have done to you, to Anton and Petre... And for what I have let happen to so many of Promethea’s sons and daughters, my place has long been assured.’

Sorin said nothing, shaking with anger and fear.

Ciprian turned to Anton. ‘Leave no evidence behind.

Tales of Promethea

Take what you need, burn the rest.'

Ciprian turned back to his brother. Sorin's face was twisted with anger, bitterness, and fear. He did not speak, but his wild eyes told the story. Ciprian nodded weakly, blood trickling from his lips.

The circle of men stood silent, all eyes on the DSF assassin. Sorin glanced up from his dying brother to the twin, the doppelgänger standing opposite him so full of hate. 'Do it,' he said finally.

The snow swirled over the tops of the trees as two shots rang out. The sound echoed across the white mountain, ringing across both crag and meadow, a rending crack of thunder in winter.

Scar Gang

By Matt Gibbs

Mud splattered and soaked, Ana tried to keep pace with Elisabeta, her former maid. The woman's thin legs carried her over the worst of the puddles, even as the rain turned the dirt lane into a mire. Scurrying along behind, Ana had to take two paces for every one of hers and, try as she might, her skirt and petticoats trailed in the wet. Huddled in her coat, it wasn't her clothes that concerned her though, but their destination.

As they reached Botosani the rain eased, but did not stop. Ana tried to shake the mud from her shoes and stockings as they trudged through the cobbled streets. By the time they reached the large, wooden gate to a dour three-storey building, she'd managed to clean very little off.

Elisabeta knocked loudly on the gate's wicket door. Several moments later, the sound of a lock tumbling and a heavy bolt grating could be heard. The door swung inwards and an elderly man, with greying, patchy stubble and a ring of keys clutched to his chest, scowled out at them.

Tales of Promethea

‘I’m here with the girl,’ said Elisabeta.

Without a word he stepped aside, letting Elisabeta and Ana through into a large courtyard, surrounded on all sides by the building, and closed the door behind them. As they stood in the drizzling rain, Ana became keenly aware of the sensation of being watched from dark and barred windows, as the elderly man crossed the stones and entered the building to announce their arrival.

A minute later he stepped back out and began ambling back to his post. In the doorway behind him stood a pale woman with hard features, wearing an austere, black dress and starched, white apron. In her shadow was a wiry girl, dressed in plain, homespun work clothes. She said something to the girl, who remained in the doorway. Unfurling an umbrella, the woman clacked across the stones towards them.

‘Now remember what I said, don’t be rude to the Matron, alright?’ said Elisabeta under her breath, curtseying and glancing at Ana to follow her lead.

Ana didn’t move, but lowered her head as the woman - the Matron - stood before her and looked her up and down.

‘So Elisabeta, this is the girl then? She is as pretty as you said, and she doesn’t have any family you say?’

‘Yes... I mean, no... No, she doesn’t have any family, Matron. There could be distant kin, from her mother’s side, over the border, but it was just her father and he’s-’

‘He’s not dead!’ said Ana, glancing up quickly.

The Matron’s eyes narrowed, ‘Where is your father then, girl?’

Ana couldn’t meet her eyes, instead she looked back down at her mud caked shoes.

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‘Well, what’s the matter? Devil taken your tongue?’

‘I...’

Ana fought back tears and the wrenching sensation welling up in her stomach. It had been more than two months since her father had disappeared. At first the neighbours and servants had helped her search, but as the days went by and no word of him was heard, whispers had begun to circulate.

As the weeks passed and the rumours spread, the neighbours stopped helping. Then one morning, a pale faced Lieutenant, huddled in the thick wolfskin cloak of the new Promethean Hussars, arrived at the house. Sick with worry, Ana had feared the worst, but the young man was only delivering a message and could offer no news of her father’s whereabouts.

His message however was stark. In the desertion of his duties, her father had been court-martialled and found to be a traitor. All his pay and property were forfeit. For the majority the whispers were now confirmed. In the following days, as the last of their pay dwindled, so did the servants, until only Elisabeta remained.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ana quietly.

‘Well, alive or dead, he hasn’t provided for you as I understand. You will have to work for your board here.’ Turning back to Elisabeta, the Matron said, ‘What skills does the girl have?’

‘She can sew, Matron. She’s also good at needlepoint.’

‘Good, I’ll take her.’ The Matron’s eyes flicked back to Ana, as she said, ‘Well, what do you say, girl?’

Ana paled and looked to Elisabeta for support, but she only nodded in encouragement.

‘It is this or starving on the streets. Which will it be?’

said the Matron.

‘I’d...’ said Ana.

‘Spit it out, girl!’

‘I’d like to stay. Please, if I may?’

‘Good. As you asked so nicely,’ said the Matron, breaking into a thin smile, ‘You may.’

She motioned with her free hand and from the entrance the girl, who looked to be several years older than Ana, quickly scurried across the courtyard to the Matron’s side. Bobbing her head, the girl looked to the Matron for instruction.

‘Vica, take the new girl inside, through the scullery, and see that she’s scrubbed and changed. Then take her to the dormitory.’

‘Yes, Matron,’ said the girl, bobbing her head again.

In a daze, her thoughts tumbling, Ana followed Vica across the cobbles. Hesitating at the threshold of a side door, she looked back to Elisabeta and saw the Matron was counting pennies into her hand.

‘Come on, don’t dawdle! This way,’ said Vica.

Stepping inside, Ana started to follow Vica into the spartan interior. She’d only taken a few steps, when the girl’s piercing grey-green eyes stopped her dead.

‘What are you doing?’

Muddy footprints trailed across the scrubbed, grey flagstones, but Ana clearly hadn’t registered them. Bewildered, she said, ‘Pardon? Excuse me?’

‘Excuse you? You’re messing up the floor and Matron will likely take it out on me! Take off your shoes. Anything that’s going to make a mess.’

As Ana pulled off her shoes and stockings, Vica stood

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watching her.

‘Leave the shoes by the door, but bring the rest.’

Barefoot, Ana shadowed Vica along the cold corridor, past several rooms that appeared to be used for laundry. At the far end of the corridor, light spilled from under a door at the top of three, deep steps. They stopped just before it and Vica motioned Ana into the last side room. Inside there was a small fireplace and along one wall a wooden bench with a deep basin and hand pump set into it.

‘Heat some water and wash yourself. I’ll be back with new clothes for you,’ said Vica and, not waiting for a reply, walked out.

For a second Ana stood still, staring into space, shivering slightly. Taking a deep breath, she drew herself up and began busying herself.

Careful not to get mud anywhere, Ana hung her stockings over the lip of the basin. Selecting wood from a pile in the corner, Ana fed the embers of the fire, and taking a large black kettle from its crane, filled it from the pump and hung it back over the heat.

What little light coming through from the small, high window was fading fast by the time the kettle was beginning to boil, but she was no longer so cold or wet having kept close by the fire.

‘Here, once you’ve washed, put these on,’ said Vica. She stood in the doorway holding out a pile of clothes like the ones she wore and a folded, thin blanket.

Ana took them. Feeling the coarse linen shift and drawers, and rough-spun dress, which was more like an old fashioned bodice and skirt than the light dress she was wearing, she said, ‘Thank you, but my own clothes are

fine. Once they're washed and cleaned they'll-

'Once they're washed, they'll be sold. If they're any good. Everyone wears the same here.'

Ana bit her lip as she turned, so Vica wouldn't see her red, flushed cheeks in the glow of the fire, and mumbled, 'I didn't... Alright...'

Placing her new garments on the side, she filled the basin from the pump and, using her coat sleeve, poured hot water from the kettle into it. Removing her coat, she began to strip down to her own shift and wash herself.

'What's your name?'

'Anastasia, but everyone calls me Ana... You're Vica, right?'

Vica grunted, and said, 'That's Russian isn't it?'

'My mother was Russian.' Seeing the look on Vica's face, Ana quickly added, 'But my father is Hungarian... I mean Promethean. He's a Captain in the army.'

'He must have done alright for himself,' said Vica, picking up Ana's dress and examining it by the firelight.

'He's...'

'Same story for all of us here,' said Vica, misunderstanding. 'You're like the rest of us now, we've got to work for our keep.'

'What kind of work?'

'Nothing you won't get used to. Cleaning, laundry, spinning, sewing... That sort of thing. Anything to stop wicked, idle hands as our Matron would say. Are you done?'

'Yes,' said Ana. 'What can I use to dry myself?'

Vica barked a short laugh, and said, 'You're a proper little princess aren't you? Use the fire and your new clothes. Pass me the rest of the old ones.'

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Ana scooped up her muddied clothes and handed them to Vica.

‘Can I keep my own shift?’

‘I don’t-’

‘Please? I’ll keep it hidden, under the other, and the bodice.’

Vica thought for a second, looking Ana in the eye, and said, ‘Fine... But if you’re caught, you don’t mention I let you keep it, right?’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

‘You’d better. Matron keeps strict rules. You start completely new here, leave everything behind. Come on now, get dressed.’

Standing near to the fire, Ana quickly towelled herself down with her skirt and pulled on her new, homespun garments.

‘Hand me the coat too,’ said Vica and, seeing Ana’s quizzical expression, added, ‘You won’t be needing it anymore. We’re allowed in the courtyard, when its not pouring with rain, and that’s all.’

‘You mean we’re not allowed out?’

‘Girl, do you even know where you are? No, we’re not allowed out. Not until we’re of an age and the Matron can find work for us. As a maid for one of the patrons if we’re lucky.’

Ana fumbled clumsily with her coat, darting her hand into the pocket. As she handed it over, she prayed Vica had not seen what she’d palmed in her hand.

‘Now follow me and bring the blanket.’

Vica led Ana up the steps and through the kitchen, the lingering smells of an evening meal making her stomach grumble. As they walked through the room, a surly

looking, rotund woman, who's domain it appeared to be, watched them both like a hawk.

They walked through what seemed like a maze of corridors to Ana and up two flights of stairs, until they reached a door at the top of the last flight.

'Go on in and find yourself a cot. Tomorrow you'll start work with the rest of us,' said Vica and, indicating the clothes she'd been carrying, added, 'I've got to take these to Matron.'

As Vica slunk back down the stairs, Ana turned the handle and opened the door.

Ana stepped through into a long, attic-like space running the length of the wing, the roof supported by a framework of exposed beams overhead. At the end where she stood was a fire burning in a chimney place and wooden beds ran the length of the low walls into the darkness of the dancing shadows at the other end.

A group of older girls stood beside or sat on beds near the fire, their conversation had stopped and all were now intent on Ana. A dark haired girl, slightly taller and older than the rest stepped forward, the pockmarked skin of her face exaggerated by the flickering light.

Taking a breath, Ana said, 'Hello, I've been told to find a cot?'

'Babies sleep at the back,' said the dark haired girl, motioning with her head towards the shadows. Sneering, she turned back to the group for effect.

Laughter broke out all around Ana. She didn't know what to say or do. In a daze she walked towards the far end of the room, their words ringing in her ears.

'That was good, Mara.'

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‘Did you hear her accent, a bit funny sounding.’

‘Sounds like an aristo-brat to me.’

‘I think she’s Russian, it’s got that...’

‘Did you see her face?’

She kept walking. At the far end of the room, Ana found an empty bed close to another fireplace. It was a mirror of the one at the other end of the room, apart from its lack of use. Sitting down, she wrapped herself in the thin blanket, but it provided little comfort this far from the fire.

She opened her hand and looked down at the medal she’d saved from her coat pocket and had been holding all this time. The Promethean Star, depicting a fist claspng a flame, its colourful ribbon the blue, yellow and red of the flag. It had been awarded to her father for his bravery in the fight for independence.

Standing, Ana walked back towards the group of girls and the fire, who once more stopped talking and watched her as she approached.

‘Well?’ said the dark haired girl.

Ana held the medal tightly in her hand, and said, ‘Can I have some wood please? For the fire at the other end of the room?’

‘Do you see how much wood we have?’

‘Yes, but-’

‘Go away, before I make-’

‘What’s going on here?’ said the Matron. Her voice was like ice down everyone’s spine, making them instantly snap up straight. She clacked into the room, Vica following in her wake. ‘Trouble, Mara?’

‘No trouble, Matron,’ said Mara, the dark haired girl, bobbing her head. ‘No trouble at all. Just getting to know

the new girl.'

'Good...' said Matron, letting the silence hang as she quickly swept the room with her gaze. 'You should all be in bed. Now!'

On command all the girls moved, Mara and Vica to beds near the fire. Ana hesitated for a second, then quickly returned to the spot she'd found.

From under her blanket, Ana could hear the Matron locking the dormitory door in the heavy silence that followed. Unfolding her hand she looked at the medal again. Its five points had dug into her, one of them breaking the skin and causing her to bleed a little. As she clutched the medal to her, she finally allowed herself to cry.

Routine led to resignation for Ana in the days that followed. It wasn't the work, even though at first she'd been clumsy and slow with cleaning and laundry duties. She'd made up for it sewing, her nimble fingers quickly repairing garments or stitching new ones. It wasn't the long hours, although rising at dawn and finishing at sunset was murder to begin with, leaving her feeling permanently tired. Nor was it the food, even if calling it bland was being charitable. No, it was the isolation.

Growing up she'd not had many friends her own age, but she'd always been surrounded by adults, whether friends of her father, her tutors or servants. In contrast she was now among girls and boys of roughly her own age, but ever since that first night she'd been clearly marked out as a joke by Mara, even a foe, and the girls kept their distance in case that taint spread to them.

It was no better with the boys. Under the vigilance of

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the Matron they were kept apart most of the time. They lived and worked in the other wing, learning trades as carpenters or cobblers, and were only allowed to really mix in the courtyard, during their brief breaks to get fresh air.

At those times, Ana found herself between both sides and part of no group within either. She sat apart and tried to keep herself as unseen, as uninvolved as possible, but it didn't always work. She was aware of the others talking about her, mostly Mara and the older girls. It's then she'd slip her hand into a secret pocket she'd sewn in her dress, turn the medal over in her hand, and remember her father. Remember to be brave.

As the weeks passed, she noticed one of the boys, a lithe lad with blonde hair, blue eyes and a sharp nose, kept looking her way. She'd been mortified when one day he'd walked towards her and asked her name, and told her he was called Cornelius. Mara had jeered loudly then before she could reply, calling out, asking whether he was her lover? Turning bright red, Ana had mumbled no and scurried away from both of them.

'What have you got there?'

Too late Ana realised she'd been absent-mindedly looking at the medal, dreaming about the day her father had been presented with it, recalling how excited, how proud she'd been. Sitting at the side of the courtyard, she must have taken it from her pocket. Now Mara loomed over her.

'It's nothing...' said Ana, quickly standing up and trying to jam the medal back in her pocket, but she already knew it was futile.

Mara grabbed her arm. 'Show me. Open your hand.'

Ana hesitantly, withdrew her hand, opened up her palm. The others, boys and girls, started to crowd round, joining Mara and her gang.

'Where did you get that?'

'It's... It's my father's... He was given it for fighting in the Liberation.'

'My father and my brother fought in that. They didn't get nothing. Didn't get anything for it,' said Mara. 'What was so special about yours?'

'He was a Captain, he organised an attack.' Before she could stop herself, Ana said, 'He was even promoted afterwards for-'

'Promoted? Both my father and brother died, and yours got promoted? It's always us doing the fighting, while the aristocrats play at soldiers.'

'It's not like that! He was a hero!'

Mara laughed, and said, 'A hero? Did you all hear that?'

There was a general murmur from the others, but all Ana could hear now was her heart pounding in her ears. Her world narrowed to herself, Mara and the medal.

'Real heroes gave their lives for this country. Give it to me,' said Mara, her fingers digging deeper into Ana's arm.

Ana's hand tightened on the medal, she heard herself mumbling, 'Please...'

A voice cut through the rising noise in her ears, Ana thought she heard Vica, heard the girl saying, 'Let her keep it, Mara. What do you want it for anyway?'

Ana's heart skipped a beat.

'Because I deserve it more than she does,' said Mara. 'Give it to me!'

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Ana felt her arm being yanked forcefully and her hand being prised open by the older girl's fingers, but she felt no pain, felt too numb to react. As the medal was wrenched from her grasp, her world exploded.

Knocked backwards by Mara's savage elbow, Ana stumbled, but didn't fall. Everything snapped clearly into focus then. Mara standing, holding the medal, smugly victorious. Vica scowling, throwing daggers with her grey-green eyes at her dark haired peer. The others still crowded around, some laughing, some jeering, some alarmed.

Ana launched herself at Mara. Expecting her to have gone down, Mara was completely blindsided by Ana's assault. The ferocity knocked both of them to the floor, as Ana flailed with her fists, thrashing at Mara's face. She found her hand's sinking into the older girl's hair, pulled forwards, and dashed her head back against the cobbles.

Scrabbling, fending her off, Mara grabbed Ana's throat with one hand and, clawing against her face, hooked the thumb of her other hand into the younger girl's mouth. Feeling Mara start to pull against her cheek, Ana bit down hard, tasting blood. Mara wrenched back her hand, but as they continued to struggle, Ana realised she couldn't win, that she didn't have Mara's strength.

Freezing cold water drenched them both. Matron stood over them, Vica by her side, an empty bucket in the girl's hand. The pale woman didn't say anything, but just glared, her jaw muscle twitching slightly, as Ana and Mara pulled themselves apart.

As Ana found her feet, she noticed the others had all withdrawn a few paces, fearful of being found guilty through association.

‘She star-‘

That was as far as Mara got, the Matron’s slap was like a viper’s strike, and she held up her finger for silence. Mara was instantly cowed.

‘Both of you inside, now!’

Walking side by side, Matron behind them, Ana chanced a look back as Mara stepped indoors. She saw the blonde haired lad, Cornelius, bend down and scoop something from the floor - a flash of bright blue, yellow and red material - but she couldn’t judge his expression in the second before Matron pushed her firmly through the door.

Ana carefully turned over in her bed. She was still very tender, but the pain was bearable now as long as she didn’t lay on her back. It was still keeping her awake however, even as the embers of the fire at the other end of the dormitory, where Mara must be feeling the same, grew dim.

Much to her relief, Mara had not brought up the medal and Matron had not pressed them as to the cause of their fight. Both girls had received the cane as punishment, before being ordered to stand in silence at either end of the hall facing the wall.

Although the pain of the beating had been bad, Ana found standing for hours with the sting of it worse. Especially when their evening meal was served and they had to continue standing in front of everyone, unable to join the long tables to eat.

Ana’s stomach growled, but over the noise she thought she heard something else. Wincing a little as she raised her head, she peered into the shadows.

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From the darkness, a voice quietly whispered, 'Hello?'

Ana jumped, sitting up slightly, far more alert, she cast around searching the nearby beds, scanning the dormitory. In the silence that followed everyone seemed to be asleep.

'Yes, you,' said the hushed voice, more urgently. 'Can you get the new girl? Ana? I need to talk to her.'

Ana realised the voice was coming from behind her, but there was nothing there, just the wall and the cold, disused fireplace.

'What do you want her for?' said Ana in a whisper, addressing the night.

'I've got something of hers,' said the voice, from somewhere near floor level.

Ana glanced around again and, sure that nobody was watching, slipped out of her bed and padded towards the source.

'It's me. What do you want?'

'I wanted to see you,' said the voice, a boy's voice, from the fireplace.

Ana paled, nervously looking back at the other girls. In a quiet, but insistent tone, she said, 'What are you doing? You can't be here!'

'I've got your medal.'

Ana was sure now that the voice was coming from the fireplace somehow. She looked back at her bed, then back at the dark fireplace. Making up her mind, she knelt down and quietly crawled forwards.

'You should go, now, we'll be in so much trouble with-'

'Do you want your medal or not?'

'Yes. Of course I do, but...' said Ana. 'Where are you?'

A hand pushed up and through the grate at the back of

the fireplace and Ana reached out, their fingers meeting, and took the medal.

‘Thank you...’

‘It’s Cornelius.’

‘I know, I saw you pick it up,’ said Ana, cradling the medal in one hand to her chest, while supporting herself with the other. ‘But why? I thought... Why didn’t you wait, you could have given it back in our break?’

‘The others would see you’ve got it back then, wouldn’t they? Mara would try to take it again. This way I thought, it seems lost, that someone took it and isn’t saying, right?’

‘I guess, but if we’re... If you’re caught...’

‘It’s alright, I do this all the time.’

Ana shook her head.

‘No, honestly.’

‘You can see me?’ said Ana, suddenly self-conscious in her shift. ‘I can’t see you.’

‘Hardly in this light.’

Realising what he’d said, Cornelius quickly added, ‘What I mean is, I move about all the time. The room below isn’t used, lots of them aren’t, it’s quite easy really at night, and this chimney shares the flue or did. Surprised it’s not fallen down.’

‘So you can come and go as you please?’ said Ana.

‘Of course,’ said Cornelius. ‘Well, I’ve still not found a way out yet.’

In the pause that followed, Ana could hear the steady, rhythmic breathing of the girls sleeping nearby.

‘That’s the Promethean Star? At least that’s what it says on it, I think?’ said Cornelius.

‘Yes.’

‘I wanted to be a soldier, before... Wanted to fight for

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our Liberation-’

A heavy cough hacked through the silence, coming from one of the beds at the far end of the room. Ana’s heart leapt into her throat and lodged there. Seconds passed.

‘Why have you-’

‘Shush,’ said Ana, straining to hear, dreading what might happen next, but only silence followed. ‘You’ve got to go. If we’re caught...’

‘Alright.’ Then blurting out, Cornelius said, ‘But I can come see you again?’

‘I...’ Ana looked down at the medal in her hand, she couldn’t see it clearly, but could feel its weight, and said, ‘Yes. Yes, I’d like that.’

‘Tomorrow then. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

As she heard him slip quietly away in the darkness, Ana smiled to herself and whispered, ‘Thank you, Cornelius.’

Ana feared a reprisal from Mara over the next few days and tried hard to keep herself as inconspicuous as possible, but the dreaded attack never came. Instead she comforted herself with the knowledge that she’d found an ally and a friend in Cornelius, who, true to his word, had come back to visit her the night after.

They’d whispered in the shadows until the early hours of the morning, Cornelius keen to hear stories of life in the army. Ana knew very little of the gory details of her father’s military career, but recounted as best she could what snippets of conversations she’d overheard. She realised at times that her claims were perhaps a little grand, overly embellished, as her pride got the better of

her, but Cornelius never stopped or derided her for it.

The pain of her beating had lessened by the end of the week and she began to hope that Mara, perhaps frightened of a harsher punishment from Matron, would now leave her alone.

As Ana applied soap to her washboard, ready to begin scrubbing the pile of linen beside her, she noticed the girls doing the same around her had all stopped. Mara was standing in the doorway to the scullery corridor.

‘All of you, come on, outside.’

Ana’s heart sank as the other girls, glancing between Mara and her, abandoned their tubs and sheepishly ducked past the older girl and left the room. Ana gazed up at Mara and slowly got to her feet, meeting her challenging stare.

To her surprise Mara took a step back, and said, ‘Come on, you too.’

Ana’s confusion was met with a scowl from Mara.

‘Matron wants us outside.’

Following her out, Ana saw that all of the girls working in the scullery were heading outside and, as she stepped out herself, found that the boys were also assembling in the courtyard in front of Matron.

‘Line up, all of you. Boys on the left, girls on the right,’ said Matron, her stern voice commanding silence. ‘In rows of six. Not so clustered together, leave a space between you.’

Ana darted a questioning glance at Cornelius, who was lining up amongst the boys, but he gave her a troubled look that did nothing to ease her growing anxiety. Trying to find the cause of the growing tension in the courtyard she noticed Belascu, the old gatekeeper, standing in front

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of the wicket door with two men dressed in red footman's outfits.

'You here,' said Matron, bodily moving one of the younger girls into place. 'You here. And you here. The rest of you line up to them. Hurry up.'

Ana moved to join the forming lines. Instinctively keeping away from Mara, she found herself at the front.

'Make sure they look presentable,' said Matron to Vica, who as always had been diligently shadowing her footsteps.

Quickly bobbing her head, Vica walked along the lines, quietly giving instructions as Matron continued to address them.

'We have important guests, benefactors of our establishment visiting us,' said the Matron. 'You will be respectful and show good manners. Do not talk unless spoken to first, and make sure you curtsy or bow before you reply, politely. I'll be watching and listening. Does anyone not understand?'

There was silence throughout the courtyard apart from Vica quietly telling one of the younger boys to tuck his shirt in. Under Matron's gaze the boy went bright red, but managed to get his escaping shirt under control. Satisfied, Vica nodded to Matron that she'd finished.

'Good,' said the Matron and, pivoting swiftly on her heels, walked inside through the main door.

Vica hurriedly joined the end of Ana's line. They did not have to wait long. From the doorway emerged a slender Lady, followed by a teenage Boy and Girl, who from their dark hair and chiselled, haughty looks could only be her children. They were all immaculately dressed, the Lady in deep red satins, the Boy in a fashionable coat

of the same rich colour, and the Girl in an emerald green dress that complimented her mother's. Matron emerged last at a respectful distance.

'So many of them,' said the Lady. 'I didn't realise quite how extensive your work had become.'

'Yes, Madam,' said Matron. 'Thanks to your generosity we've been able to take in more children this year. Sadly, Liberation didn't come without a price, so many were made orphans.'

'A price worth paying though,' said the Lady, not even glancing back at Matron.

'Yes, Madam, of course.'

As the Lady questioned Matron as to the nature of the skills that were being taught, the Boy and Girl began to move along the lines. Whether it was curiosity or just a quirk of their upper class, they showed no hint of shame or uncertainty in studying those arrayed before them. Ana watched as the Boy, puffing himself up, sized himself against one of the older lads and, seemingly disinterested, moved on along the lines.

'Mama, come see,' said the Girl, who'd stopped in front of Ana and was studying her face. 'This one is very pretty.'

Ana had already begun to blush under the Girl's gaze by the time her mother joined them. As she looked her up and down, Ana felt sure her cheeks were turning as red as the woman's dress.

'Indeed, what a beautiful face,' said the Lady. 'What is your name, girl?'

Ana curtsied, and said, 'Ana, Madam.'

As she straightened, before she knew what was happening, the Lady took Ana's chin in one gloved hand. The woman's grip was firm, but not rough. Ana flinched,

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but only for a second, and tried to smile.

‘What a charming little thing you are,’ said the Lady, turning Ana’s head from side to side. ‘But too young I fear to serve for you, my dear.’

‘Yes, you’re right, Mama.’

‘Look, here’s a girl more your age,’ said the Lady, releasing Ana and moving away.

Ana watched, completely forgotten, as both of them moved to the end of the line.

‘Lift your head, girl, let us see your face.’

‘Oh! What striking eyes.’

‘Yes, they’re quite delightful,’ said the Lady. ‘What’s your name, girl?’

‘Vica, Madam.’

‘Well, what do you think?’ said the Lady, turning to her daughter, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Very sure, Mama.’

‘I’m sorry, Madam, I think... I think there’s been some mistake with...’ said Matron, who suddenly looked more pale than ever.

‘What mistake could that possibly be?’

‘This girl is my aid, she helps me with-‘

‘Ah, I see. So, she’s not only well schooled in household duties like the others, but is also intelligent and reliable. What I don’t see is what difference that makes?’

‘But...’ said Matron.

‘But what? My daughter has taken an interest in this girl and there is no comparable substitute here. She’s has... Unique qualities. Qualities that will serve my daughter well.’

‘Yes, of course, Madam,’ said Matron, curtsying herself. ‘My apologies. The girl has been a most trusted

servant to me. I forgot myself.'

'Your loyalty for your charges does you credit, but I'm glad we're in agreement. Have her made ready. I'll send my man tonight.' The conversation apparently ended, the Lady turned back to her daughter and, after another look at Vica, said, 'Yes, you're quite right, they are most delightful... Come along, it is time for us to leave.'

Sweeping towards the wicket gate, the Lady stepped out without another word or glance back, her children and footmen following, while Matron held a long curtsy. Underneath her deference though, Ana could see anger flare in Matron's eyes.

As Belascu closed the gate after the visitors, Matron jerked back straight, and shouted, 'What are you all gawping at? Back to work! All of you! Now!'

As Ana ducked back inside the scullery door, she saw the Matron round on Vica and heard her snap, 'You! Come with me.'

Vica didn't return to the dormitory that night. As Ana lay in her bed, she listened to the whispers of the older girls at the other end of the room by the fire.

'Do you think she's alright?'

'She's probably already sleeping in a proper bed, the lucky bitch,' said Mara, Ana easily picking her voice out from the rest.

'They wouldn't... You know... Would they?'

'What? No. None of that's true anyway... Is it?'

'You sure? Emil says-'

'Emil's an idiot, good for nothing-'

'Catalena doesn't think so!'

'It's not true.'

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‘I’m not so sure...’

‘Come on, we’ve all seen you and him.’

‘Catelena’s in love.’

‘I’m not!’ said Catelena, more loudly than she intended.

‘Hah! She is, look... Her face has gone bright red!’

‘They liked the aristo-brat’s face. Did you see the way they peered at her?’

‘Fine then! What’s wrong with Emil anyway?’

‘Yes. Yes, they did...’ said Mara.

The conversation rolled on about Emil, a couple of the others baiting Catelena about him, but in the background a hushed discussion had started. Ana strained to hear what was being said, mainly by Mara it seemed, but she couldn’t make it out. As the teasing of Catelena petered out, the others began to listen and join in the secretive debate. Soon there was silence throughout the dormitory and the older girls slunk back to their beds to sleep.

Ana rolled over in bed to face the cold fireplace, hopeful that Cornelius might be able to slip away tonight to see her. She had questions and hoped he might know the answers.

As she began to doze, her thoughts tumbling together, she heard a whisper in the dark and broke into a smile. As she raised herself to move towards the fireplace, a hand clamped over her mouth and hands seized her from behind.

Struggling, she tried to lash out and free herself, but there were too many hands and all of them were stronger than her. Pulled back, she was forcefully pushed down onto her bed. In the firelight of the dying embers, she could make out the older girls surrounding her.

Mara loomed over her head, holding a smouldering

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switch of wood from the fire, and said, 'Gag her!'

As the girl holding her mouth released her hand, Ana found herself crying, 'No! Please no! I'm sorry-'

'Quick! Shut her up.'

As Ana protested a rough strip of cloth, the middle tied into a large knot, was forced into her mouth and held so that it pinned her against the bed. With her free hand Mara dragged back Ana's hair from her face and grasped her forehead.

Ana renewed her struggle, thrashing more forcefully than ever, but there were just too many of them. She heard Mara say something, but the words made no sense, and felt another girl grab either side of her head. Between Mara, the gag being pulled down into her mouth and the third girl, Ana's head was pinned helplessly in place.

As the burning switch of wood was held against her skin, Ana blacked out.

Ana took to hiding her face, keeping her head forward and her hair down. The pain was worse, far worse, than the thrashing she'd received from Matron. She'd washed and cleaned the wound as best she could, but the burn had left an angry and swollen welt that would forever scar her left cheek and jaw.

She tried to make herself even more of a recluse, but it was impossible to ignore the other girls when she was working. They didn't tease and catcall though. Instead Ana received sympathetic looks when she met their eyes, even from the older girls. Far from comforting her, this just fuelled her anger.

She was also resolutely trying to avoid Cornelius. He had of course come to see her the next evening, full of

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concern, but she had pretended to be asleep and after many whispered attempts to get her attention he had slunk away. He'd tried the next night too, but, unable to face another night of him calling, she'd hissed at him to leave her alone.

Her back to the wall of the scullery corridor, she sat listening to the sounds of her peers at break in the courtyard outside, her hair pulled forwards, down over her face. She knew she would be in trouble if found, but she couldn't face the looks and whispers that followed her.

She jumped as the courtyard door closed. Cornelius was standing there, at the end of the corridor. Horrified, Ana lurched to her feet as he walked towards her.

'Are you okay? I heard what-'

'Go away!' Ana took a step backwards, turning her face from him, and said, 'Please, just go away. Leave me alone.'

'Why won't you talk to me?'

'Please...' said Ana, taking another step back. Looking over her shoulder she could see the closed door to the kitchen, the sounds and smells of cooking from beyond it, and realised there could be no retreat through Cook's domain.

'I want to help.'

'Help? How can you help? I'm...'

Standing before her, Cornelius reached out gently to brush her hair from her face, but Ana jerked her head away before his touch, her body trembling.

Cornelius faltered, stepped back as if he'd been slapped, and said, 'I'm sorry... I didn't-'

'Just go away!'

'They did it because you-'

'What! You think I deserved this? Do you?'

‘No, it’s just-’

They both heard the latch move and dived into one of the washrooms, just before the door flung open and Cook barked, ‘Who’s there?’

Pressed against the wall, holding their breath, they heard the woman lumber down the steps and call out again. Dreading that she’d enter their room at any moment, Cornelius silently watched Ana as she still kept her face hidden, turned away from him, on the other side of the washroom doorway.

Eventually they heard her muttering, puffing her way back up the few steps, and closing the kitchen door. Silence followed.

‘You must go,’ said Ana, once she was sure the woman had gone. ‘I don’t want... I don’t want to get you in trouble.’

Cornelius hesitated, looking at her, and said, ‘No. No, you need to understand...’

‘Understand what? Understand that they hate me? I know-’

‘No. Why they did it. Come with me.’

‘Are you mad? We were nearly just caught by-’

‘I need to show you something. Please. Please, come with me... Trust me.’

Through her hair, Ana looked into Cornelius’ eyes, saw the earnestness there, and said, ‘I-’

At that moment, at the other end of the corridor, the door to the courtyard opened and two of the younger girls bustled inside. Break had ended.

The decision made for her, Ana said, ‘I can’t! I’d be missed. You will too.’

Quickly glancing over his shoulder at the two stunned

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girls, Cornelius turned back to Ana looking defeated, and said, 'Later then? Tonight? You'll come with me and I can show you... This is important.'

Taking a breath, she nodded, and said, 'Later then. Now go.'

Cornelius half smiled, half nodded back in reassurance, then hurried out, passing the whispering girls who were gawking at him. In his wake, they turned to stare at Ana, who pushed more hair in front of her face and went back to work.

That night Ana lay in bed, waiting, turning over the events of the last few days in her thoughts. She could not fathom what Cornelius wanted to show her or how he would be able to do so tonight.

Long after the light from the fire, at the far end of the room, had died down to the glow of embers, she heard him whispering from the disused fireplace. After a quick check of the room, she quietly swung herself out of bed and padded over to him in the dark.

'You ready?' said Cornelius, whispering from below.

'What are you going to do?' said Ana, scowling into the dark.

'I'm going to lift this grate.'

'What? But that will make a noise.'

'Not if I'm slow and careful. I've thought it through. Do you have a cloth or a blanket? Something I can slide it onto?'

'Yes... Yes, wait a moment.'

Ana slunk back to her bed and, after quickly slipping on her homespun clothes, her hand briefly straying to the medal in its secret pocket, she stripped the thin blanket

from it as quietly as she could. Returning to the fireplace, she said, 'I've got a blanket. What do you want me to do?'

'Great, double it up and put it in front. I'll lift, slowly, but I need you to steady the grate, guide it onto the blanket.'

Ana folded the blanket up and slipped it in front of the fireplace, and said, 'That's done. I'm ready.'

'On three then... One. Two. Three...'

The grate moved, making a scraping sound, but Ana instantly steadied it and they stopped. Her heart pounding she listened for any sign that they'd been heard.

'It's good. Keep going.'

Cornelius pushed up again and between them they steered the grate onto the blanket with barely another sound. Ana stared down into the gap, she could just see Cornelius' retreating outline in the dark below.

'Swing yourself down, legs first. I can guide your feet.'

Ana lowered her legs into the gap, felt Cornelius' hand take her right foot and guide it to a ledge in the brickwork. Taking her weight on her arms she lowered herself into the small gap, contorting and squeezing her body through, as Cornelius led her down.

She didn't have far to climb in the damaged and tumbled fireplace, and soon found herself standing in one of the disused rooms beneath the girls dormitory. In the moonlight from the barred windows, she could clearly see Cornelius grinning at her.

'What did you want to show me?'

'Come on.'

Cornelius padded to the door and led Ana into another room much like the last, only it was piled high with tables, chairs and beds in various states of disrepair. Closing the

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door behind her, they stood awkwardly, only a couple of paces apart, looking at each other, Ana still hiding her face behind her hair.

Cornelius started to unbutton his shirt.

‘What are you doing?’ said Ana, trying to take a step back, but bumping into a chair.

As he opened his shirt, Ana saw that a web of old scars criss-crossed his chest. She reached out her hand as if to touch them, paused, left it hanging in the air between them.

Seeing her expression, Cornelius said, ‘It was the others, the older lads, they did this to me.’

‘Why?’

‘To save me.’

‘To save you? I don’t... I don’t understand.’

‘Last summer, one of our benefactors came with his son. He wanted a companion for him, a whipping boy, as he was scrawny and ill himself. Just like the other day, we were told to get in lines, but we had to take off our shirts, as they walked up and down. They chose me. I was to go the next day... That night the others did this.’

‘But? But that’s horrible!’

‘Is it? There’s worse than scars,’ said Cornelius, taking Ana’s hand and guiding it closer to his chest.

‘It must have hurt?’ said Ana, resisting for a second, she placed her hand on his chest, her fingers feeling the marks more clearly than her eyes could see them in the moonlight.

‘When Matron found out she was furious. Furious that I’d been spoilt she said, and so I wasn’t sent away, none of us where. None of the others were suitable she’d raved at me. It saved me. Like it will save you.’

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Ana's hand went to her face.

'Let me look, please.'

Lifting her head, she let Cornelius gently brush the hair from her face. Ana studied his eyes and saw no trace of repulsion, only concern, as he looked at her.

'Are you alright?'

She nodded, tears welling up, and said, 'Yes... But I still don't understand. Save me? Save me how?'

'They didn't want a whipping boy. Same as they didn't want a maid the other day. They just want some part of you.'

Ana laughed suddenly, surprising herself, and said, 'What? No? No, that's crazy... Some part of you? What are you-'

'I can show you, come on.'

Frowning for a second, Ana followed Cornelius through the junk to a second door. He bent down, opened it a crack, and looked out into the corridor beyond.

'Just follow me and be quiet.'

Cornelius led Ana through the dark maze of rooms and corridors, many of which were ruled out of bounds by Matron and were thick with dust from their lack of use. Eventually they reached what once must have been a grand dining room before the house had been turned into an orphanage.

'We're going to have to climb down,' said Cornelius, carefully sliding back a wooden panel to reveal a dumbwaiter set into the wall. Illustrating with his arms and back, he added, 'You can brace yourself. Like this.'

Ana looked into the dark hole in the wall, and said, 'How far?'

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‘Past the kitchen, down into the cellar. Do you want me to go first?’

She nodded and Cornelius climbed up, sliding his legs in and lowering his body through, and said, ‘We need to be quiet as well. Cook falls asleep by the fire sometimes.’

Once inside the wood lined shaft, Ana found it tough going, but she managed to slowly lower herself down. At the very bottom, Cornelius guided her through another hatch and out into the pitch black of the cellar.

‘Here...’ said Cornelius and, fumbling in the dark for a moment, he struck a match and lit the small stub of candle he’d taken from his pocket.

As Ana’s eyes adjusted, the flickering candle revealed a rough stone cellar with a low, barrel vaulted ceiling. Shelves contained an assortment of old and new tins, while baskets and sacks of foodstuffs were stacked against the walls.

‘This way.’

As Cornelius led them further into the cellar, the candlelight made shifting shadows play across the ceiling. A couple of archways led off into another room running parallel with the one they were in, but they kept going straight, heading for a door at the far end.

It opened into a short corridor and, passing stairs that Ana guessed led up to the locked door in the scullery above, they crept through into another room. It was much wider than the kitchen cellar and was divided into walled partitions along its length, some of which held supplies of wood for the fires. They headed on, through another door at the far end.

This room was also partitioned, but unlike the last the alcoves were piled high with barrels, more wood and even

a supply of coal. Ana didn't take this in though, her attention was fixed on the wooden table that stood in the middle of the floor, upon which rested something large, bundled and wrapped in sacks.

'Is that?' said Ana, her eyes flicking briefly to Cornelius, who nodded.

Without realising, Ana slipped one hand into her pocket. Clutching the medal tightly, as she stepped into the room. Standing before the table, she reached for a flap of the sacking. She felt herself squeezing the medal more tightly and, hesitating for a second, she pulled back the sack.

Vica's empty sockets looked up at her. The girl's eyes had been removed.

Disgusted, unable to tear her gaze away, but unable to look into those empty holes, Ana's eyes danced over the girl's blue-grey face and down her neck, where she noticed a thin, angry line cut deeply into the bruised flesh there.

Ana didn't know how long she stood there, gazing down at Vica. But it wasn't Vica anymore, just a body that had once been her. She felt a hand on her shoulder, turned to look up at Cornelius, and gently let him guide her away.

As they stepped back through the doorway, Ana said, 'It's... They can't be allowed to do this. If someone knew.'

'I'm not sure anyone cares, who would-'

They both froze, rooted to the spot. Light illuminated the corridor leading back the way they'd come, cutting them off. It bobbed and weaved, growing stronger, as it came down the stairs.

'Back,' said Ana, dragging Cornelius into the room with Vica's body and closing the door behind them.

She cast around for somewhere for them to hide,

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spotted a stack of barrels in the corner, near the coal, and pointed and pushed Cornelius towards them. As they hunkered down behind them, Cornelius blew out the candle, plunging them into darkness.

They could hear footsteps and voices approaching. Moments later light streamed into the room as the door opened.

‘-here, gentlemen,’ said Matron, and several people walked into the room.

Ana held her breath, hardly daring to breathe. Next to her, Cornelius did the same. She lay on the floor, her back against a barrel, looking up the steep slope of the coal chute, fearful that if she tried to see she’d be spotted.

‘What happened to her eyes and neck?’ said a rasping, male voice.

There was a long pause, all they could hear was Matron’s heels click across the floor towards the table, as the light from the lantern moved across the room.

Finally Matron said, ‘The Countess’ Surgeon collected them, her daughter wanted new eyes, and the neck... I assume that isn’t going to be a problem?’

‘Well...’

‘It wasn’t the last time,’ said Matron.

‘No, it’s fine,’ said a second, much deeper, male voice. ‘They don’t ask questions. What with all those students paying to watch as they cut them up, they can’t get enough bodies.’

‘Same arrangement then?’

Another pause, shorter this time, then the rasping man said, ‘Agreed.’

‘Get the feet,’ said the other, and Ana heard the men lift Vica’s body and follow Matron out, plunging her and

Cornelius back into darkness.

As the minutes passed, she realised that silent tears had been running down her face, but couldn't recall when she'd started crying. In the dark, she found herself holding Cornelius' hand.

'Let's go,' whispered Cornelius, reluctantly withdrawing his hand from hers and relighting the candle stub.

Without a word, they carefully crept back through the cellar. Even after climbing up to the dining room, as they retraced their steps to the chimney, they didn't speak. Once Cornelius had quietly replaced the grate, their goodbye was simply a lingering touch.

In the weeks that followed, Ana and Cornelius plotted their escape. Cornelius knew his way around the building, better than anyone, but it was Ana who eventually suggested that they might climb out into the street through the cellar's coal chute.

Venturing back down one night, they found they'd have no difficulty climbing up the steep incline, but discovered the hatch at the other end was chained shut from the outside and there was, as far as they could tell, a heavy padlock keeping it in place. Neither of them were surprised, but it did force them to rethink their plans.

They slowly, so as not to draw suspicion, began to collect the things they'd need. Cornelius began to take tools from the workshop, sneaking out a file, a broken saw blade and an awl to use on the chain, while both of them tried to gather extra clothes. They didn't worry about food, instead planning on taking it from the cellar rooms as they left.

It took weeks, weeks that felt like an eternity to Ana, to

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steal everything they might need, but they did not dare rush or be too blatant. Although neither of them had said it, they both knew they'd only get one chance and dreaded what the punishment would be if they were caught.

Eventually the day came when they were ready. They waited until it was late, then quietly made their way down to the room that had housed Vica's body, stopping only to gather food in the cellar.

As Cornelius worked at the chain with the tools he'd scavenged, Ana bent low at the bottom of the coal chute, holding the stub of a lit candle, watching him work.

Minutes seemed to turn into hours as he attacked the chain, but Ana's heart soared as Cornelius reported, 'Nearly there!'

Too late, Ana heard the telltale click on the stone floor behind her and gasped as her head was wrenched back by her hair.

'I knew it!'

Ana struggled to turn around, dropping the candle and food she'd been carrying, wrapped in her blanket, and tried to grab hold of the hand seizing her hair.

'You little bitch!' snarled Matron, releasing Ana and striking her across the face. 'I knew someone had been down here!'

Ana reeled from the savage blow. Dazed, she found herself looking up at Matron, as the woman towered over her, the hooded lantern she was carrying swinging crazily in one hand.

Matron lunged forwards, grabbing Ana by the scruff of her neck, half carrying, half dragging her across the coals, and said, 'Not clever enough to leave things as you found

them, were you? What did you see?’

‘Nothing. I saw-’

Ana fell backwards as Matron pushed her, sprawling on the coals as they turned underfoot, and the pale woman said, ‘Liar! I know you were down here. I know what you saw.’

Even with her blood pounding, with Matron looming over her, Ana could hear or somehow sense that Cornelius was quietly edging his way down the coal chute behind her, and said, ‘You’re right... I saw what you did! How could you? How could you do that to Vica? Let her be murdered like that? Sell her like that! Sell her to the Countess? To those two men?’

‘You were still in the room?’ said Matron, snorting a short laugh. ‘Well, I caught you at last. Caught you prying. And stealing... Get up!’

Ana lay motionless on the coals, and said, ‘No! You’re-’

‘I said get up!’ shouted Matron, screeching over her.

Pulling herself to her feet, Ana said, ‘You won’t get away with this. I’ll tell everyone.’

‘And what will you tell them?’

‘That you’re killing people. That you’re selling parts of bodies... Parts of bodies to be used by others!’

Matron scowled, her eye’s narrowing and, indicating the door, said, ‘Move!’

Ana stumbled towards the door, drawing the pale woman away from the coal chute, and said, ‘What are you going to do to me?’

‘Stop!’

They both spun round to see Cornelius, the pointed awl in his hand, standing where they’d been moments before.

‘Two of you! I should have-’

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‘Shut up!’ said Cornelius. ‘Ana, get behind me.’

‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘What we’re doing is walking out of here. First you’re going to give us your keys, then we’re going to tie you up.’

Matron’s eyes narrowed, went to the metal spike in Cornelius’ hand.

Seeing her look, he added, ‘Don’t try anything. I’ve got enough reason.’

‘Fine...’ Putting the lantern down on the table, Matron began unhooking the set of keys from her belt, and said, ‘It won’t get you far. Where can you go?’

‘Away from here,’ said Ana and, thinking quickly, added, ‘All you need know is, should you come after us, we’ll let everyone know. Let them know what you’ve done here.’

As Matron threw the keys to Ana, Cornelius half turned to look at her, and said, ‘Find something to tie-’

Cornelius was choking, his hands at his own throat before he knew what was happening. Ana’s warning had been a second too late and died on her lips. Matron, lunging to his blindside, had whipped a length of wire around his neck from behind. Her hard mouth twisting in a sneer, she pulled tight on two wooden handles at either end of the wire.

Ana didn’t hesitate, dashing forwards she snatched the lantern from the table and swung it at Matron, screaming as she did. It hit the woman’s head with a satisfying crack, breaking the glass, and sent all of them staggering backwards. Cornelius, released from the garrotte, pitched forwards onto his knees, gasping for breath.

Ana swung again, hitting Matron across her back, and the spilt oil from her first strike ignited. With a howl of

rage and pain, Matron's hair and clothes, the skin on her face and neck, went up in flames.

As the woman howled, turning this way and that, Ana pulled Cornelius away just as Matron overturned the table. Writhing, the flames intensifying as her apron and skirt caught fire, she ran shrieking, stumbling into and collapsing against a pile of wood, overcome by the pain and shock.

In the cavorting devil light from the growing flames, Ana ripped a piece of fabric from her shift and pressed it against Cornelius' bleeding neck, guiding his hand to hold it, and said, 'Come on!'

In the minutes that followed, Ana moved as if in a dream. Quickly, but calmly, collecting the keys and their stolen supplies, she helped Cornelius to his feet and guided him up the stairs and out through the scullery.

In the confusion of the spreading fire, as Belascu abandoned his gatehouse to raise the alarm, they quietly moved to the wicket door and unlocked it.

They were long gone before anyone knew they were missing, long gone before the fire, that ravaged the entire kitchen wing, was finally brought under control. At the outskirts of Botosani they stopped and looked back. A column of black smoke hung above the town and a single star was visible in the pre-dawn gloom.

'What-' croaked Cornelius, 'What do you want to do?'

Ana slipped her hand from her pocket, where she'd been clutching her medal, and took Cornelius' hand in hers.

'We can never go back... But, I want to make them pay. This isn't what my father fought for.'

Family Feuds

By Magz Wiseman

Vasili Lupescu relished the orderliness of his well-kept home, situated in one of the more fashionable areas of Bucharest. He savoured the perfection and elegance of the fine furniture and appreciated the paintings that hung in heavy gilded frames along polished oak panelled walls. He experienced an almost spiritual joy in the carefully chosen collection of antique ornaments and vases regaling the surfaces and mantels of his manor house.

Yes, perfection and elegance should be the core of any respectable gentleman and his household, as well as wealth and power, obviously.

‘Terrible business,’ Vasili boomed in outrage, as he pored over the morning’s crisply ironed broadsheet. Grigore, his eldest son, glanced up from feeding the remains of his uneaten breakfast to a brutish hound slobbering at his feet.

His mother, Olga, as elegant and beautiful in her middle years as she had been in the first flushes of youth, could not abide the hideous creature in the house, let alone the dining room. The guard dog had been

Augmented far beyond its original form. Enlarged ears gave it enhanced hearing, enabling it to detect potential intruders as soon as they entered the grounds. A bulging neck housed an oversized larynx, which allowed its bark to reverberate far louder than any normal canine. Its elongated snout housed an extra compliment of savagely sharp teeth, thus ensuring its bite was every bit as bad as its bark. Powerful hind legs and a viciously muscled tail completed the hideous form of the beast, which never failed to bring a shudder to Olga. She still recalled the day the creature had turned on her precious little lap dog, Pushkins. It had taken the maid nearly all afternoon to clear up the mess and had quite ruined her favourite Persian rug. It was not her place to comment on such matters though and so she must continue to put up with the repulsive beast's presence for the moment. She had considered poisoning the monster. However, she knew that Vasili would be most upset. He had invested rather a lot of money on the dog's Augmentations. Such a creature was rarely seen outside of the military and had raised considerable envy amongst Vasili's peers.

'What is becoming of the world, when a great and illustrious man is struck down with such appalling violence in the sanctity of his university? Outrage, I say!' Vasili ranted, his puffed face growing red with indignation as he continued to read the article. 'They believe he was attacked with one of his own surgical instruments, which appears to be missing.'

'Which illustrious man would that be then, Father?' Lucian had flung open the door at that moment. Not quite as tall, nor as handsome as his elder brother, he often felt the need to make such grand entrances, mostly to

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attract the attention of his parents, but mainly to annoy them. Striding to his place at the table, he kicked the dog brutally out of his way. The hound kept its eyes lowered, not daring to raise a growl of protest. Past experience had taught it well.

‘Professor Eduard Tomescu has been murdered,’ Vasili glowered with irritation. ‘Perhaps if you made the occasional effort to join us in time, you would not appear the doltish fool you undoubtedly are.’ Lucian outwardly ignored the comment, however the words cut deep as always.

Grabbing an apple, Lucian eyed the young maid standing to attention. Blending well with the furniture, Liliana had been an exemplary addition to the staff. Always ready to serve, she had an uncanny ability to anticipate the family’s every need, and had quickly established her position in the household. She met her young master’s knowing smirk as he viciously bit into the fruit. Returning his hungry gaze with just a hint of a smile, she fought the urge to rub those tender places where she still hurt.

Lucian tossed his apple core into the fire where its juices hissed and spat. He watched the tongues of flame consume it, fascinated by its transformation into blackened remains. He idly pondered how long such flames would take to consume a man, imagining the process in minute detail.

Grigore shook his head, suitably shocked at the crime. ‘The Resistance, most likely.’ His eyes lingered on the delicate form of his sister, Daria, currently trying to guide a spoonful of Mămăligă into her perfect mouth. Only partially successful, the thick, yellow gruel dribbled down

her chin. 'It is only what he deserves...' Grigore dabbed her mouth gently with his crisp white linen napkin.

Olga glanced at her daughter's beautiful face. The most carefully crafted German bisque dolls failed to approach such perfection. Just turned sixteen, she should have been drawing the attentions of the finest families. Olga's eyes lingered on the faint scar just below Daria's hairline and which snaked its way beneath luscious blond curls.

Nature had been deeply unkind to Daria. An unattractive child, she had grown into a truly ugly young woman. The solution had seemed so simple - transfer her quick, sharp mind and delicate personality into an equally beautiful body. What need could a peasant have for such a figure and pretty face anyway? Her marriage into an elite family would have propelled them further up the social ladder.

Those hopes had been dashed under the scalpels and needles of Doctor Tomescu. As with many a celebrated surgeon, nobody spoke of the inevitable failures encountered on the path to success and popularity.

His brutal death would send shock waves among his wealthy clients as well as his students and colleagues at the university.

Grigore did not like to be kept waiting. The smell and raucous laughter of 'Cămaşa de Lila', a seedy backstreet alehouse, made him feel nauseous. He sipped the thin ale, so popular amongst the lower classes, and fought the impulse to spit it out immediately.

He looked up sharply as Theodor Silivasi sat down opposite him. His ale slopped over the battered tankard, adding yet another layer of stickiness to the wooden floor.

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The young man flicked his dark hair out of his equally dark eyes, a habit Grigore found both irritating and endearing.

Originally hailing from an insignificant town in southern Prahova, Theodor had made his parents so proud when he had won a scholarship to study medicine in Bucharest. With a shining academic career ahead of him, fears that his good looks and athletic body would capture the eye of the Harvesters began to diminish.

‘What kept you?’ Grigore demanded.

Theodor responded with his usual charming smile. ‘I’m here now, aren’t I?’

Grigore took another sip of ale, struggling to hide his distaste. Oh, for a decent claret.

Lucian stood in shadow. The dirty street he had followed Grigore to was cluttered with the dregs of the poor and common. What had possessed his brother to come here? Perhaps some gaudy slut had caught his eye? The harlots and strumpets that infested these rundown areas were admittedly entertaining. He was well acquainted with such establishments and found them an amusing change from the pomp and ceremony of the tediously dull Gentleman’s Clubs. Occasionally, when they demanded a promised payment, it was pitifully easy to dispose of them. No one even noticed. No one of importance, that is. He smiled at the thought of Grigore, apple of their parent’s eye, being attracted to such a depraved place. Perhaps the Golden Boy was not so perfect after all.

A young boy trotted past. Trousers, which were little more than rags, were tied over his skinny frame with a frayed piece of rope. Covered in grime and muck, Lucian

dreaded to think what roamed in the boy's matted hair. He tripped the lad up and grabbed the collar of his threadbare shirt.

'You, boy. You will do an errand for me.' A shining silver piece appeared in his hand, close to the boy's face. Wide-eyed at such wealth, the boy nodded vigorously.

'Anything you want, sir!' The lad could not tear his eyes from the coin.

Lucian pointed to the alehouse and whispered Grigore's description. 'Tell me who he is with, and listen to what they say. Every word you hear, you will repeat them to me. Understood?'

'Yes, sir. Every word, sir.' Lucian pushed the boy roughly away from him. Pulling out a lace handkerchief, he wiped the dirt and stench from his hands, watching as the lad disappeared into the alehouse.

'Try not to appear so nervous,' Grigore commanded his companion, his voice low and urgent.

For the past several months, he and Theodor had plotted in various taverns and alehouses, never frequenting the same establishment long enough to attract suspicion. Grigore was certain his fellow student and co-conspirator had tenuous links to the Resistance, but so far had not been able to prove it.

Theodor had supplied him with the skills and knowledge required to break into Professor Tomescu's locked study. His intention had been to frighten the man, to lay evidence of a false scandal in order tarnish his reputation. Some would call it revenge, but Grigore considered it justice.

'Did you check all the broadsheets?' Grigore hoped his

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own nerves weren't apparent in his voice.

Theodor nodded. 'They say there are no suspects at this time.'

Grigore relaxed a little and raised his tankard in a silent toast. Theodor raised his in return. Neither noticed the urchin listening intently beneath a nearby table.

They had not expected the Professor to be asleep on the couch in a dark corner of his study. Nor had they anticipated him to awaken and confront them.

In a panic fuelled by self-preservation, Grigore had seized a surgical knife from a tray of instruments lying next to a partially dissected dog. The dog had whimpered with a feeble hope its misery was about to end. Waving the knife in front of him, Grigore had meant it only as a threatening gesture.

'He's seen our faces, Grigore!' Theodor had hissed, wringing his hands in terror.

'Shut up, you fool!' Grigore cursed.

Tomescu, his eyes adjusting to the half-light recognised Theodor instantly. He shook his head sadly. The boy had shown such remarkable talent. 'How very disappointing, Theodor.'

The professor had walked closer, squinting through the gloom, studying the young man threatening him. Tomescu searched for a name to put to the vaguely familiar features. He prided himself in knowing the names of every student, even those not under his direct tutelage.

'Grigore... Grigore... Ah! I have it now. Grigore Lupescu. A student of Professor Boroi, if I am not mistaken,' Tomescu had mused. Lupescu that name echoed elsewhere in his memory. Paying no heed to the

knife wielded at him, the professor appeared unruffled by this unexpected midnight encounter. Instead, his mind engaged fully in capturing the elusive facts. 'Yes, of course, that girl. Dana? Denisa?' His memory seemed to fail him more and more these days.

'Daria,' Grigore whisper her name reverently.

'Yes. Daria. Now I recall.' To Grigore, her beautiful name sounded obscene coming from Tomescu's thin, cracked lips. 'Such an unfortunate affair. Did you dispose of her as I advised?'

On reflection, what Grigore had seen as a sneer on the professor's face, could have been a mere trick of the jaundiced streetlight flickering through the window. A wild rage had flooded through Grigore, images of his ruined sister diffusing all logic. He had watched with detached fascination as the glinting scalpel stabbed repeatedly into the Professor's eyes. How quickly the sockets had filled with a pulpy mess as the man's screams resounded through the study in perfect rhythm with the plunging blade.

Finally Tomescu had quietened, lying so still at Grigore's feet. He didn't know how long he had stared at the body and was only vaguely aware of Theodor standing close by, rigid with mute horror.

'What are we to do, Theodor?' Grigore had asked, his voice an innocent, childlike whisper.

They had returned to Theodor's lodgings after fleeing the University, spending most of the night destroying evidence of their guilt. Grigore's blood splattered clothes had been burned. He had all but scrubbed his skin raw removing the dried blood that caked his body. Theodor comforted him, cradling his trembling body against his

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own. In the first rays of the chilled dawn, they had made love well into the morning.

Lucian stared at the flames crackling within the enormously ornate fireplace. Within those flames he saw himself, a glorious phoenix, rising triumphant. A smile touched his lips. Such a wondrous feeling to savour the knowledge he held Grigore's fate in the palm of his hand. His brother would do anything to remain within the heady heights of his father's esteem and out of the clutches of the authorities. He allowed himself a brief fantasy of Grigore, strapped to an Evisceration frame. Chest open, bulging veins strained to pump blood to his beating heart which was stretched out as far as possible to allow him to watch from expertly extended eyestalks.

Liliana glanced at the row of bells. Each one had a label under it, indicating which room of the house they were being summoned to. Noticing service was required in Master Lucien's chambers, she jumped with eager anticipation to attend to him.

'That'll be the young Master wanting his brandy,' Cook stated, not looking up from her darning.

Ivan, the Footman, glanced up from the day's broadsheet, which as always was passed around the lower quarters once discarded by the family. He threw an irritated look at Liliana. Already half way up the stairway leading to the upper floors, she didn't notice.

'Airs above her station, that one,' Cook muttered.

The head Butler, staring into the fire, wondered silently to himself whether the young maid would last any longer than the others.

Liliana took the glass of brandy over to where Lucian stood by the fire. The flickering firelight altered his expression from contentment to refined cruelty, and back again. She couldn't decide which she found most appealing.

Glancing towards his magnificent four-poster bed, she noticed a crumpled white shirt lying on it. Her heart contracted with sudden fear. Like the rest of the Lupescu family, Master Lucian insisted upon perfection, which included tidiness to what some would consider obsessive levels.

He turned towards her, a glow of reflected red highlighted in his eyes. She froze, held within his gaze.

Reaching for the superbly cut crystal glass, Liliana admired Lucian's slim fingers as he lifted it from the polished silver tray. Her tongue flicked over her lips as she watched him savour the golden liquid.

'Did you find anything?' Lucian asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. Liliana withdrew a small bundle of cloth from her skirts and handed it to him. He took it and smiled.

'You have done well.'

'Will that be all, Master Lucian?' There was a hint of promise and hope in her voice.

Lucian drained the last of his brandy and placed the empty glass carefully on the mantelpiece. Brushing delicate fingers through her hair, he slipped his other hand inside the blouse of her uniform. His gentle grasp rapidly became a frenzied clench as he pushed her onto the bed, grabbing and clawing at her clothes and skin.

Liliana squirmed beneath him, eagerly powerless

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against his weight pressing her onto the crisp sheets. Her screams of submission were satisfactorily muffled by his mouth, clamped viciously over hers. Fingernails tore desperately, lustfully into the clammy flesh of his back and neck, desperate for his frenzied violations to continue.

Lucian, his desires almost spent, smiled tenderly down at Liliana. She stared back up at him. Reluctant to pull out of her just yet, enjoying her beneath him, he tasted the sweet flesh of her neck and felt himself swelling up inside her once more.

Tardy though he could be, it wasn't like Theodor to be this late for one of their meetings. Grigore looked around the park. The hard wood of the bench was becoming uncomfortable.

He looked for the umpteenth time at his fob watch. It had been a birthday gift from Daria, not long before her disastrous operation. Embarrassed and unable to shift his attention from her repulsive appearance, he had smiled and thanked her dutifully, but could not quite bring himself to deliver the anticipated kiss on her cheek. Those oozing pustules had revolted him. How sharply he recalled the disappointment in her beautiful, adoring eyes.

She had idolised him even as an infant. Ever present, she would trot after him like a loyal, ugly puppy. As the years went by, his distaste at her continued worship increased, maturing into resentment. When she developed a habit of walking in on his private meetings, a habit that caused much amusement amongst his friends and colleagues, his anger had blossomed into hatred.

He stared at the inscription on the back of the exquisite timepiece. The deep wretchedness and regret that had

become such an integral part of him threatened to overcome him once more. His thumb caressed the fine, silver words, 'To my dearest, beloved Grigore. Love, Daria.'

Another half hour had passed before Theodor arrived, anxious and distressed.

'What is it? What has happened?' Anxiety rippled through Grigore, a gut wrenching terror only the guilty can be acquainted with.

'Two DSF officers came to see me during a lecture today,' Theodor's voice shook.

Grigore's dread sharpened. 'What did you say to them?' Grigore demanded.

'I told them I was at home, alone at the time.'

'You should have told them you were with me! We could have given each other an alibi.' Grigore forced himself to take a deep breath.

'I'm sorry. I panicked. I didn't want to mention your name to them.'

'Did they believe you?' Grigore's eyes bored into his companion's with a cold light Theodor had never noticed before.

'I think so...'

'Think is not good enough!' Grigore jumped from the bench, pacing back and forth. He wiped a hand through his hair. 'Why did they want to speak to you anyway? Do you think they suspect?'

'They said they were talking to all the students. It was just routine questioning.' Theodor couldn't be certain whether he was trying to convince his friend or himself.

Grigore sat back down on the bench.

'I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. We were careful,'

said Theodor, placing a reassuring hand on Grigore's.

'Yes. We are always careful.' The smile did not reach Grigore's eyes as he withdrew his hand from under Theodor's.

Afternoon sunshine streamed into Olga's favourite reception room. Everything about the room suggested feminine perfection and beauty. She listened to the music of her favourite composer, Porumbescu, as it filled the room with the haunting melodies of Crai Nou.

Closing her eyes, Olga allowed herself to drift with the music. It was one of the few pleasures left to her. Once, her soirees and parties had been the talk of all Bucharest. How the rooms and halls had rang with the gaiety of Promethea's elite! Even the King himself had once sent his representative to grace their home.

She rarely entertained guests these days. Hiding her hideous daughter during her childhood years had been relatively simple, however her official 'Coming Out' was looming uncomfortably on the horizon. Questions were already being asked as to when Daria would be having her Debutante Ball. She was already a year behind in making her anticipated grand entrance into Society. Something would have to be done soon.

Certain precautions had already been taken to ensure the staff's silence. The Head Butler, for example, although excellent in his job, as his father had been before him, was well known for spreading gossip after a few off-duty ales. He had adapted splendidly to his surgical muteness.

Her reverie was sharply disrupted by the harsh barking of that cursed hound. Several minutes later, the doorbell rang, whipping the dog into even greater howls as its

Augmented ears translated the sound into rapturous torture.

Irritated, Olga wondered who could be calling unannounced. She felt a moment of panic, hoping that the maid had locked Daria back in her room as per usual. Her curiosity was piqued at the sound of men's voices from the entrance hallway.

Opening the front door was not one of the Footman's duties. Ivan would be sure to have stern words with Liliana later, should she decide to turn up for work. No one had seen her since the previous evening.

'Some gentlemen are here to see you, Master Lupescu,' Ivan showed the two DSF Officers into Vasili's study.

Vasili looked up from his paperwork at the two men daring to interrupt his afternoon routine.

'What can I do for you... Gentlemen?' Vasili had little concern for the lower orders, regardless of the uniforms they wore.

'It is your son, Grigore, we have come to see.' The taller of the two men stated, his voice raspy and high pitched. It reminded Vasili of an out of tune violin and set his nerves on edge.

'I assume you will find him in the University library or attending a lecture.' Vasili made no attempt to keep the irritation from his tone. He returned his attention to his papers. To his mind the interview was ended.

'He has not been seen at the University for the last two days,' the second DSF Officer intoned. 'Do you have any idea of his whereabouts?'

'I believe you have been misinformed. My son is most studious and dedicated.'

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‘Could he be with friends? A close companion, perchance?’ Vasili was sure the insolent man was smirking.

‘What council my son keeps is his own business, and certainly none of yours.’

The first Officer spoke again, setting Vasili's teeth on edge. ‘Do you know where he was two evenings ago?’

‘He was most likely at his Gentleman's Club or attending a meeting of the Debating Society.’ A tendril of suspicion wormed its way into the back of Vasili's mind. ‘What is this about?’

That smirk again, from the obnoxious Officer. ‘We believe he may be able to assist us with our investigation into the murder of Professor Eduard Tomescu.’

‘My son has nothing to do with such outrageous and vile a deed! Kindly vacate my abode, sirs!’

‘Your family has had a connection to Professor Tomescu in the past, has it not?’

The question triggered a flare of anger within Vasili and the lack of an honorific only ignited it further. ‘Get out! You hear me? I shall set the hound on you. Get out!’ Vasili had risen in rage and brandished his gold-topped cane at the DSF Officers. ‘I shall be speaking to the Minister regarding this outrage!’

As the Officers let themselves out, the raspy voiced man regarded Vasili. There was no mistaking his smirk now. ‘It may also interest you to know that your son has been consorting with a small group of students whose activities have come to our notice. Students who have ties with known Resistance members...’

Vasili sat back down at his desk as Ivan escorted the Officers from the house. His hands shook and he thumped his fist on the desk at the intolerable attitude and

deplorable accusation that had been inferred on his good name and that of his son. As much as he tried, he could not remove the niggling doubt that was growing within him. If Grigore had been reckless and stupid enough to become involved in the wrong company, it would cost him dearly.

Vasili sat enjoying a brandy and cigar, as was his habit of an evening. Still perturbed by his earlier encounter with the DSF Officers, he was only now beginning to relax.

Grigore had barely said a word all evening, and the atmosphere in the luxurious lounge was unmistakably cold, despite the roaring fire.

Olga looked up from her novel, a silly modern romance she had been given by a lady acquaintance. She herself would never choose to indulge in such frivolous scribblings, however she felt obliged to struggle through it for the sake of politeness. Apart from the necessity to keep up with the latest fashions, regardless of their crudity, she liked to think she still possessed a romantic side that could be tickled by such fancies. She tugged the bell pull next to her chair.

Lucien was slouched on one of twin couches, sipping brandy and staring at Daria. Her angelic face held no expression. Occasionally, her azure eyes focused on something only she could see. From time to time, she would let forth an inappropriate giggle or a rasping belch. Lucien found her highly amusing.

Grigore glared at his brother. He felt his anger rise at the lustful leer in his brother's eyes as they devoured their sister's perfect body.

Olga, unable to bring herself to look at her two

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youngest children, often wondered why she had been cursed with such ill fortune. Only Grigore offered any promise of great things for the name Lupescu. She reached out and yanked the bell pull again.

‘Where is that maid?’ she hissed with exasperation.

‘Didn’t you hear, Mother?’ said Lucian. ‘The filthy little slut was found dead in a gutter this morning.’ He shifted his glance to Grigore. ‘Near a grubby little alehouse called Cămaşa de Lila.’ To his immense satisfaction, Grigore stiffened at the mention of the alehouse. ‘Apparently someone didn’t consider her good enough to warrant payment for her services. She had been stabbed through the heart with a small knife.’ He laughed as he took another drink.

‘How dreadfully unfortunate,’ Olga was genuinely shocked. ‘If only we had delayed her wages for another day,’ she sighed deeply. ‘I shall pen an advertisement for her replacement in the morning.’ She shuddered as the hound barked and growled hysterically. A moment later, the doorbell resounded in the entrance hall.

Vasili grunted. He loathed his routine disrupted. ‘Who could be calling at this later hour?’

‘Do not bring them in here!’ Olga screeched. For a brief moment, she considered throwing a blanket over Daria.

Ivan, the Footman appeared at the lounge door. ‘Master Lupescu, the gentlemen from the DSF have returned. They wish to speak with Master Grigore.’

Grigore felt a chill. Lucian turned his grin towards his brother, his eyes sparking with interest. He sat up attentively. ‘Whatever can they want with you, Grigore?’

If he hadn’t felt so nervous, Grigore may have

wondered at the odd look in his brother's eye and the knowing smile hovering at the corners of his mouth.

Grigore paced around his room. All through the interview with the DSF Officers, he had felt the perspiration relentlessly drip down his back, in spite of his outward calm. All those questions! The hard eyes of the Officers had seemed to bore into his very mind, stealing his memories of that night. He was certain they had not believed his fervent denial of any involvement, nor the alibi he and Theodor had carefully concocted.

The Officer's parting words, of their intention to pay Theodor another visit, had filled him with nauseating dread. Their growing suspicions of his colleague had been clear.

They had watched him carefully when they revealed a cleaner at the University had witnessed two men leaving Professor Tomescu's study on the night of the murder. Although she had failed to see the men's faces clearly, one had glanced behind him as he and his companion had fled. Frightened to approach, she had waited until they had gone before entering the study. Upon her grim discovery, she had raised the alarm.

As pretty as Theodor was, he panicked too easily and made stupid mistakes when under pressure. Grigore ceased his pacing, grabbed his coat, and left by the servant's entrance.

'Grigore!' Theodor's face lit up as he opened the door of his lodgings. He ushered his unexpected visitor inside. Theodor poured them both a strong drink. A rough locally distilled vodka that Grigore had always hated.

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'The DSF have your description.' Grigore's voice was calm, gentle almost.

It took a few seconds for his words to sink in. Theodor turned pale. He gulped his drink down and poured another. 'But how can that be? We were careful,' his voice trembled.

'I was careful, Theodor. You were not.'

'What are we going to do?' Theodor sat on the edge of his bed, shaking hands gripping his drink.

'I won't allow them to arrest you,' Grigore assured him.

'We should leave. Right now. Get away from here. We can go somewhere they'll never find us. Across the border perhaps,' Theodor hurried to his wardrobe and pulled down a battered suitcase. It was the one he had carried his meagre belongings in when he had arrived in Bucharest to begin his studies.

Grigore watched with a hint of bemusement. 'I have no intention of going anywhere.'

'We shall be sent to the racks, for sure!' There was genuine fear in Theodor's eyes.

'No, we won't.' Grigore reached into the pocket of his coat. The small, ornate pistol was of exquisite craftsmanship. He placed it gently into Theodor's hand, covering it with both of his own. Grigore could hardly bear the look in those lovely eyes as Theodor gazed without comprehension, into his own. He raised Theodor's hand, holding the gun to the young man's temple.

'Grigore?'

'It is the only honourable way. First you, then me. We shall face our atonement together.'

Grigore placed a soft kiss on Theodor's lips and pulled

the trigger.

‘I see they have found the villainous scoundrel!’ Vasili’s righteous tones boomed around the dining room. Grigore showed little interest as he tossed the hound another piece of food from his plate. He had no appetite.

This morning, Lucian had graced them with his presence in a timely fashion. ‘Which villainous scoundrel would that be then, Father?’ His eyes flicked towards Grigore, a flash of anticipation in them.

‘Name of Theodor Silivasi. One of Professor Tomescu’s very own students, no less!’ His outrage was evident in the timbre of his voice.

‘Silivasi, you say?’ Olga sipped her lemon tea as though it had taken on an unpleasant taste. ‘What a frightfully common name. You see, this is exactly what happens when they allow those of lower breeding into our respectful establishments. For their own good, they should remain where they are meant to be, toiling in the fields. Anything beyond that simply confuses them and leads the wretches to acts of unrestrained brutality when they find themselves unable to cope with civilisation.’

‘Grigore, wasn’t this Silivasi chap one of your friends?’ Lucian accented the last word meaningfully. Grigore ignored his brother’s comment, and continued to feed the dog.

Daria, dressed in a particularly fine yellow silk dress, newly arrived from Paris, let out a small wail, and began rocking slightly in her chair, her eyes fixed firmly upon Grigore.

‘Shot to the head. Found a suicide note apparently, admitting everything. Miserable coward. Couldn’t even

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face the punishment he deserved. No sign of the gun though.'

Grigore looked up at his father, a look of confusion flashing in his eyes for a fraction of a second.

Vasili tutted and turned the page. 'Ah! More splendid news, the stocks on copper have just gone up.' He sighed with contentment. It promised to be a good day.

Sitting on the park bench he had so recently shared with Theodor, Grigore still fretted. He wondered as to the whereabouts of the gun. He had taken pains to place the weapon in Theodore's still warm hand as the halo of blood had pooled around his head, giving him an almost saintly look.

Every waking moment since had been spent on edge, waiting for the DSF Officers to arrest him. However, a week had passed, and there had been no further visits or questions. The note he had forged proclaiming Theodor's guilt at killing the Professor was surely evidence no one else had been involved. His creative embellishment of further tarnishing Tomescu's reputation by implying a forbidden relationship with his student, had pointed towards a crime of passion. Poor Theodor, driven mad with rejection when the Professor had supposedly told the boy it was over, was given the perfect motive behind his frenzied attack. With no proof of his involvement in either Tomescu's murder or Theodor's suicide, Grigore had begun to relax. Putting the whole, sorry affair behind him, he could now get on with his life.

His involvement in the shadier side of Promethean life had quashed any romantic notions of rebellion he may have briefly entertained. His little band of student rebels,

temporarily enamoured with anti-state whispers and unrealistically noble ideas of equality for all, would similarly forget such ridiculous philosophies once their studies were over and they took their rightful places among Society's elite.

Grigore's thoughts were interrupted as someone sat next to him.

'I thought I'd find you here,' Lucian grinned. 'You are always so predictable.' Grigore looked warily at his brother. 'Oh Grigore, Grigore. You are not nearly as clever as Father believes you are. Or that you believe yourself to be!'

'What do you want, Lucian?' Grigore felt a tingle of concern.

'I just wanted to give you some brotherly advice.' Lucian pulled a silver flask from his coat pocket and took a sip.

'What advice would that be?' Grigore attempted to sound bored to hide the alarm creeping over him.

'Well, when I say advice, what I mean to say is that things are going to be very different from now on.' Lucian enjoyed the look of wary bewilderment growing on his brother's face. 'You see you are going to do anything and everything that I tell you to do.'

Grigore laughed in spite of himself. 'What makes you think I would possibly do that?'

'I've been in your precious shadow all my life. Father has named you as sole beneficiary in his Will. He's leaving everything to you. The house, the business, the family fortune... Everything.' Lucian's voice was bitter. 'He truly believes the sun shines out of your anus, Grigore. I wonder what he'd say if he knew of your fondness for

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other things up there?’

Grigore stared in shock. How could Lucian know? He'd always been so careful.

‘Of course, your preferences are your own business,’ Lucian continued amiably, his eyes ice. ‘As are mine. Speaking of which, Daria is every bit as delightful as I anticipated she would be. Mother chose well to insist on that body...’

A red curtain of rage distorted Grigore's vision. Every muscle tensed, ready to spring onto Lucian and pound him to a pulp.

‘Oh, I don't think so.’ Lucian wagged his finger at Grigore as though chiding a child. ‘If anything happens to me or you don't do exactly what I want, my solicitor has instructions to give the key of a certain safe deposit box to the DSE.’ Lucian paused, enjoying the moment. ‘Do you want to know what is in that box, Grigore?’

Grigore sat, rigid with fury and fear. How he had underestimated his younger brother.

‘The box contains one of your shirts, stiff with blood and wrapped around poor Professor Tomescu's knife. The knife you used to kill him.’ Lucian sat back with a contented sigh.

Grigore shook his head. ‘That's impossible.’

‘Obviously it's not the Professor's blood, but all blood looks the same, don't you think? I had to be a little creative. Liliana serviced me in more ways than one that night...’ He closed his eyes, relishing the memory of the maid beneath him. With the warm, moist feel of her around him, and the hot sticky blood seeping from the knife plunged deep into her chest, smearing over his skin, he had been so reluctant to pull out of her. He recalled

the sweet delight as he had swelled up inside her once more, only briefly regretting that she wouldn't scream for him this time.

Slowly coming from his revelry, Lucian smiled. 'The box also contains a lock of hair from our former maid, unfortunate enough to discover the murder weapon in your room.'

'How...?' Grigore struggled to talk coherently.

'As I said, always so predictable, Grigore, still using the fourth floorboard under your bed to hide your secrets, just as you did as a child.' Lucian laughed at his brother's deathly pale face. 'You really shouldn't have kept all those touching letters from your past lovers, either. Such sentimentality. Father will be most... Disappointed.'

Grigore felt ill.

'The gun you used to kill your accomplice is also in the safe deposit box. It took a while to prise it out of his fingers though. His face was so distorted with the pain of betrayal...' Lucian glanced at his pocket watch. 'Time we were off to the Gentleman's Club, don't you think?'

Lucian stood up. Smiling, he offered Grigore his hand. 'This is just the beginning of a beautiful, brotherly relationship, don't you think?'

Grigore numbly took Lucian's proffered hand.

Natural

By James 'Grim' Desborough

Cosmina pressed up against the window of the carriage and looked out into the night, her breath misting the glass as she panted, breathlessly, with excitement. The carriage rattled and bounced, jarring her in her seat. She could barely see anything out of the little window, even without bouncing around, but it was all part of the mystery, the adventure.

The strobing shadows of dark trees rushed past. The thunder of the horses' hooves audible even through the soft, furnished inside of the carriage. There was a brief flash of light through the darkness, a gap in the trees, a patch of dark blue twilight against which she thought, imagined, she saw a strange and twisted shadow, caught like a photograph in her eyes for one, fleeting moment.

There were rumours about these woods, that sprawled in every direction, stories that went back before Promethea to the times before the new science. Stories of werewolves, vampires and spectres. Nonsense for superstitious peasants. She was above such things. Cosmina Danesti, bright young hope of her family,

refused to be scared of shadows and set her jaw defiantly, taking on the airs she would be expected to.

The carriage ground to a halt, the horses still audible, snorting and stamping as though they couldn't wait to be running again. The driver jumped down with a rattle and a bounce of the carriage, opening the door with a flourish and a too-familiar grin, and offering his hand to help her down.

She refused it, hopping down from the step and giving him a withering glance from her ice-blue eyes as she thrust her hands into her hand warmer and swept up towards the lights of the front of the grand old house. She was used to the more grandiose buildings of the city but this house, more crudely built as it was, somehow had an air of authority that came with age. It didn't need the baroque twists and curls, the gaudy decorations of the old, nor the relentless modernism of the new. It was simple, clean, but old. Somehow it fitted the man she had come to see.

She heard the carriage turn, the snort of the horses and the fading clamour of their hooves as they rode away into the darkness and for a moment her heart fluttered. Here she was, a woman, alone, deep in the woods, unchaperoned at a strange man's house. It was thrilling, threatening, exciting. She paused at the door, unsure for a moment, but she had no choice but to knock. It was that or stand outside in the cold all night. The carriage wouldn't be back until late the following day.

She knocked. The doors were old, grand, bound with iron and the hammer blow of the great brass knocker sounded strange in the little shelter of the porch. It was bright too, lit by a pair of lamps either side, and while she

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waited with growing impatience she realised that the house had electrification. Even all the way out here. The master of the house must do well enough for himself, but if his reputation were to be believed then that should be no surprise.

Finally the door opened, clearly something of a feat for the dainty young woman that was pulling it open. There was a rush of welcome warm air as the door flung wide, bringing a little prickle and a flush to Cosmina's cheeks as she swept in, depositing her hand warmer presumptively upon the girl. She was dressed as a maid after all.

The young woman pushed the door shut with great effort and offered Cosmina a pretty smile. 'May I take your coat and hat as well, Miss Danesti?'

She had a peasant's accent, but it wasn't completely disagreeable and she was polite and servile, as she should be. Cosmina took off her heavy furred hat and checked her white-blonde hair in one of the entrance's tall mirrors. It was still perfect, braided and piled. Cosmina took great pride in her appearance and charms, both those naturally endowed and those the art of the couturier, hairdresser and cosmetician bestowed. She saw herself as a jewel, polished to a shine by their attentions. She smiled back to the girl and carefully shrugged out of her coat, piling it onto the pretty little thing along with everything else.

'I will put these safely away and then fetch the master to greet you.' The girl sketched a curtsy, as best she could under the pile of clothing and fur and unhurriedly disappeared, backwards, through a door in the side of the entrance hall, leaving Cosmina alone.

While she waited, again, flaring her perfect nostrils in annoyance with a little huff, she cast her eyes around the

hall. Like the outside of the building it was simple and well made, and old. The beams were visible in the walls and in the ceiling but so much else spoke of modernity. The lighting, electric, the floor tiled in a geometric pattern of mathematical genius. That must have been the touch of the master of the house, as must the only things that weren't simple or plain - the glass cases and the stuffed animals they contained.

Cosmina cast a glance back to the door that the girl had vanished through, but there was still no sign of her. She gave another huff and stepped, boot-heels clicking on the tessellated floor and echoing from the high ceiling, to take a closer look.

Trophies and stuffed animals weren't really something that interested her. Her father perhaps, he had inherited and bought huge swathes of land upon which he hunted. Barely a week went by without the carcass of a bear, deer or wolf being added to his collection. Her mind had almost learned to tune out the sawdust-filled horrors of home, but here there was little else to look at.

Behind the glass of the case was a tableau, a fierce, scaly animal descending upon a mob of panicked rodents, scattering them. A moment frozen in wire and hide, stuffing and glass. It was well done, certainly, it had an animated quality that the roaring bears and snarling wolves of home simply did not have in their glassy stares. As she paid more attention the tableau suddenly snapped into focus and she became properly aware of it, stifling a little gasp with her hand.

The scaly beast was not anything that could or should ever live, the body and head of a cockerel, but clothed in banded scales like a snake, its long tail arched over its head

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as it squawked, forked tongue tasting the air from within a beak and that long arched tail terminated in a wicked barb like that of a scorpion. The rodents, she saw, were dressed up like little villagers, posed with pitchforks and recognisable looks of panic upon their little furry faces. It was amazing and terrifying all at once, a case of chimera in a dramatic scene.

She thought, for a moment, she saw one of the terrified little mice blink and she stepped back, dizzy and faint, vision swirling with the other cases and the other strange scenes in each case. Animals bound together by the taxidermist's art in ways nature had never intended.

The cough of the serving girl grabbed her attention again, grounded her, made the world make sense again and she composed herself with a tight-lipped smile.

'The master of the house is ready to receive you now, madam. If you would care to follow me?'

Cosmina nodded and fell in behind the girl. A lesser beauty might have been jealous of the girl, but Cosmina was secure in her own beauty. She wondered that the girl hadn't been poached by some other master, or taken for some other reason. There were plenty who would pay handsomely for the girl's hair, hips, legs, bosom, to win the same glances she must get in the village. Peasants, good for only one or two things at best. She didn't doubt why the master of the house kept her around but that really wasn't her business.

The girl opened a final door and held it open, stepping aside, announcing her. 'Master, may I present Miss Cosmina Danesti. Miss Danesti, may I present the master of the house, Doctor Zoltan Adler.'

This room was dimmer than the others they had passed

through, smaller, more intimate. She saw the man within stand from his chair by the hearth, lit by the warm golden flames and the dimmer, hooded glimmer of a small electric lamp. He was a handsome man, a young forty, hair cut in an anachronistic, ruffled pageboy style. His face was neatly bearded, a moustache and a dagger-like point upon his chin without a trace of grey. He had a strong jaw, high, angular cheekbones and pale skin that made her think back to the peasant stories of vampires, but that was ridiculous. She couldn't see his eyes, they were hidden behind the dark lenses of round glasses he perched high upon his nose, but she could feel his gaze and his intelligence, even without seeing them.

'Ah, Miss Danesti, please do come in and sit down,' his voice was deep, resonant, assured, authoritative.

When he spoke a request she felt it as an order and all her unsettled feelings fled, just from that greeting. It reminded her of her father, her grandfather, her uncle. Men who spoke with authority from their station and from their grand history of nobility. He gestured, fluidly to the chair opposite where he had been sitting and waiting, and folded his hands behind his back.

She took the seat gratefully after the bumpy carriage ride to the house and felt relief flood through her. She was where she needed to be, without incident and Doctor Adler seemed to be gentlemanly enough. Once she was ensconced in her seat he took his own and turned to the maid.

'Bring the food and some tea, Teodora. It's late and I'm sure Miss Danesti didn't eat in the carriage. We have much to discuss and we'll both need sustenance for that I think.'

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The maid withdrew quietly, leaving them alone. The good Doctor leaned back into his seat, his face vanishing into the shadows from the projections of the headrest, though the fire glinted in his lenses. 'So, you know who I am and what I do, Miss Danesti. Why are you here?'

'Is it not obvious sir? You are known amongst the elite as one of the finest and most innovative surgeons to use the Gift. Your work is exquisite, artistry, not mere surgery. If I am to take my place alongside my sisters and aunts I need to look the part, be the part, be all that I can be.'

He took a long moment to consider her words and then leaned forward, back into the light. 'If I may be so bold Miss Danesti, you are as near to a perfect specimen of womanhood as I have ever seen, though I'll grant you everyone has a different concept of perfection. Why would you seek to change the gifts that the fates have assigned to you?'

Cosmina flushed a little and folded her hands in her lap, glancing down a moment while she composed herself. 'I am far from perfect, sir. I am somewhat graceless and clumsy. My sight is shortened and spectacles are unbecoming amongst the nobility.' She lifted her ice blue eyes to regard him as he listened with interest. 'The marks of surgery, the advantages that it brings, these are now as much a badge of our wealth and bloodlines as a family crest or castle. Surely you know these things, Doctor?'

He smiled and barked a little laugh, then stroked the point of his beard before nodding. 'Yes, I know these things but my techniques, my work they are unique, yes but not without risk. My scalpel is at the very cutting edge of what is possible and there are risks attendant to that. I must be sure you truly desire to go under my knife and

that you appreciate that things do not always turn out correctly. Even for me.' The smile melted away and became an earnest crease of his brow.

Cosmina took a breath to answer him, but that was when Teodora returned. The serving girl shared a glance with the Doctor, and Cosmina thought she caught a spark between them. Scandalous, but it was none of her business how the doe-eyed peasant girl secured her position. It wasn't uncommon. Teodora laid down a silver tray, cups, an elegant silver teapot, sugar, milk and two small bowls of soup. She poured two cups of tea and then withdrew soundlessly, the Doctor's gaze watching her leave.

'You were saying?' the Doctor paused, waiting for her to drink first before he took his own cup.

'I know all this, but this is why I came to you. You did such wonderful things for my cousin Luminita, the spirals of her scars, the play of skin tones and she is so...' she paused, holding her teacup before her mouth, trying to think of the right word.

'Provincial?' he smiled again.

'Yes,' said Cosmina, and took a sip of the sweet tea and felt it work its magic. She set it down and pulled her bowl closer, setting the folded napkin on her lap as she took to the sweet warming soup.

'Your family is still wealthy enough to afford my services? I hate to be so blunt, but there have been rumours of a revolt in your family's lands.' His frown deepened as he took a long sip on his tea.

'Some rebelliousness, but hardly a revolt.' How had he heard of this all the way out here? 'A few peasants refusing to work, spreading scurrilous rumours about my father.

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Nothing that couldn't be dealt with.' The soup was delicious, sweet and warm, she had to pace herself so as not to speak with a mouthful or seem like a pig.

'I heard your maid was a part of it. That must have been a shock.'

Cosmina coughed, choking a little on a swallow of soup. What was a shock was that anyone knew this. She dabbed at her lips with her napkin and fixed the Doctor with her steady, cyan gaze. 'You are certainly well informed, Doctor. Yes, my maid used her position of trust to help the gossip mongers and the troublemakers.'

'What on Earth did you do?' The Doctor pushed his soup bowl away, half finished.

'She came to me, if you can believe it, asking me to help her, to hide her, to protect her from the consequences of her actions.'

'And?' One smooth eyebrow rose up as he asked.

'Why, I turned her in of course. I'll have no truck with traitors or bolsheviks. It was a shame, she had been with me since my twelfth birthday.'

'A tragedy that such people exist to disturb us so. You are confident though, of my abilities and my loyalty?' He leaned back again, crossing one knee over the other.

Cosmina pushed her empty bowl back on the tray, 'Yes, I am confident of you. You are known. You have made great changes to many of the leading families. Your mistakes are few, so much as I have heard of them and that is little.'

Teodora returned to clean away the bowls, bustling around them briefly as they continued their conversation.

'What then, my dear Miss Danesti, would you have me do for you?'

Cosmina dabbed her lips again and waited the moment it took the maid to leave again before she answered him. 'My sight, if you can fix it without changing the colour. You may call me vain, but I do love the colour. It is just so hard to read with my sight as it is, especially in dim light.'

'That can be done. It can either be fixed, or improved, though if I improve it too far you may have to wear glasses in any case.' The Doctor tapped the side of his own lenses.

'Oh, have you been augmented yourself, Doctor?'

'Me? No.'

Teodora returned with plates of small, roasted fowl on vegetables and left them with their cutlery on the table, the Doctor leaning around her to keep his sight upon Cosmina.

'No, I was born with great visual acuity and steady hands, but also a sensitivity to the light. It gives me the most terrible headaches. The price for being such a skilled surgeon I suppose. Chance gives out with one hand and takes away with the other.'

'Have you not considered having the problem corrected?' Cosmina took up her knife and fork and cut, delicately at the food on her plate, lifting a fragment of meat to her mouth as she awaited his answer. It took him a short while to reply.

'I know of only two surgeons I would trust to alter me without destroying the skill that already exists and one of them is myself. I could not, very well, operate on myself effectively. So for the time being I must cope with these little frustrations. Count yourself lucky that you are not so limited as I.'

'The animals, in the hallway, the stuffed ones. Are those

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your work?’ Thinking about the snake-cockerel put her off the fowl, but she tried to hide her distaste and disguise it as a properly small, womanly hunger.

‘They are. I do so few actual operations that I find the hobby of taxidermy a useful way to keep my skills honed.’

‘They’re so strange though, so unnatural, however wonderful the work is. I’m afraid I find them ghastly, as well as beautiful.’ She couldn’t finish the fowl now, thinking about it all, and set down her knife and fork even as he continued with his.

The Doctor gestured with his fork, flaky flesh and crispy skin dangling from the end. The way he’d been taking the little bird apart was almost surgical. It was unsettling the way he moved, so precise, so machine-like. It reminded her of those first few moments when a train starts to move, pistons moving, oiled and smooth.

‘Natural you say? What is natural any more? We hold the power of life and death for ourselves. Whether you think we evolved this intelligence of ours or whether you think it is god-given, either way it is natural,’ he set down his fork, getting more animated as he spoke on.

‘Is a beaver dam unnatural? A molehill? An anthill? The animals produce artefacts that they have made, from nests and burrows to insect cities, pure in their geometry in a way our cities can never be. What is a knife, a fork, a house, but a more complex and advanced beaver dam, really? Humanity changes its environment more, but it is only a matter of degree and now...’ His lenses glinted, his face smiling with a look of almost childlike wonder ‘Now we can sculpt ourselves, improve ourselves and this too is the result of our natural intelligence.’

‘But these creatures of yours, in your cases, the little

scene with the mice villagers, some of them are quite disturbing.'

'There are predators and prey, Miss Danesti, rulers and the ruled, the strong and the weak. Nature is cruel and harsh and unforgiving. The mice are a joke, perhaps, but they are responsible for the way they react, as the cockatrice in that piece is responsible for the way it acts. You can choose to be at the mercy of the unfairness of nature or you work to change it.'

'If you change it, are you not then confounding nature?' Cosmina smiled, she had caught this intriguing man in the web of his own excitable lecture.

'Then we change nature itself. We are marrying the parts from different bodies now, even different species. Improving on the originals in ways that would have seemed the deluded fancy of a madman not so many years ago. Miracles are commonplace in industry and medicine and when you go under my knife you will be the freshest miracle of all, my dear.'

Teodora returned, a slight pout on her face seeing the uneaten fowl. Was she the only staff the Doctor had? A man and his servant alone in the wild woods day after day? Damn the girl for her impudence, she was a servant and her feelings mattered not. Cosmina studiously ignored her as she set down a plate of cakes and took away the fowl. 'Then you will do it? I know you operate only when you are sure, certain, confident in what you are doing. It's why you're so sought after.'

'I will, but you must rest. The operation can wait until tomorrow. When the carriage comes I will send the driver away with a letter. He can come back again when we are done.'

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'I cannot thank you enough, Doctor Adler. I will be the envy of my sisters!' Cosmina gave a giddy little clap of her hands and plucked a sweet pastry from the plate. A little celebration of sweetness. Tomorrow she would emerge from her chrysalis a brand new butterfly.

Cosmina could barely sleep she was so excited. Teodora had brought her bag from the entrance hall so she was snug in her nightdress. The room was warm enough for an old house and the ever-busy Teodora raked down the charcoal fire in the grate to a dull red, warming glow and then left her alone. Still she couldn't put her head down for thought of the transformation coming tomorrow.

She read a while in the electric light, but stopped when she found herself reading the same page for the third time and tossed the book aside, sighing. After a moment she slipped out of the bed, barely noticing the slight chill and padded to the window, pulling aside the curtains to look out into the night.

The windows were dappled with condensation, tracking down the glass where the warm, wet air hit the cold pane. Outside, the grounds of the house were little more than a big expanse of grass over which the mists were hanging. At the far border she could make out the silhouettes of the great evergreen trees against the blue-black sky, swaying in the slight breeze that stirred the drifting miasma.

It wasn't an enchanting view by any means but the lack of features made the endless stirring of the mist fascinating in its own way. Cosmina found herself hypnotised by the curls and spirals of the mist, watching it without thinking. She didn't know how long she had been

staring when a strange and rattling cry snapped her from her reverie.

It was the most unsettling sound she thought she had ever heard. A sound of pain but choked and strangled and plucking at her somewhere inside like the wail of a child. It was a primal thing and she pressed against the window with her hands, her forehead against the damp pane, squinting through the reflecting glass to see a sign of what could have made such a noise. For some reason she thought of the fleeting thing she had seen in the woods, but there was no sign of anything out there in the mist and shadow.

She shivered, suddenly feeling the cold, and drew back from the window, wiping away the dampness from her forehead with her sleeve. She grabbed the curtains and wrenched them back together tight with a yanking pull of her arms. Suddenly she wasn't so excited as she had been. She hurried back across the floor, dancing on her feet like a little girl and diving back under the heavy blankets into the warm, hauling the cover up over her head and seeking the solace of sleep.

The morning came suddenly, or so it seemed. Cosmina was still tired, she had barely slept, but in the morning light that shone through the cracks in the curtains things didn't seem half so unsettling and excitement outstripped any weariness that remained. Teodora had brought her a steaming pot of tea and an omelette, keeping its warmth under a cover, and so she ate. Chasing away her tiredness with strong tea and a full stomach. She wasn't sure what would happen now, so she dressed and composed herself before she slipped out of the room in search of the

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Doctor.

Such a big house and so empty with just the Doctor and his maid in its halls. Perhaps that suited him, but to Cosmina it seemed cold and devoid of life. Every room she passed, finding her way back down the stairs, seemed crowded with the Doctor's chimerae, packed with cases and mountings. It was a curious, almost nightmarish variation on the trophy rooms of her father and she found it hard to reconcile this macabre fascination with the charming Doctor of the night before.

'Ah, you are awake,' his voice, deep and authoritative, as she reached the bottom of the steps.

'Good morning, Doctor.' She sketched a curtsy, not entirely sure why she made such a formal gesture, but it seemed the right thing to do somehow.

'Are you ready?' He was dressed more simply this morning, a white shirt with a high collar and the sleeves rolled back to his elbows, a gleaming watch chain glittering at his hip. He looked ready to work and, even shaded by those damned glasses, she could feel his gaze intent upon her, though not with the same interest most men showed.

'I am, sir, if you are rested and wish to proceed?' She tried a smile upon him and he mirrored it, turning to the side and beckoning her to follow.

'I have a good feeling about this, Miss Danesti, and I believe I can do all that you required. I will not bore you with the details of course. I take it one as young and of as high a station as yourself, has no medical training?' he paused at another of the old, iron bound doors of the house and opened it up, gesturing for her to pass through.

Cosmina stepped past him and on to stone steps. They

were old but unworn, barely used down however many centuries it had been. The walls were rough hewn, hurried almost and as she descended she ran her fingers over their rough surface. 'What a curious place, Doctor, is there a story behind it?'

'This? Oh, many stories are etched into these walls, told and untold. These cellars were cut when the Turks threatened to invade, but were never used. They were hidden away, I was lucky to find them when I purchased the house, but they are interesting, are they not?'

Cosmina stepped down onto the uneven floor of the cavern. Cables and pipes ran naked along the walls and the glowing filaments of the electric lighting made it seem harsh and stark, even more so than it had first seemed. The Doctor moved to one of the side chambers and drew open a curtain of canvas. Cosmina lifted her hand and shielded her eyes and nose against the harsh smell of carbolic and the harsher light.

This room, behind the curtain, where Teodora waited in gloves, mask and apron, was covered in every part with smooth, white, glassy tiles. Electric lights sprouted from every corner of the room like a fungus and from the wall hung surgical instruments, arranged in some inscrutable order, mingled with canisters of Frankenstein's Gift. The centre of the room held a great metal table, flat and cold, with gutters along its edges.

Cosmina swallowed back the feeling of fear at the sudden reality of what she was about to face. She shrank back a step, back into the broader chamber of the cellar only to feel the Doctor's reassuring hand at her shoulder.

'There is nothing to be afraid of. You will not feel a thing and when you awaken, everything will be different.

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You will be the person you deserve to be. Beautiful, graceful, honoured and perfected. A cut gemstone, with every facet gleaming. I will give you my very best.'

She gave a breathless sigh, her shoulders relaxing. She was scared for nothing, in good hands, the best hands and she would come forth a lady, enhanced as he said, polished as he said. Perfected.

Gently the Doctor guided her into the room and sat her on the edge of the table. He scrubbed his hands with the harsh soap while she waited, demure, hands folded in her lap as he prepared. When he returned to her his mouth, as well as his eyes, were hidden from her sight. It made him blank, a cipher, a professional, a surgeon, detached. With great and gentle care he rolled up her sleeve and found her pulse. She felt it quicken, idly wondering if this brilliant man was truly so attached to his maid that he would not entertain the idea of courting her.

'This will sting, but only for a moment.' He swabbed her arm with something cool and she gave a little gasp as the needle penetrated her flesh, followed by a flowing numbness that spread slowly out from her arm.

'My, that feels quite strange.' She blinked and felt the numbness spreading further as the Doctor and the maid helped her to lie down, placing a cushion under her head. The numbness spread everywhere and left her feeling almost like she was floating, nothing but a point of awareness, barely drifting in the sky.

'You remember the talk we had, Miss Danesti? About nature? About what was natural and what was not?'

She could, just about nod, but trying to speak came out as a slurring sound that conveyed no meaning at all.

'I have come, through my work, through my

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understanding to realise that there is no god above. Justice depends upon men. Now that we have the means to create life and death it is down to us to take the place of this imagined god.' He paused, scalpel twisting in the light, and then cutting down, parting her dress, stripped her bare.

She could not move, she could barely breathe, all she could do was blink and roll her eyes, staring at him with their ice-blue intensity, windows to the terror she could not express. Something was very, very wrong.

'There is no justice in nature. The strong and the cruel endure and thrive while the good and kind suffer for their kindness. You, my dear, have had all the benefits that this cruel and biased nature could provide you. Wealth, beauty, you have been spoiled and you have emerged from this not better, but worse. You are a cruel, worthless little brat and the world will not mourn your passing.'

The maid took firm hold of her head and grasped it. Holding it steady. The scalpel swelled huge in her vision as he leant over her.

'Fortunately, we have the power to redress the balance that nature has so unjustly given you and you, my dear, will remain one of my rare mistakes. Things happen, we do not always know why.'

He made the first cut.

'I am not as young as I once was, Doctor. I feel the strength and vitality of youth slipping away,' said the Count, leaning forwards to pick up his cup. He turned his head to watch the Doctor's pretty, young maid retreat from the room and leave them in peace. 'I see you have an eye for a pretty girl as well.'

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The Doctor shared a laugh at that, 'One might indeed say so.'

'Pretty eyes, your girl there, so blue!'

'One among many fine features, Count. Though one must be careful in one's indiscretions of course.' The Doctor sipped his own tea and left the comment hanging in the air between them, a slight smile upon his lips.

'Sometimes one cannot be careful enough, but they are only peasants and whores and their get only bastards. Whose word will be believed should it come to it, hmm? One of the advantages of power to balance the demands made upon one's time to govern.'

'Well Count, I am certain that the solution to your problem can be found upon my surgeon's table.' The good Doctor set his tea down again and steeped his fingers.

'Then you will operate?'

'I would see it as an honour.'

'Thank God for that. Why just as I was arriving here tonight I heard a strange shriek from the woods outside. Were I feeling my youth and vigour I would have taken to the woods to discover the source of such a frightful sound. Instead that shriek chilled me to the bone and I took fright so much I thought I saw the source of it, a ghastly, lanky, pale thing galloping alongside the road.'

'It was doubtless just a fox, Count, their cries can be most disturbing. They can sound like women in pain or crying babies. These woods have always had a dark reputation. It can bend the mind.'

Teodora returned with their food and set about placing it upon the small table. The Doctor gave her a slight nod, his tinted lenses reflecting the ice-blue of her own determined gaze. He lifted his knife and fork, and made

the first cut.

Witness

By Iain Lowson

The black-garbed priest closed the door to his small, lamplit room. He stood for a moment, his back to the door, as though gathering himself for some great physical effort. He was not an old man, nor a corpulent man, but the steps he took into the room required more effort than any he had taken in his life before. The Herculean task led him to a table. He lowered himself down into his chair. Folding his hands in his lap, he just sat there. If he noted the time that passed, he gave no sign. No great sigh passed his lips. He did not move. Only his slow, regular breathing showed he lived. During the long minutes, his eyes never left the pale, well-travelled writing box that sat on the plain wooden table.

The priest finally reached out one hand to the box. His hand rested on the lid for a moment, longer yet, before opening it and removing paper, pen, ink and blotter. These were laid out methodically, precisely. Once this was done, the priest sat back again. His eyes flicked between the items on his table. Abruptly, his hand went to his chest, where it grasped the ornate cross that hung there. For a

moment, the priest looked shocked, as though the icon had suddenly appeared. He quickly removed it and was about to put it on the table when he stopped.

Drawing back his hand, the priest cradled the cross. He let the wooden beads on its string trickle down through his fingers to hang loosely there, some in each hand, some dangling. He clicked the beads back through his fingers, their smooth surfaces reflecting the lamp light, his face, the table, bed, chair, floor, ceiling, walls. Each bead became the moment, became everything that was left. Slowly, the priest drew the cross to his lips, kissing it once. Then, without looking, he laid it down on the table in a gentle rattle of wood, as far from him as he could reach without the ignominy of casting it away.

Rubbing his hands together once, twice, the priest reached smoothly for the pen. He flipped open the lid of the inkwell, dipped, tapped and, drawing the paper to him slightly, began to write.

‘I am Father Mihai Gheorghe Popescu.’

The priest stopped writing, placing the pen to one side. He looked for a long time at the page, at the name that stared back at him. He glanced over to where the cross rested. He stood, pushing the chair back and picking up the piece of paper he had written on. Tearing it up, slowly and methodically, he dropped the pieces to the floor and walked from the room.

Some minutes later, he returned. The priest turned the chair around and sat facing the door. His wait was a short one, as a young man entered wearing the slightly crumpled robes of an initiate. He smiled at the older

priest, who had stood now and was waiting by the chair.

'Ah, of course,' the young man said. He scuttled to the chair, almost bowing to Gheorghe as he went.

For his part, Gheorghe was expressionless. The newcomer rearranged the writing materials to his satisfaction, before turning and smiling to the older priest.

'Can I just say, I am deeply...' The young man stopped when Gheorghe moved a little away, seeming to have not heard. Embarrassed, the man at the table looked back to the blank paper, muttering apologies. He took up the pen, dipped it in the ink, scraped it on the rim of the inkwell, and was poised to begin.

There were a few seconds of silence, uncomfortable ones for the man at the table. Should he look round again? To his relief, the seldom-heard voice of Father Gheorghe now filled the room with its quiet authority.

'I am Mihai Gheorghe Popescu. I was Father Gheorghe. Once. No more. Father Gheorghe died two and a half years ago in the village of Hasdat.'

At the mention of the village by name, the young scrivener hesitated. Even in the lamplight, he could be seen to pale. He quickly resumed writing, but his eyes flicked to the door from time to time, as though he hoped for some kind of rescue.

Gheorghe's deep, mellow voice continued, relentlessly recounting his story. The emotion in his voice built slowly. The skills of the old orator remained, the young priest marvelled, even if he was not himself.

'It was no distance, really, from Hunedoara. South a little from the city, then East. The road was good enough most times of the year. Even in winter. You came along the valley floor for a time, then the road left the little river

and climbed up onto the plateau Hasdat sheltered on. The village was well placed on the roads leading to and fro, but it took no real benefits from being there. Too close to the city, probably.

‘I liked stopping there. It was friendly. From the valley, you could follow the main road up, and come in at the Southern end of the village. But I liked the little path that led off to the left even as the main road struck off to the right. The little path was harder, but it led you through the trees and brought you straight to the heart of the village, the open area in front of the church, right to where the people always were. Good people. Roma, mostly. I loved them.

‘I remember that the children were always so strong looking. Always so happy. The men were tough, like leather beaten by the sun and the weather, but the women were tougher. And louder. Ai! Louder! The women would call to me, the children run to or from me, but the men would just nod. I worked hard for such acknowledgements. These were not people who let strangers in easily, and they never let me in fully, I know. I was not Roma. Now they ask this last thing of me.

‘I wonder if they called for me then. Often, I wonder that. I do not know. I was summoned in the night to the local DSF offices in the city. I did not go in. Rather, I was met in the street. Not openly, of course. They waited until I was almost at the entrance before two of them appeared beside me and manhandled me towards a car. The DSF like to do that. They could have asked me, but they prefer to keep you off guard, scared. I was scared. In the rattling, noisy car, I was scared. Too scared to appreciate the rich surroundings. The fat officer, in there already, said

nothing. He sneered a lot, but I do not think he was capable of anything else. He sneered at my questions, sneered at the driver, sneered at the scenery the moon picked out that night. Sneered in his sleep. I did not sleep.

‘I soon guessed where we were going. My heart sank. I did what I could to ready myself. I was going to Hasdat, I knew. The previous winter, a number of Resistance people had been caught during a search of the village. Then, the DSF had done nothing. Not to the villagers. The Resistance people had been taken away and terrible things had been done to them for a long time. The people of Hasdat were left alone to imagine they had been forgiven or forgotten. They were left long enough to hope. That was the most cruel thing of all. Through the winter, their fear turned to hope. In the spring, the hope grew, so by the summer it was strong, like the children. Strong and naïve.

‘The car stopped short of the village, near to the start of my favourite path. Hours had passed since we had left Hunedoara. My dread had made the hours seem longer. The promise of dawn was turning the night sky behind the village a pale, ghostly blue. When the car stopped, I heard voices and saw the silhouettes of soldiers and men and... Others. Seeing so many men, I feared the worst. The worst that I could fear then. Naïve fool.

‘The door to the car was thrown open and I was ordered to get out. DSF officers stood to either side of me, not looking at me. Behind me, the car was pushed off safely to the side of the road. I did not see where the sneering officer went. I realised that, though I had heard voices, few of those around me were talking. All looked tired, and...

‘My blood ran cold when I realised that almost all of

the people around me were scared. Lamps, braziers, torches all revealed haunted faces, darting eyes, even some tears had streaked the grime on the faces of some of the men around me. I think I would have run then, had I control of my limbs. Rather, I stood, quaking with a deep, all-consuming dread. These men who had seen terrible horrors, perpetrated obscenities, whispered about but never mentioned aloud, these men had been shaken to their core. What had happened to Hasdat?

‘I wish I had run. I wish, I could have been shot down that night. Then... Before...’

Gheorghe stopped talking, as though his voice had betrayed him. All of this time, he had been standing in the middle of the room. He had barely moved. Only his quiet voice had borne a shred of the emotions he felt, the emotions that had been caged inside the silent priest for so long.

At the desk, the young initiate was staring at the words that had tumbled from the pen in his hand. They seemed alien to him. It was as though Gheorghe’s voice had manifested itself in scratched ink without the scrivener being involved. He carefully blotted the sheet and laid it to one side with the other complete pages. Behind him, he heard Gheorghe take a breath, ready to speak again. Taking a fresh sheet, the young witness began to write.

Gheorghe’s words sounded as though they came from some unfathomable distance away, yet he was as clear as before. The words were emotive, but there was little emotion now in his voice.

‘There were signs all around me that some great endeavour had been completed. As my eyes adjusted to the cold light of pre-dawn, I saw where wood had been

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stacked and worked. Pale pools of sawdust were left behind, partly trodden into the mud that seemed to be everywhere. Tents were being taken down, and carts were being stacked. There were some motor trucks being loaded with tools, generators and portable lights. So much was being done with so little talk. No one would meet my eyes. My dread increased so, I felt my heart should stop.

‘To one side of the road, a large motor truck sat on fat wheels. It looked like one of the Roma caravans, only square and ugly. Very like Promethea to make such advances. There were lights on inside. I had been standing for a little time when a door at the back of the truck that I could not see opened, spilling light. Someone stepped down. I saw their shadow move against the ground. The door was closed, and a tall, thin man came from behind the truck and walked quickly towards me. He had a heavy black coat draped over his shoulders. His hands were jammed into his pockets, his shoulders shrugging up. His movements were sharp and quick, his eyes wide and challenging.

‘He walked right past me, stopped, then walked backwards a few steps to stand before me. Glancing sideways, he smiled. I did not like the smile. He looked at the sky, inhaling deeply, and then nodded his head toward the track leading to Hasdat. “Come with me,” he said. He spoke Hungarian, but the accent was Austrian. He walked off, towards the track. One of the DSF officers pushed the back of my shoulder, so I followed. Glancing back, I saw that the officers were waiting. In that moment, I stumbled into the tall man and he chuckled as I recoiled. He laid an arm across my shoulder, pointing back at the DSF officers.

“They will follow, but not yet. I do not wish that they

intrude on our time together. You must be focused, Father Gheorghe. Do not worry about anything.” He turned me around, then let me go and I followed him along the track. His hands were in his pockets again. He looked like some great insect, stalking across the rutted ground. After a little while, as we neared the trees, he spoke again. His hands came out of his pockets and he gestured expansively.

“I was told that this is your favourite way into the village. I had found this path as I explored. I like to... To wander. I like to let the environment, this canvas that I work, speak to me.” He stopped and turned on me suddenly, smiling warmly. His eyes were blazing with energy. “I had already decided on my theme and on the route through my creation when someone told me that this was your chosen path each time you visited.” He walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. His smile was so sincere, so warm, that I found myself returning it on reflex.

“It was then that I demanded that you be struck from the list. I knew I had to share this with you.” His hand snaked around until he had his arm around my shoulder. He led me on along the path, now into the trees. “I may not be able to work again this season, you know. This is the beginning and end of this phase of my work, I feel. Now, I will be silent. It is better for me, so I can absorb your reactions. But I am with you,” he hugged me in once, “in case you have questions. You know?” He released me, and we walked on.

“It was the smell that came to me first. I could see the dark outlines of the houses, and see flickering torchlight, but the smell was the first detail. A tang of copper that I could taste in the air. As a young priest I had once been

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asked to administer last rights to a group of Hungarian soldiers, prisoners who were to be executed. It was during the liberation, before Romania was born. They were slaughtered with sword slashes to the head and neck. It was brutal and bloody. The smell then was the same. Hot blood on cold ground.

‘By now, I had passed beyond fear. The numb incomprehension that has smothered me for so long began then. I was nothing and no one as I walked. Just a pair of eyes to witness what had been wrought there at Hasdat.’

Gheorghe paused. It was an instant that almost allowed the scrivener to flee, but Gheorghe continued, unable now to hold back the weight of emotion from his voice. The despair and pain of his words held the younger priest to his seat though he shook with terror.

‘It began at the first house. The family there had tended the orchard we had just walked through. The husband was standing at the path, frozen in the act of dramatically motioning for his wife and young son to follow him. They were emerging from the house, rushing to him. All three naked bodies were suspended from wooden frames by wires that cruelly run through their flesh. Their throats had been cut a little, I guessed to silence them. Their faces had been cut and stitched, much as their bodies, so that they showed the desired expressions of urgency, eyes ever open, mouths too. As I walked mechanically past, their eyes followed me, their ruined throats and mouths twitching as they fought to speak, to scream, to beg. This was the first house.

‘There were more than thirty houses in Hasdat.

‘At the next, the rushing family were dragging their old grandmother. The weight of her pulled at them, splitting

their arms, tearing the flesh and hauling their bones free. Tendons strained as they craned their heads, straining forward, their desire to reach their goal physically stretching them onward even as the old woman pulled them back. Their eyes followed me, save for the old woman's. Hers were glazed and grey, yet flickered still. This was the second house.

‘From there on, we wound our way around the frames, around the naked, meticulously altered, and surgically idealised bodies. All straining to outrun their physical forms, as they hurled themselves up the path. I passed those I had known for so long, enduring the scalding touch of their eyes as I went by them. I was weeping silent tears I think, but what I saw was driving me deeper and deeper into myself, crushing me, wiping out who I was before that time and leaving nothing in its place. This was just the beginning.

‘The first angel nearly broke me. My companion sighed with satisfaction as I saw it. It staggered me, literally. I fell back from it, and only my companion's arm at my back stopped me from falling. I stared, not knowing, not feeling. Just stared.

‘She hung over the path, looking down to the villagers rushing by, beckoning to them with one arm while the other pointed urgently up the path. Her wings glowed in the light of the torches. The skin and muscle from her back had been so finely unfolded and cunningly refashioned that the crimson feather fronds they made appeared delicate and fragile and precise. And, God help me, beautiful. She was beautiful, and her beautiful eyes stared down at me, burning me. Burning me. I remembered that her name had been Rahela, and that

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she had been so happy to be with child, and that she had wanted a little girl - the little, unborn girl that from her mother's exposed womb also beckoned to the villagers to hurry on up the path, her own little wings so small. And I walked on.

'We came at last to the church, and to the open place before it. The villagers thronged here, and there were other angels. The most handsome and beautiful of the men and women had been lifted up as angels. The little children, the babies, were as cherubs, flittering around the scene. The church tower had been cast down by some force, and suspended in the act of falling. Angels sought to halt the fall even as villagers rushed to the tower's base, some carrying great tree trunks to shore up their precious house of worship. All suspended in a single, dynamic moment, illuminated by the glory of the golden light of dawn.

'I knew all their names. All of them looked to me. All of them. They poured out their souls from their eyes. The weight of those souls has been with me ever since. In the terrible silence that should have been rent with the fury of God's own vengeance, I could walk no further. I fell to my knees in the mud. Behind me, my companion exhaled slowly.

'After a moment, I realised that I heard scratching. Turning, I saw a darkly clothed woman sketching furiously on paper held on a board. Her eyes stared fiercely, darting between me and the page before her. I understood then. I was the last element of this tableau. I was as trapped here in this moment as the poor souls suspended on the frames around me. Horrified, I scrambled up and ran at the woman. She smiled. The smile was revolting in its genuine

joy at my reaction. Arms went around me, dragging me back, as I clawed at the board. I heard the Austrian shouting at the people who held me, but I was beyond reason then. I think, I screamed and shouted. Finally, as I was carried back down the path, I must have fainted.

‘I knew nothing until I was returned to my brothers in Hunedoara. I was broken, lost in darkness. I could not speak, not at all. Doctors were sent, and I know by whom, to ensure I lived. I was very well cared for. However, Father Gheorghe was dead and gone, trapped and held forever at Hasdat. They tell me that it was burned, and that the fires lasted for days and left nothing. I know that somewhere it still lives. On paper. Perhaps on canvas as some great memorial painting. Those pieces of paper, that canvas, hold all that remains of Father Gheorghe. His soul is there.’

The young man suddenly stood up, dropping the pen onto the table. He turned to Gheorghe, tears flooding down his face. He looked Gheorghe in the eye. Seeing the terrible emptiness there, the young man took a step toward the door. His mouth worked, but he said nothing. He ran from the room.

Gheorghe closed the door after him, locked it, and then returned to the table. He took a moment to glance through the pages. He numbered them, and neatly arranged the stack before taking a fresh page. He wrote the last words himself.

‘It is time that I left this world, and I do so this night. I was to be the living witness to Hasdat, as well as the last part of the work done there. At least I can deny them that.

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This document must be kept to record what happened, so that some future justice may be done. I doubt any justice on this Earth could erase what I saw. I do not know that there is any justice to appeal to. Father Gheorghe believed there was. He would say, that this night, I will go to Hell for what I am about to do.

‘I believe he is already in Hell. And, if I join him, it will be as nothing compared to that which I leave behind me.’

The priest numbered the last page and added it to the rest. He cleaned his pen and returned the writing materials to the box they had come from. Before he closed it, he removed a letter opener, and pushed the box away, to the back of the table.

Standing, the priest tucked his chair back. The stack of papers he put on the neatly made bed. Then he went to the middle of the room and stood facing the door. He had shown no emotion up to this point, and somehow showed no pain as he dug the letter opener into the side of his throat.

Blood spurted into the room. He dragged the near-dull blade through the flesh of his neck, right around. Breath whistled and gargled through his punctured windpipe. The priest’s hand nearly faltered, his eyes closing tightly, as he raggedly drew the blade around to the vein on the other side of his neck. Blood was flooding down his clothes and onto the floor as his hand dropped to his side, the letter opener falling from his darkly stained fingers. His breath bubbling, the priest stood shaking for a few moments. Abruptly, he collapsed.

The Cult of Victor

By Kate Harrad

‘Tell us how it began.’

‘It began with a pair of hands.’

Dr Grasu no longer bothered to examine the pieces of paper handed to him by Lady Iulia's manservant. They were all perfectly legitimate, so far as they went. That is, they had been signed by the correct number of the correct officials, and they certified that Lady Iulia was suffering from skin problems, or eyesight problems, or a broken ankle – something to which the cure lay in the skin, eyes, ankles and so on of another person.

Augmentation was Lady Iulia's hobby, obsession and religion. She had the connections to keep it up, and the more Augmented she became, the better her connections got. Her multiple scars and grafts were always in fashion. There was a rumour she aspired to win the hand of Frankenstein himself, although nobody was sure if scars were actually the way to the King's heart. Certainly, the doctor reflected, he seemed to have resisted Iulia's largely borrowed charms so far.

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‘Dr Grasu?’ asked the aristocrat, impatient. ‘Do you understand what I need?’

‘Your hands are leprous,’ said the doctor, finally glancing at the paper. He kept his voice neutral. It was possible that the words were edged with a hint of scepticism, but Iulia showed no awareness of it.

‘Possibly leprous,’ she conceded. ‘Best to replace them before the worst happens, though, don’t you think?’

‘Of course, my lady. Give me a day or two to find a donor-’

‘Actually,’ she interrupted, ‘I may have someone.’

The doctor nodded, resigned. She always did. Did she keep a collection of peasants in her cellars like wine bottles, waiting for the right occasion? He half-believed that she did, although he had no intention of investigating. His job was to perform the surgery, take the fee, and keep quiet. You didn’t want to alienate your best customer.

Nevertheless, as he stood in his office listening to the dwindling rush of his best customer’s skirts, he couldn’t stop himself from wondering. Where did she get her harvest?

The village of Sângeorgiu de Mureş lay on the outskirts of Târgu Mureş, the new capital of Promethea. To be so near Frankenstein’s home was a blessed location, but also a dangerous one - the flame that lit the country both warmed and burned them. On one hand, because of the regular visits of foreign dignitaries to the city, the DSF ensured that the villagers living on the outskirts were always presentable. Never obviously starving, and always engaged in productive work. That was a good thing. On the other hand, freedom was even more limited than in

most of the country. There could be no hint of resistance, let alone the Resistance.

It was for this reason that the parish priest had been discharged from his duties some years ago, since everyone knew the Orthodox Church was sympathetic to the struggle, and since then the village church had fallen, heavily, into disuse. Only the graveyard was operational. The main building had become a ruin remarkably quickly, as though God had known there was nothing for Him there any more.

But when God and the villagers had abandoned the church, they had created a vacuum. That vacuum was now being filled, very furtively and unobtrusively, by another religion. A much smaller one and a much newer one.

‘I think they are meeting again tonight,’ said Elena Cristescu to her husband, quietly, as they lay in bed.

She felt his shoulders tense. ‘Do they not know that curfew breaking is a threat to us all? Is Rosalia asleep?’

‘Yes. I checked. I saw her there, under the covers.’

‘Good. Perhaps she has given up this perversion.’

‘We must hope so.’

‘We must do more than hope. If she will not turn away, we must save her from herself. Every night we must tie her to her bed, so that she cannot bring shame on us. What if she... - succeeds? What will we do? She is our only child. She is fifteen years old.’

‘I know, Dvidiu. Don’t cry. She will not be Harvested.’

‘We cannot know it.’

They lay in silence after that. Neither wanted to check what was under the bedcovers in the next room.

In fact, as they feared, Rosalia had crept out ten

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minutes earlier. As her parents whispered and worried, she was walking barefoot to the church. In the moonlight, its outline showed a luminescent grey against the inky bulk of the mountains beyond, and she smiled to see it. The church was the heart of her now.

The rest of the group was already inside when she arrived, sitting on the steps in front of the altar. Their pale, intense faces were lit only by a couple of candles, but Rosalia knew them all despite the gloom. They were her companions. She was full of the sense she always had here, of having found her people, her place in the world.

‘Good evening,’ whispered Martin, the leader.

‘And to you,’ she whispered, making the sign of the V across her thin chest. ‘May Victor bless us.’

‘May Victor bless us, may Victor use us,’ repeated Martin, echoed by the dozen or so others huddled behind him in the draughty church. The gentle rush of their chanting was ghostly against the stone walls. Rosalia made her way into the circle and bowed her head in the opening prayer.

The Cult of Victor was a recent entity. It was confined to a handful of villages around the country, all of which had developed the religion independently. The Cult of Victor, was not what they called themselves. It was the name used by the DSE, who kept an occasional and mostly benevolent eye on all the groups. Its adherents worshipped the King as a god, on the basis that his powers were effectively divine, and they offered their bodies to him in sacrifice. Not through ritual suicide, but through Harvesting.

Unfortunately for them, Frankenstein had never been known to use the Harvest for himself, so their desire to

provide for him personally was unlikely to be fulfilled. But, fortunately for them, a minority of the aristocracy around him most certainly did use it. The various Cults of Victor therefore extended their devotion out from the King to his council, and further to the aristocracy in general. They were prepared to regard anyone in the top tier of society as de facto semi-divine and worthy of the Harvest. And, in the most Augmented, most decadent cliques of the elite, word had begun to spread.

Lady Iulia Ilionescu was the centre of the most delightfully scarred clique in Târgu Mureş. The near-bottomless well of her dead husband's finances ensured that nobody could keep up with her levels of Augmentation, and few tried. So for her to discover that the nearby village of Sângeorgiu de Mureş held a cadre of villagers who were actively eager to be Harvested was akin to discovering a cache of gold conveniently located at the end of her garden stamped, 'Property Of Iulia.' Half a dozen of the cult members had already donated to her or to her friends. It was refreshing to Harvest from people who smiled under the knife.

All of which explained why, of the people sitting in the old parish church that Friday night, the ones who sat up straightest and gave thanks most fervently were those who were missing limbs, facial features or patches of skin. To say they wore their disfigurements with pride would be an understatement. They glowed. The rest of the village might think they were freaks, but here, every Friday, they could be revered for the martyrs they were.

Rosalia glanced enviously through her fingers at her best friend Uca, sitting next to her, who had given her eyes to Lady Iulia two months earlier. Uca had been promised

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replacements, but so far they had not been forthcoming, so she made do with a blindfold and the help of her brother Daniel, who was sitting on her other side. In the corner by the pulpit lay a bag containing the siblings' clothing and their scanty possessions. Uca's parents had disowned her when they found out what she had done, so she and Daniel often slept in the church now. The Cult brought them food and blankets when they could.

Uca, fifteen years of age like Rosalia, had in effect given up not just her eyes, but also her future. There would be no work for her, no marriage, and probably no children. Daniel too had likely sacrificed the life he might have had. It was no small thing. Did Lady Iulia and the others understand that, Rosalia wondered? Of course they had been glad to do it. It was the culmination of their most deeply felt beliefs, but even a sacrificial victim – especially a sacrificial victim – likes to feel appreciated. It would have been generous of Lady Iulia to have at least ensured that Uca had new eyes, thought Rosalia, and at once felt guilty. It was central to her religion, she reminded herself, that she and the others existed to be used. Uca's blindfold was a badge of honour.

A badge that Rosalia felt herself unlikely ever to possess. Uca's eyes had been beautiful, dark and gleaming, a fitting tribute. Dorotu's breasts, now adorning Lady Iulia's chest, had been and presumably still were full and soft. Petru's kidney had, she assumed, been a fine and healthy kidney when Lady Iulia had chosen it to replace her own. They had all had something valuable to give. Rosalia's face and body were pleasant, but unremarkable. She had acne on her skin and lacked curves. What if she was never used? What meaning could her life have then?

Tales of Promethea

In her abstracted state, Rosalia had failed to notice that the silent prayers had come to an end. It was time for announcements.

‘Sorin’s legs are healing well,’ began Martin. Sorin, whose feet had recently been Harvested by the youngest son of Lord Vilhelm Lazarovici, waved his stumps at the assembly with a grin. His roughly built wooden crutches lay beside him.

‘Dorotu’s scars are clean and cause her no pain. Not that she would complain if they did, of course.’ Dorotu bowed her head in assent, arms clasped around her now flat chest.

‘And Uca and Daniel have been offered a bed by Petru tonight.’ The siblings looked gratefully towards Petru.

‘It is no problem,’ he mumbled shyly. ‘You know I would have you to live if my mother would allow it. But tonight she visits her sister and will not know, so come.’ They clasped hands with each other, excited. The church was cold at night.

‘Finally,’ Martin’s voice acquired a new tone, ‘I have been summoned to the city by Lady Iulia again. Tomorrow. And she bids me bring Rosalia to her.’

Rosalia’s head snapped up. ‘Me? She wants to see me? Why?’

‘Well, my love, perhaps she has found a use for you.’ Martin smiled at the girl. ‘Would you like that?’

‘Oh Martin-’ she choked.

‘I know. Let us hope it is the case. We will visit her, and perhaps tomorrow night we will hold a special meeting to report back?’ The group nodded in agreement. It was some weeks since any of them had been Harvested, and the need for it had been growing in them. And Lady Iulia

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was certainly their favourite saint; or, to put it another way, though of course they did not think of it in those terms, their best customer.

The Ilionescu estate was by a long way the most luxurious residence Rosalia had ever seen. Even Martin, who had visited it several times, stood awkwardly in the hallway. If he had owned a cap, he would have been twisting it in his hands. Soft-footed servants came and went, but none of them spoke to the two peasants.

‘Should we have gone to the back door?’ asked Rosalia, her voice hushed to match the stillness of the house.

‘Wait. The Lady will come to us.’

And so she did, after ten minutes. They heard her skirts sweeping along the rich red carpeting, down the curving flight of stairs, and then there she was, in front of them, smiling.

‘Martin. Thank you for coming. Victor bless us.’

‘Victor bless us, my lady. This is Rosalia.’

‘Hello, Rosalia.’ Lady Iulia sounded amused. ‘You may look up at me.’

Rosalia lifted her eyes to the face of her saint, and was struck dumb. Like her house, Lady Iulia was almost tangibly surrounded with an aura of gleaming, velvety wealth. Her skin shone with it, the expensive black ringlets of her hair radiated it, and her clothes were finer, richer cloth than Rosalia had known existed. But what silenced the girl was the thing she should have expected, but somehow hadn’t thought about Iulia’s eyes.

She had known, of course, that the Lady had taken Uca’s eyes for her own. But she had not realised how it would feel to see them in the face of another, and that

other such a great lady. It was unnerving in a way she did not have the words to describe. To see familiar eyes in an unfamiliar face is to feel one's sense of the world begin to shake.

'My lady,' she managed, looking down again in order to be able to speak. 'It is an honour.'

'Of course,' Lady Iulia said pleasantly. 'Come in here. Sit.'

A servant led them to a small room off the hallway. The two peasants perched nervously on chairs each of which had cost more than anyone in their village made in a year.

'Your name is Rosalia?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'And you are... Fifteen?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'May I see your hands? Martin tells me you have good hands. Young and soft.'

Obediently, Rosalia held them out for examination. Lady Iulia took them in hers, smoothed them in her fingers, turned them over to see the backs, and nodded.

'You have not done much manual work?'

'No, my lady. Mostly... mostly sewing, and some cooking. No heavy labour.'

'Good. And rare.'

This was true. Rosalia's parents had taken extra work on themselves, in order to spare their daughter from the manual work that most children had to undertake from an early age. It had earned them some mockery from their neighbours. Rosalia was no beauty, what were they saving her for? They could not have answered the question themselves.

But now, Rosalia thought, she knew what they had been

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saving her for, even if they would never understand it. Her hands! She had never realised that her hands could be valuable. A wave of triumph surged through her. Finally, she could be used. When she looked up, the expression on her face was one of adoration.

‘They are yours, my lady, if you want them. Everything I have is yours.’

‘You are a good girl,’ purred Iulia, eying her up and down. ‘Tell me, are you often ill? Coughs, colds, stomach pains?’

‘No, my lady, none of those. I have always been very healthy.’

‘Excellent. Well, I am pleased to tell you that I have indeed selected your hands for Harvesting. Well done, my dear. I shall meet you at Dr Grasu’s laboratory in one week’s time for the surgery. Come after dark, please. As you know, the legalities of the procedure are... somewhat ill-defined.’

Martin nodded. Rosalia tried to look as if she had understood what ‘legalities’ meant.

‘And during the week, I would like you to keep your hands well cared for. Here,’ she handed the girl a small pot, ‘Apply this cream to them every night and morning.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Excellent. I shall see you on Saturday next. Martin knows where to go.’

As they left the mansion, gracefully but efficiently dismissed, Rosalia held her hands in front of her, marvelling. In one week’s time, her hands would be back inside that big, quiet house. They would be picking up cups, brushing Lady Iulia’s hair, smoothing down the silk of her dresses. They would belong to the aristocracy. How

strange to think of it. How exciting.

And she would have made her first sacrifice to the King. Even if he would likely never know about it, even if - rumour had it - he might not even have approved of it, it was nevertheless an offering to his divinity. Still, even as she thought the words, it was not the face of Frankenstein she saw, indeed, she was only aware of what he looked like from fifth-hand descriptions. No, she saw Lady Iulia's face, and it appeared to her as the face of a goddess.

'Rosalia?' Martin touched her shoulder and she realised they were reaching the outskirts of Sângeorgiu de Mureş. She hadn't spoken since leaving the Ilionescu estate. She smiled up at Martin to indicate that she was well and happy, and he smiled back down at her. 'Good. Let us go and tell the others that you have been Chosen. Uca will be very happy for you.'

'Yes, Martin.' She began to reach out her hand for his, but stopped herself. It was consecrated to another.

During the next week, Rosalia refused to do any work. Sewing, cleaning, washing, or mending - when her parents asked her to do anything that involved using her hands and might risk damaging them, she shook her head. She would not explain. She simply went to her room, or left the cottage to walk in the woods, returning late at night. She rubbed the expensive cream over her knuckles, marvelling at the rich, smooth feel of it. She ate carefully and dressed carefully, and if she had had gloves, she would have worn them all the time. By Saturday night, she was satisfied that her hands were in as good a condition as she could get them.

By Saturday night, the Cristescus had become worried

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to distraction. It was clear that Rosalia was desperately excited about something, and they had not failed to notice her newfound obsession with her hands. They knew what the Cult of Victor was, as all the village did. They put the clues together without much difficulty.

‘Her hands! To lose her hands! I cannot bear it. We must restrain her,’ argued Dvidiu that afternoon. Rosalia had gone out for a walk, too restless to stay still.

‘What if Martin and the others come for her?’ said Elena. ‘We could not hold out against all of them.’

‘We are not the only ones who are opposed to this - this unholy thing! How can they want this? When the rest of us would do anything to avoid it? How did we all let this perversity go on among us? I swear I shall seek out the Resistance,’ his voice dropped, ‘and ask them to dissolve this blasphemy.’

‘You know the Resistance could not come so near the city, so openly. And you know why the village has let it happen, while there are willing victims, the unwilling ones will last longer. When were any of us last used for Harvest? When were we last raided, or punished for anything? The aristos have found a herd of cows that yearn to be eaten, and they will protect them, and us because of them. And we accepted that, before our daughter became the sacrifice.’

Dvidiu bowed his head, unable to refute her.

‘But it ends here,’ said Elena.

Her husband looked at her. ‘How?’

‘We make it end. We gather the village together, and they will stop Rosalia from leaving, and if the others come for her they will stop them too, and perhaps we can chain them all. At least until they see reason. Or...’ she did not

finish the thought, but it had occurred to her that a spell of semi-starvation might make bodies much less attractive for Harvesting purposes.

Elena was a forceful woman and the rest of the village knew it. Once she had pulled the veil away and shown them what they were colluding in, they were filled with shame and anger. She told them what to do and they obeyed.

That night, when Rosalia set foot on the stairs to go upstairs to bed, she found instead that her father had hold of her. As gently as possible, he carried her to her bed and lay her down while two neighbours, suddenly appearing, attached ropes to her hands and feet. She screamed and struggled, pleading to be released. Elena and Dvidiu cried throughout, but did not relent.

Left alone in the dark, Rosalia was frantic. Lady Iulia would be waiting for her. She was supposed to meet Martin at the church to be taken to the laboratory. Would he come for her? Had her hands been damaged by the struggle? The thought of that kept her lying still. Martin would come.

Martin did come. After waiting half an hour, he set off to the cottage, taking with him Uca and Daniel, who were back sleeping at the church again. They were determined to rescue Rosalia by force if necessary. But as they approached, they saw that the cottage was surrounded with a ring of silent villagers, each holding aloft a torch of burning wood.

In front of the door stood Elena with her arms crossed, and Dvidiu beside her with a torch in his hand. In the darkness, lit by the flames, Elena's face was that of an avenging angel.

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‘Leave here, Martin,’ she said. She did not raise her voice, but Martin took an involuntary step backwards. ‘My child is not going with you.’

‘Elena, listen...’ began Martin, then stumbled. ‘Rosalia is old enough to know her own mind,’ he continued, sure that he was right, but disconcerted by the silent, intent attention of the village. ‘You cannot stand between her and her faith.’

‘Faith!’ exploded Dvidiu. ‘Abomination! Blasphemy! Heresy! Her hands-’ he trailed off, choking on the words.

‘Faith.’ Martin spread out his own hands towards them. ‘Devotion. Meaning. Sacrifice. Her hands are the symbol of all of that to her, now. If you do not let her go, what will you do, keep her imprisoned forever? I swear to you, the moment you stop watching her, she will escape to me.’

‘Then we will never stop watching her.’ Elena stood unmoving, unmoved.

‘Please, please...’ began Uca, breaking free of Daniel’s protective hold to move towards the sound of Elena’s voice. ‘This is what she believes in. I gave my eyes! What is a pair of hands to that? Let her go!’

She reached out past Elena towards the cottage door. Dvidiu whirled around to stop her entering, but Daniel pushed him aside. Dvidiu stumbled and the torch in his hand fell, and suddenly the door was aflame.

‘Fire!’ screamed Uca, tripping backwards into Elena. There was a scramble as some of the villagers rushed to fetch water, while others ran to help the Cristescus. Uca screamed and screamed. Daniel shouted incoherent accusations into the air. In the confusion, Martin shot through the burning door into the cottage and ran upstairs.

Tales of Promethea

Rosalia was as upright on the bed as she could get, twisting her wrists and ankles against the ropes, panting. ‘What happened? Is the house on fire?’

‘A little, they will deal with it. Come.’ Martin sawed at the ropes with his knife and Rosalia stood up, dizzy. ‘Are we too late?’

‘No. The Lady will wait. But we have to hurry.’

Holding her arm, Martin helped the girl down the stairs and out through the back door. The ring of jailors had dissipated and become concentrated at the front where the fire still blazed, enabling the pair to creep away into the woods without being noticed. Rosalia shut her mind to the distant sound of her parents weeping and her house burning. Her future lay ahead. She walked quickly, never looking back.

When they reached the laboratory, all was quiet. It lay in the hills to the north-west of the city, set in its own grounds for privacy. Martin knocked at the gate and a silent servant let them in, unsmiling and grim. Dr Grasu, Lady Iulia and a small selection of their assorted assistants and servants were already waiting.

‘Where have you been?’ hissed Iulia. ‘How dare you keep me waiting?’

‘My sincere apologies, my lady.’ Martin bowed apologetically. ‘We were attacked. Not all of our people support our religious beliefs. They tied Rosalia to her bed and-’

‘Very well, never mind,’ interrupted the aristocrat, impatient and bored. ‘Come on girl, come here.’ Rosalia moved obediently to the slab indicated and lay down. The stone was chilly and rough against her back. Her shiver was partly anticipation, partly fear and partly just cold.

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‘Religious beliefs?’ asked Dr Grasu. He had met Martin before, of course, accompanying previous Harvest volunteers, but Iulia had always discouraged conversation. Martin took a breath ready to explain, but Iulia cut him off. ‘Doctor, I need a word with you.’

‘Of course, my lady.’ They moved to a corner and began whispering. Expressionless, two of the assistants began to strip Rosalia to her petticoat and prepare her for the surgery.

Martin sat on a stool out of the way and waited, as he always did. He was remembering, for some reason, his first time under the knife. It had been long before the Cult of Victor. He had been young then, called to supply a lung for a young and dying lord. He had survived the experience, and they had assured him that he was special, blessed, for his gift. Frankenstein himself had sent his thanks, they said. The boy to whom he had sacrificed had said little, but Martin had never forgotten his face. Clear-skinned and unscarred, unlike Martin’s own, it was the face of someone who up until that moment had never known hardship of any kind. Martin had loved him for that, where another might have hated. A seed was sown, and the Sângeorgiu de Mureş chapter of the Cult was the fruit.

He came back from his memories to notice that in the corner, the doctor was frowning and black-browed. ‘My lady’ Martin heard him say, ‘But why? I am not a-’ and she shushed him, glancing towards Martin, and their voices dropped again.

Rosalia was quiet on the slab. She was a good girl, Martin thought. Ready to leave her family and her home and follow the light of the Harvest no matter where it led,

even if nobody else understood, even if they were a persecuted handful of outcasts. Even if their own divinities did not always appreciate their sacrifice... Martin pushed that thought away with the ease of long practice.

The reigning divinity finished her conversation with the doctor, apparently unconcerned by the fact that he was now looking grey and ill. She walked to her slab, divested herself of her clothes leaving only a silk slip, and arranged herself gracefully and comfortably across the stone. It practically had her shape indented in it. How many times had Martin seen her there, he wondered? About half a dozen, but somehow it seemed to him as though he had spent half his life in this underground laboratory.

Dr Grasu checked Rosalia over as an assistant brought over his case of surgical tools. Martin expected him to speak to her, reassure her as he had with the others, but he merely examined her, avoiding her eyes, and then applied the ether. Rosalia slipped into unconsciousness with a blissful smile. Her goose pimped body lay relaxed and ready. Out of respect, Martin averted his eyes from her semi-nudity.

The doctor gave Lady Iulia a brief examination and applied the ether to her as well. As she relapsed into sleep, her mouth fell open and her limbs sprawled. Working quickly, he removed her hands and placed them on the table between the two women. But he did not immediately begin the removal of Rosalia's hands. Instead he turned to the two assistants.

'Fetch me the larger saw,' he instructed one, and to the other, 'Bring me my spare scalpel from my room.' They nodded and left.

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Grasu glanced at the slabs, checking for signs of movement, and seeing none, he turned to Martin.

‘Listen,’ he said very quietly, ‘You have to tell me. What are your religious beliefs? What do they have to do with Lady Iulia and... this?’ He nodded to the dismembered hands.

Briefly but comprehensively, Martin told him.

Grasu sat down heavily on a stool and was silent.

‘I can’t be party to this,’ he said after a moment. ‘This is... this is impossible.’

‘You have Harvested peasants who were unwilling, have you not?’ said Martin. ‘Is not this better? We consent. We want to be used. We believe we were put on this earth to be used, and we go gladly to the knife. Why is that wrong?’

‘Because you should not collude in your own oppression!’ said the doctor sharply.

‘You really said that?’

‘Yes, I did.’ The doctor shifted in his chair. ‘Are these bonds really necessary?’

‘Yes,’ said the figure opposite him. ‘And you did not know of this cult before that moment?’

‘I swear I did not.’

‘Continue.’

‘We are not oppressed,’ said Martin simply. ‘Those who reject their destiny are oppressed. We are free.’

Dr Grasu sighed. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I have to tell you something. Lady Iulia has made a ... request. She thinks Rosalia looks unusually healthy. And she is young, of course. Strong bones and clean organs.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Martin.

‘She does not just want her hands.’

‘I’m sure Rosalia would be honoured-’

‘She wants her dead.’

Martin was silent.

‘Her body,’ said Dr Grasu with deliberate brutality, ‘kept in my laboratory, will provide my lady with a personalised store of limbs, kidneys, lungs, anything she wants. It could last her for years.’

The man took a deep breath. ‘Rosalia would want this,’ he said. ‘I know it. I can answer for her.’

‘Think about this then, with Rosalia’s body available, the lady will no longer need you. Any of you. Perhaps for the occasional part the girl is not pretty enough to provide, - her feet seem quite big and stocky, for example, - but essentially, your role will be over. Your conduit to the aristocracy will be gone. What will happen to your cult then?’

‘That was a good point.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I gather you did not want to kill the child?’

‘I did not.’

‘And yet you had Harvested others?’

‘Never killing. Organs from the living and from the already dead. I had never taken a life.’

‘Continue.’

Martin’s mouth set in a stubborn line. ‘Pardon me, Doctor, but our faith is not your business. I will look after them. Your business, like mine, is to do the bidding of your betters. And do it quickly. The Lady will not sleep forever.’

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Grasu swore. 'You will make me do this?'

'It is the greatest sacrifice we can offer to the King. A death. A useful death.'

'The King? The King does not even approve of Lady Iulia.'

'Nevertheless, this is the world he created, and we worship him for it. We believe he will come to accept the Harvesting, and us with it.'

There was a noise from the slab. Rosalia stirred a little and muttered something indistinct. The doctor looked over at her. 'She is waking. I cannot do this.'

'Then let me.' In one swift movement, Martin crossed the room, picked up the ether rag and held it over Rosalia's face. 'Will she die? Will she die from this?'

The doctor shuddered. 'If you clamp it over her nose and mouth she will inhale too much ether and... yes, she will die.' He turned away. 'Do what you will. She is your responsibility.'

In the ensuing silence, broken only by the approaching treads of the two assistants returning from their errands, Rosalia's life dissolved into a cloud of ether. Martin's eyes were wet but he kept the rag on until he was sure she had stopped breathing. He made the sign of the V across his chest.

'There.' He dropped the rag. 'Now she is your responsibility.' He strode past the gaping assistants, out of the laboratory. 'I will tell her family,' he called back. 'And my congregation will pray for her soul.' Then he was gone.

'It was he who killed her?'

'It happened as I have told you.'

Tales of Promethea

‘Then why are you running from justice? Why did you come to us?’

‘There is more to tell.’

Dr Grasu stared at the girl’s body for some minutes. His assistants stared at him. Finally he gestured to them.

‘Take her. Bury her.’

‘Bury her?’

‘Do as I say. There is a bier somewhere in the building. Put her on it, carry her back to Sângeorgiu de Mureş and bury her in the churchyard there. Find her parents and let them come to the burial. Let them conduct the Cult of the Dead if they wish. Do not let anyone stop you from doing my bidding. Stay till it is over.’

The stolid men looked at one another, shrugged and picked up the girl in one practised motion. As they left, Lady Iulia began to stir upon her slab. Grasu looked at her, then at her missing hands, then back at her. In her half-sleep, she looked beautiful.

He picked up the discarded rag, still soaked with ether, and moved towards the slab.

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Yes.’

‘So... did you kill her because she was evil, or because she would have had you Eviscerated for having taken her hands without providing a replacement?’

‘Perhaps both. As for evil... I could not say. I was culpable too.’

‘Nobody is denying that.’

‘In any case, I wish to make amends for my actions. For the Harvesting.’

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The figure looked at him for a moment. 'You understand why it is hard for us to trust you.'

'Of course. But please believe me. Whether you accept me or not, I am now and shall always be in sympathy with your aims. I am part of the Resistance now whether you like it or not. My advice is to take me, and use me. In whatever way I can be used. That is my only desire now.'

The figure nodded. 'Yes. Believe me. We will.'

Hollow Face

By Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan

I did it for love. I want that to be perfectly clear. Note that down, please. My testament. All for love.

Ivana was the most beautiful girl in the village, and because I only knew the village, the most beautiful in the world. We shared a birthday, though she was two years older than I. The old men looked at us playing in the street, and called her blessed and me cursed. She truly was blessed, the face of an angel, the poise of a ballet dancer, a smile like the dawn.

And they were right. I was cursed. I was born with mismatched limbs, and a twisted face too big for my thin body. My tongue lolled in my mouth, limp and dead, and only those who knew me well could understand me when I spoke. My mother died birthing me, and my uncle raised me like a dog. He named me Victor – the man was as unimaginative as he was uncaring.

The village priest showed me a little kindness. Perhaps he thought that I could find refuge in the church. He taught me to read, and I devoured every book in his little library. Who could have guessed that a keen mind hid

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within my misshapen body?

The other children called me a monster, and threw stones at me. I learned to sneak and to climb, and hide from their tenderness. I could not run fast, but I learned to scale trees and cliffs so they could not catch me. The ringleader of my tormentors was an older boy named Piotr. He was a natural leader of men, a little tyrannical general who cemented his power by turning the whole village against me. Everything that went wrong, a barn fire, a sick cow, a missing purse, was blamed on me, on Victor the Beast.

When Ivana joined in their cruel games, she always threw to miss, and I loved her for that even then.

After a few years, Piotr went off to the city, and my torments ceased. Without their general, the other boys lacked courage, and feared me instead of hating me.

The old men started to call me blessed, and Ivana cursed. A new governor had come to power in Gorj, and he brought with him a bloody Harvest. In other districts, they said, the Harvest took only the dead and the damned, but here they took who they wanted. The old men looked at Ivana and her perfect features and shook their heads sadly. Women counselled her to burn her skin, or to rub stinging nettles on her cheeks every day until the blotches became ugly scars. She would not listen, and her pride made her even more beautiful in my eyes. I was fifteen then, she would have been seventeen years old.

I tried to talk to her, to tell her how I loved her, but my stammer turned my words to nonsense and she just stared at me. Only action would do.

In the Harvest, I saw my opportunity. I had learned to hide in the wooded hills above the valley, and built a little

lean-to there. When the Harvest came, I would take her there and we would hide until the butchers went away. In this little pastoral fantasy, we would live together as man and wife in the forest, and there would be no more stones and no more talk of blessing and curses. I did not mention this plan to anyone, not even her. To do so would have exposed my silly dream to the harsh light of reality.

One night, I heard the guttural roar of engines struggling up the steep slope to the village, and saw their headlights in the dark. I had never seen electric lights before, and watched them in fascination for a moment before I realised what they were. The Harvest!

I ran to Ivana's house, sprinting in my stumbling gait, one leg a little longer than the other, and hammered at her door. There was no answer. I ran around the house, threw stones at her window, kicked at the back door. Nothing. In the street, I could hear the police grabbing the victims of the Harvest.

Mikel, his eyes were keen as a hawk and blue as the sky over the mountains. They would take his eyes and leave him with a worthless receipt he could no longer read, and those blue eyes would stare out of the Augmented skull of some rifleman in the Promethean Army.

I heard Maria's screams. She was not as pretty as Ivana, but she had the voice of a nightingale. The screams ended in a gurgle.

Stefan, the blacksmith, so strong, so healthy... So ripe for the Harvest.

The DSF cars parked in the market square. I circled around to a place where I could watch them. The police went door to door, searching for the unfortunates on their list. In the middle of the square was a bigger wagon. Coils

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of icy smoke tumbled out of the rear doors when they were opened. Inside, I glimpsed stainless steel tables, shining scalpels and saws, and glass vials brimming with Frankenstein's Gift. That was the harvest's scythe, the butcher's table.

None of their victims were killed. The butchers would take the choicest parts, and replace them with less valuable substitutes where necessary. Maria, for example, lost her nightingale voice, and in exchange they left her with a windpipe salvaged from some corpse, dry and scratchy as the grave. I watched as they worked, searching the village for exceptional flesh, rejecting the weak or broken. Blessed are the weak, the sick, the ugly - they shall be spared.

Wild plans danced in my brain. I would wait until they dragged Ivana out, and then rescue her. We would run off into the night and vanish in the forest. I would tell her I loved her, and my tongue would not betray me, and all would be well.

I waited for hours, watching the Harvest. There was no sign of her. Was I too late? Had they already taken her, plucked the most beautiful fruit first?

The engines coughed foul smoke, and the police cars turned back down the road to Gorj. The Harvest was over, and still I had not seen Ivana. It was impossible to think that they could have rejected her, or not known about her. Everyone in the valley whispered of her beauty.

One car remained behind. As rosy dawn touched the mountains in the east, I saw two figures approach it. One wore the uniform of the DSF, and swaggered as he walked. Piotr!

Beside him, untouched, unscarred, beautifully whole,

Tales of Promethea

Ivana walked arm in arm with my hated enemy. Her head rested against his shoulder, and she whispered into his ear as lovers do. They kissed before he climbed into his car and drove away.

How could my cabin in the forest compare to the protection offered by a newly-promoted lieutenant in the DSF?

If Piotr could find his fortune in the city, then so could I.

My uncle was glad to see the back of me. The villagers probably blamed me for the severity of the Harvest. I took with me only my ragged clothes and the priest's books.

In the city, I became a thief, a burglar of rich houses. My ungainly limbs had grown agile with long practice, and fences didn't care about my ugly face when I brought them treasures. Gold and jewels were prized, but what they really desired were the gadgets and wonders from the workshops of Promethea. To own such products of the King's Science was the aspiration of every merchant and burgher, well, after the perfect health and beauty promised by Frankenstein's Gift.

The governor of the city was the font of all corruption. He let the Harvest run unchecked to ensure the wealthy continued to support him, let them feed on the common folk like beasts, and he grew fat off their bribes. The city reflected his monstrous nature. The buildings huddled conspiratorially together, with narrow dark alleyways running between them like black veins. I suppose I should thank him. His twisted city made my criminal life possible.

Three years. By night, I robbed. By day, I tried to forget her.

Then I saw her. She strolled along the Victorstrasse like

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a queen, surrounded by preening courtiers. Her silken dress glittered with pearls. She was laughing. I had never seen her so happy. Her smile was so bright it hurt.

I followed, how could I not, and watched as she vanished into a fashionable salon, a little outpost of decadent Paris in the grey hills of Promethea. I skulked around the back and found a window on the second floor that could be prised open. To see her again, to speak to her, was worth any risk. Inside, sculpted figures with stolen faces danced slow formal dances, choreographed to avoid bursting sutures. I stayed in the shadows as much as I could, but her light drew me out. I ignored the angry glances and caustic whispers, as I pushed through the crowd until I was close enough to pluck her hem.

‘I-I-I-Ivana?’ I stammered, forcing her name past my teeth with sheer will. It is I, Victor! I love you still!

She turned, and there was no recognition in her eyes. No, they weren’t her eyes. Her eyes were blue, yet the eyes that looked out of this face were green. Now I was close enough to see the faint scars on her neck and cheeks. Masterful work, really.

‘Oh,’ she squealed, ‘It’s a grotesque! How delightful!’ She had mistaken me for one of the beggars who sold their limbs on the black market, and replaced them with whatever cast-offs they could afford. The salon allowed a small number in to entertain the guests, to provide contrast for their unnatural beauty.

I mumbled an apology and fled. Hot tears flooded my eyes. Blind, I crashed through the crowd, my twisted limbs brushing against the best fruits of the Harvest. I heard the voice of the woman who wore the face I love, calling after me in confusion. I ignored her and shoved my betters out

of the way.

A hand closed around my wrist and spun me round, and I looked into the face of my enemy. Piotr flung me against the wall. He wore a military uniform, with the shiny bars denoting his new rank of captain. His eyes widened when he recognised me.

‘Victor?’

I snarled and threw myself at him. I wanted to break him, to rip his face off with my teeth. He pushed me away easily. His Augmented muscles drove his fist into my stomach with the force of a steam engine.

‘W-w-w-where i-i-i-Ivana?’

Was that pity or scorn in his eyes? They were so very far away.

‘Why not?’ he said, half to himself. ‘You deserve each other.’ He named a house of refuge, not very far away, a place for cripples, orphans and the victims of botched procedures. The Church ran the house as a charity.

I ran the whole way there. I pushed past the old monk at the front desk, and ran from room to room, searching for her. It was a gallery of horrors, a misprinted anatomy textbook made flesh. Limbless men on little carts, blind men stumbling in the dark, women with gaping scars where they had lost organs, figures without skin, without faces...

And there, in the blackest pit, I found her.

I had money, I was a good thief, so I moved her to a secret attic room where she would be comfortable.

‘He betrayed me.’ Her voice was that of an old woman. ‘I loved him, Victor, but he turned on me. The woman you saw at the salon, Nadia, the one who took my face,

her father is the head of the DSF in this district.’

Nadia, she told me, was one of the few Prometheans permitted to study abroad, thanks to her father’s connections. Her passion was history, especially the dynasties of Ancient Egypt, and her father arranged for her to visit those fabled tombs. She contracted some strange disease in Egypt, one that nearly killed her. She was barely alive when they brought her back through the Isthmus, sealed in a preservative capsule awash with Frankenstein’s Gift. Her father paid to have her remade using only the best parts.

Piotr bought his promotion with Ivana’s face.

I cradled her ruined head in my misshapen hands, and we talked long into the night. There were back-alley surgeons who traded in stolen flesh. I could have bought her a new face, we could have gone elsewhere in Promethea or even tried to sneak across the border, but no. She wanted her own face back, and I wanted revenge on Piotr. It was not love, but it was something to keep us together.

There were back-alley surgeons, and there was Doctor Dorjiev, the artist of the operating table. Why he worked out of dimly lit rooms in tenements instead of some Ministry hospital, I do not know. His terms were extortionate, and I speak as a career criminal. I – we, I suppose – had little choice. Ivana wanted her true face back, as perfect as it once was, not a tattered mess, and that meant we needed the best there was.

I met him in a graveyard. We were not alone. I had to queue behind a motley assortment of grave robbers and desperate would-be clients. The grave robbers he dismissed. Their wares were decayed, rat-chewed, or

pulled too clumsily from the earth's embrace. The clients he listened to, but most of them either presented cases that were beneath him or could not meet his prices.

Finally, I crouched before him. He raised his lantern and assessed me like a tailor sizing me up for a new suit.

'Well-developed physique despite physical deformity. Singularly ugly face. Heterochromia. All correctable.'

'W-w-w-w-'

'Also eminently correctable, given a fresh larynx. Necrotic specimens lack timbre.'

'N-no,' I told him, but then I reconsidered. My voice had always troubled me. It cut me off from others, and worse, it frustrated Ivana. Since losing her face, she had also lost her patience. Conversations with me made her angry because I was so slow to form words. A new voice would fix everything.

The doctor and I came to an arrangement. When I recovered Ivana's face, he would restore her beauty, leaving her flawless once more. To seal our bloody bargain, I promised him a recently killed body, and he would repair my voice.

I had never killed before, but to be honest, it came easily to me. At the right moment, I would close my eyes and remember the children in the village. Then one stab, or two, or three, and the deed would be done - my own retributive Harvest.

My first was a neighbour of mine. I heard him singing when he came home drunk every evening, and I admired his voice. Now it was mine. I followed him with knife in hand, and then dragged his body through the streets to Dorjiev's laboratory in a disused slaughterhouse.

The operation was a success. I could not speak for three

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days without coughing up blood, stained with the lurid green taint of the Gift, but then I found myself with a new voice. I could laugh! I could sing!

I could tell Ivana how I loved her.

‘What is there to laugh or sing about?’ she said. She wore a burlap hood to hide her scarred features even from me, but I could see tears glimmering in the shadow of her cowl. ‘I’m still a monster. She’s still wearing my face!’

‘I will bring laughter and joy back to you, my love!’ I said, thrilled by the ease of speaking. ‘I shall bring you the moon and the stars!’

‘Do you even know where she is?’

I did not. I had not seen Nadia in weeks and, as I said, she was the daughter of the district director of the DSF. Her movements were a matter of the utmost security. Her visit to that salon where I saw her must have been a rare excursion, perhaps to celebrate her new face.

Dorjiev, ever resourceful, suggested a solution. He had any number of prospective clients who needed his services, but could not afford his prices. These clients, however, might have information about Nadia. A cleaner in the town hall might steal a glimpse at the guest list for a grand banquet, or a police informant might hear rumours about her. If I paid for their Augmentations...

So be it. Ivana was worth any price.

I don’t know how many people I killed. No doubt you have the records to hand.

My victims were wealthy. I robbed them of life and limb as well as their money. To throw the police off my trail, I left evidence implicating the Resistance in the crimes. It was a simple matter, a few slogans daubed in

blood on the wall, “Death to Frankenstein’s lackeys”, “Freedom for Romania” and so on, whatever the nonsense of the masses was that week. Soon, the peasants spoke of a heroic avenger of the night, a shadowy warrior driven to overthrow Frankenstein’s corrupt regime. One of the underground newspapers, rags printed by Resistance sympathisers, dubbed me “The Spider.” I embraced this, adding a matching calling card to my murders.

Imagine my delight when one of my spies reported that the DSF had appointed a special task force to hunt down the Spider, and that none other than Piotr was its commander. I left little clues to taunt him.

That boy they arrested, the one they Eviscerated in the town square, I watched as they tried him for my crimes and sentenced him to have his organs removed, one by one, leaving him with only lungs to draw breath, a mouth to scream from, and a brain to suffer. I could have saved him, I suppose, but no doubt he had other crimes to answer for if he was in the Resistance.

Ivana grew impatient. She spent her days hunched in the attic, staring out at the streets below through a filthy pane of glass. Next to her seat, she kept a calendar and a scrapbook filled with all the balls and salons she missed. Her scarred face pained her in the winter. Brandy eased her pain, so I brought her bottle after bottle. The shrewish, shrieking thing that spat at me bore little resemblance to the angel I loved.

I persevered. The true Ivana could be restored, I told myself, and all would be well. I smiled. I endured her blows and her cruel words, because she was not herself, and soothed her with my mellifluous new voice. If I was ever angry, I smiled all the harder, and the Spider would

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be especially vicious that night.

It was around that time that she began to talk of other faces. ‘Perhaps,’ she said through gin-scented tears, ‘I could just be ordinary, and walk outdoors, and forget all this. Perhaps I don’t want to be her anymore.’

The thought of losing the Ivana of my memory was intolerable. If I could murder and steal, then she could endure another few months of isolation. I told her this, and we argued for hours. By the end, I was so sick of her weeping that I agreed to consult Dorjiev.

We met at the graveyard. The doctor listened to her pleas, and then shook his head. ‘Madame,’ he explained, ‘I could certainly stitch a new face onto your skull. I could even, perhaps, make it appealing, but where would be the challenge in that? I specialise in interesting, provocative cases, not hack-work. Reattaching your original face and leaving it as perfect and luminous as Victor describes, now that appeals to me.’ He took her jaw and moved it left and right, up and down, so the moonlight fell on her ruined features. ‘Yes... The original work was common butchery, sloppy in the extreme. Rebuilding you will be a challenge, but only with the original face.’

He let go of her. I saw that his gloves were stained with the blood that suppurated from her face.

‘We continue as planned.’ It was an order, and neither of us had the courage to gainsay the great doctor.

It was one of Dorjiev’s special orders that put me on Nadia’s trail. One of his clients needed a rare Augmentation, a particular gland extracted from a great ape or so I understand, and he sent me to recover it. I tracked the organ to its current owner, a clerk in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The poor fellow was very

diligent, and often worked late into the night. I scaled the wall outside his office and hung there like an errant gargoyle. A single flickering gaslight illuminated the room. He'd left the window open a crack, and that was all I needed. I prised it open and slipped inside before he could react. And then the knife was in my hand. And then the knife was in his throat.

I was a butcher, not a surgeon. I hastily cut him down to a portable size with a bonesaw that I carried with me. As I mopped up, I noticed a blood-splattered pile of forms, and Nadia's name leapt out at me.

Once I puzzled through the bureaucratic jargon and the smeared blood, I determined that the forms were a request for an entry visa into Promethea on behalf of a foreign professor of history. A historical society wanted him to give a series of lectures, and Nadia was named as one of the sponsors for the application. Indeed, she was the chief sponsor, using her father's influence to invite this potentially problematic academic into our isolated nation. Finally, an opening into the hermetically sealed circles she moved in.

I was elated as I climbed out of the ministry, but my heart fell as I crept through the streets, until my bloody prize seemed to be an intolerable burden. The historical society lectures were public affairs, where there would no doubt be dozens of hulking security guards. Nadia would arrive in a coach, and leave the same way. I might, at the cost of my own life, be able to murder her with a quick knife thrust, but there was no prospect of recovering Ivana's stolen face. Anyway, Piotr would be there, watching over her, and he would recognise me instantly if I showed my misshapen face. All I had accomplished was

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a way to torment myself further.

I gave Dorjiev his carcass and slumped against a tombstone as he filleted the corpse. He noticed my dejection and asked me what was wrong. I explained my predicament, and he offered me a solution.

‘It is a comparatively simple matter to remake you,’ he said, ‘And with a new face and new physique, you could attend these lectures safely. Perhaps then you can engineer an opportunity to... Accomplish your goal.’

He sniffed. ‘Of course, such a remaking would need to be almost flawless. Such precise tailoring is not inexpensive. Also, we would have to complete the procedures soon, before the lecture tour begins.’

What alternative did I have?

Ivana was not pleased by this further delay and greater expense. She accused Dorjiev of trying to steal what little remained of my money. I think, by then, she had come to think of all surgeons in the same way. To her, there was no difference between Dorjiev and the ones who took her face. I soothed her as best I could, whispering and cajoling with my new voice.

That Thursday, I held her with new hands. On the Saturday, I kissed her with lips stolen from a young suicide. On the following Wednesday, I looked at her with new eyes. How we had both changed! She was, I admitted to myself, a twisted, ugly thing with a flayed face and a shrill, shrewish voice, and I was a handsome young man with the voice of a singer and the strong limbs of an athlete. Actually, I believe he was a chimney-sweep, but no matter. Oh, I had to walk carefully to avoid opening the dozens of sutures hidden beneath my new clothes, and I wore perfume to hide the noxious tang of the chemicals

that knitted and animated my new flesh, but I felt positively reborn – a new man in search of a remade bride.

While recuperating, I prepared myself mentally. I read books on Egyptology, studied the society pages of the newspaper, composed carefully spontaneous witticisms, and practiced smiling with my new lips. For this work, I would have to do more than see my prey at the lectures. I would have to win Nadia's trust, even her affection, if I was ever to get her into a position where I could steal her face.

It was a Sunday evening when Dorjiev completed the last adjustment to my new form. He sewed up the last incision, injected me with another thick syringe of some necromantic fluid, then stepped back and proclaimed me complete. I thanked him, and handed over the last few coins I owed. I walked out of that graveyard nearly as poor as when I arrived in the city all those years ago.

Before heading to the lecture theatre, I returned to the attic hideaway I shared with Ivana. She was asleep, drunk on cheap gin. Her hood had slipped down, and in the moonlight I could see her ruined features. It was not the flayed flesh that made her ugly, I realised, it was the jealousy and bitterness. I left without waking her.

I arrived at the theatre with an hour to spare. An electric vitality filled the night, galvanising my steps as I walked through the town. Previously, I had skulked through the alleyways. That night, I walked proudly down the pavement, and drew approving glances from every passer-by. At the theatre, I mingled with the other guests as we waited for the lecture to begin.

I heard the clatter of hooves outside, and a quartet of

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monsters entered the lobby. Piotr, Captain Piotr, older and greyer than I remembered, followed them. His eyes swept the crowd, darting nervously from person to person, looking for anarchist bomb-throwers and Resistance assassins. His gaze fixed on me for an instant, then moved on.

And then she walked in. My God, she was beautiful. I would have died for that face. In that moment, I was back in the village, a grubby little beast spying on an inaccessible angel from afar. My tongue felt numb and lifeless. My shoulders hunched.

She smiled and opened her hands to the crowd. 'Thank you all for coming.' Green eyes like priceless emeralds. 'It is heartening to see so many with such enthusiasm for antiquity. Though our beloved Promethea strides towards the future, we must learn from our past to guide us along that road. Please, join me in welcoming the Professor.'

I applauded absently as she led the little rabbitty academic into the theatre, but the Professor and the crowd, even the titanic guards, even Piotr, they were all ghosts, and she and I were the only flesh in the world.

Have you ever been blessed? Truly blessed? I have. That night, I felt as Frankenstein must have done when he brought life to dead flesh and usurped the power of God.

The lecture was in two parts, and during the intermission, the audience retired to the lounge for refreshments and light conversation. I approached her and said...

Actually, I cannot recall what I said. Some joke I'd composed weeks ago about hieroglyphics, I think, but I told it at precisely the right time, in a dashing, off-the-cuff

manner that made it seem like purest wit. She looked up at me and laughed. Our eyes met, and it was as though a bolt of lightning leapt between us.

I bowed low. 'Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Victor.' Greatly daring, I took her hand and kissed it. 'I understand you've travelled widely outside Promethea. I myself have recently returned from business abroad, which is why I am so late in making your acquaintance.'

Her hand strayed to her face. 'Yes, I spent some months in Cairo and Istanbul last year.'

I could no longer detect any scars at the edges of her face. It was hers, completely and perfectly.

'I had to return for medical reasons.'

'How unfortunate. Still, a change in perspective can bring new appreciation of the familiar.'

We talked for a few minutes about her experiences in Egypt. In a supreme irony, she dispatched Piotr to bring us each a glass of wine. I raised my glass in a mocking toast to my oblivious tormentor. 'Ah, Captain. I understand you caught that villainous Spider! A tribute to your deductive skills!'

He stammered – stammered! A few rough words of appreciation. I'd caught him unawares.

'Um, well, yes, thank you. The Resistance in this region is under siege and will soon be swept away.'

'Of course... But, well, I seem to recall reading something about a murdered clerk a few weeks ago?'

Piotr shot a nervous glance at Nadia, as if seeing her father's shadow loom behind her. 'That's an unrelated case. There's an unlicensed surgeon operating in the city. We suspect his minions have moved on from grave-robbing and are now conducting illegal Harvests.'

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‘How ghastly.’

‘I can’t discuss the matter further. It’s a state secret.’ He puffed himself up like the self-important little fool he was.

The bell rang, summoning us back our seats. I rose to go, but Nadia stopped me with a feather-light touch on my arm. ‘Please, let us continue our conversation. Piotr here won’t mind giving you his seat next to me. This way, Victor.’

We whispered to each other throughout the second half of the lecture. As I say, I was blessed. I exhausted my knowledge of Egypt in five minutes, and my preplanned bon mots in ten, but our conversation flowed like sparkling wine, like... Like blood pumped by twin hearts beating as one.

I felt utterly at ease with her. After all, I’d known her face all my life.

All the while, I had my knife by my side. There were even opportunities during the lecture when we were alone when I could have finished it, but the thought never occurred to me. We talked merrily, and Nadia’s keen intellect gave Ivana’s face an animation that was new to it. She was no longer an unapproachable angel, a perfect doll, but something warm and wonderful.

At the end of the lecture, when the guards came to bring her to her carriage, she pressed a calling card into my hand and asked me to attend one of her private salons, where she and a select group of friends discussed matters philosophical, historical and scientific.

‘Thank you for the invitation,’ I said, ‘But I may not pass muster with the DSF. I am but recently returned from foreign parts and... Well, shall we say I was compelled to bypass the customs house and the checkpoints.’ I had little

doubt that everyone at that salon would be investigated by her father's secret police, and that they would quickly discover my ruse.

'How wicked!' Her eyes glittered. 'Leave the matter with me. I shall see you again, Victor.' She swept away, and the wall of Augmented muscle wrapped in uniforms closed behind her.

I returned to the attic. Ivana stirred as I entered the room, and she saw my empty hands.

'You didn't get it! You never get it.' She flung an empty bottle at me. I caught it one-handed.

'I have an invitation to a private salon,' I said, as I contemplated the empty bottle. A trickle of gin-laced spittle ran down the inside of the glass. 'Everything went perfectly. I am going to bed. Do not disturb me.'

'When? When will you-'

I flung the bottle so it shattered on the wall over her head. She shrieked as shards of glass rained down around her.

'When I am ready,' I said coldly. I turned on my heel and walked away.

For the next several weeks, I lived a double life. When I was with Nadia, I was a dashing man of mystery, an enigmatic lover who delighted her and was delighted by her. Our isolation brought us together. Both of us had grown up cut off from our peers. I was the Village Beast, but she was locked in a tower by her paranoid father. Both of us had struck out to explore the world in our own ways, and both of us now wore new, more beautiful masks. In fact, as I confided to Nadia, our transplanted faces were not masks, but revelations of what lay within us. She had

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worn the wrong face for most of her life, and it was only with Ivana's features that she was truly herself.

I had loved, I realised, the right face on the wrong woman. And it was love. Nadia adored me. We began to make plans. Now that she had her strength back, she intended to leave Promethea once again and make a tour of the great museums of Europe and the United States. She would need a bodyguard and a travelling companion, and suggested I might accompany her in that role. I accepted, of course.

There were merely a few loose ends to tie up in my other life.

First, there was the issue of money. Dorjiev's augmentations had taken my preternatural agility, so I could no longer excel as a burglar. However, with Nadia, I now moved in the highest circles of society, and could case the houses of the wealthiest families in the city. This information, sold to my former criminal colleagues, provided just enough money to pay the last of my debts and support me until I left with Nadia.

Second, there was Dorjiev himself. I needed to ensure that the good Doctor would not betray me. Piotr had let slip that the DSF was on Dorjiev's trail, and that could lead back to me. No doubt the graveyard would be under observation by Piotr's men already, but I could leave a message at his secret laboratory in the slaughterhouse.

The third loose end waited for me in the attic room. She knew already, of course. She may not have looked like a woman, but she still had a woman's intuition. My long absences, coupled with informing her that she would have to make do with a few pennies a week as I needed my money for other purposes, had long since made my

intentions clear. After two weeks, she stopped asking me when I was going to fetch her the stolen face. After three, she returned to her old plan of buying a new face from Dorjiev and leaving, and begged me to tell her where Dorjiev's laboratory was hidden. I refused, and after four weeks, she stopped talking altogether.

Still, she knew too much. She had to be silenced. I tried thinking of her as a useless appendage, a piece of rotten flesh that clung to the face. By excising her, I would excise all that I hated in my past.

Rationally, my choice was clear, but Ivana and I were entangled. This was not one of the Spider's killings, this was undeniably me, or at least the last act of the man I was. My fingers refused to close around the knife, and I walked the streets for hours in endless circles, orbiting around the attic room but never daring to go there and make that final cut.

After days of indecision, I went to a bar to stiffen my courage. I never liked alcohol before, but I felt that this new Victor was the sort to drink liquor. The bar smelled strongly of chemical cleaning products and cigarette smoke. It was crowded, but there was little conversation, just sour men staring at their drinks. I did not intent to stay long.

A woman approached me as I stood at the bar. She seemed to know me, but I could not place her.

'All alone?' she whispered. Her voice was thick, and something gurgled at the back of her throat. Her breath stank of gin. Up close, I could see the scars and sutures on her neck. A recent surgical procedure, and it looked like hack-work. Little translucent rivulets of the Gift ran down the side of her neck if she tilted her head too far.

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‘Oh, no,’ I said to get rid of her. ‘I’m on my way home.’

‘You are a handsome man. Your wife must be very lucky.’

‘It is a blessing to have found her. Please, excuse me.’

‘Such haste! There was a time when you would have killed to spend time with me, Victor. You promised me the moon.’

I froze.

‘Ivana?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Where is Dorjiev?’

‘He will do nothing for you, and I won’t get you Nadia’s face. It’s hers. It was meant to be hers. And so am I.’

‘Tell me where he is!’ she hissed. ‘I told them I’d find out!’

I turned away. There were too many witnesses in this bar, but if she followed me out, I could make it look like a lover’s quarrel turned bloody. No, better yet, an argument over a whore’s payment. I walked towards the door.

She did not follow me. ‘It was never your face that stopped me loving you, Victor,’ she called after me.

She pointed at me. In a clear voice, she said, ‘Him.’

Suddenly, the room was filled with policemen. I went for my knife, but my new limbs were too slow. A truncheon knocked the blade from my hand, then a fist slammed into my stomach.

Piotr’s face swam in front of me. ‘You?’

From a long away way, Ivana echoed him, saying, ‘The Spider.’

They had already Eviscerated that young man for the Spider’s crimes, and it is well known that the DSF is infallible. Therefore, I was convicted of the murder of the

clerk, and with conspiracy to murder Nadia on behalf of the Resistance. Being such a dangerous criminal, they Eviscerated me immediately. They stripped me of my clothes, then filled me with drugs, then stripped me of flesh until all that was left was my brain and a few other scraps of tissue floating in a tank. The pain was...

The pain helped me think clearly. When the other boys throw stones at you and drive you away, you think clearly out in the woods.

They kept me alive for interrogation, you see. For you. They asked me all sorts of questions about Dorjiev. Perhaps if I had told Ivana where to find him, then she would have told Piotr. She went back to him, begged him for the money to repair herself, told him she could help him find Dorjiev. If I had taken pity on her, would she have let me go?

I think she would have. I found Ivana in that Church-run pit, after all.

That place was a paradise compared to the dungeons of the DSF, but I need not worry. Nadia will come for me. She will come for me like an avenging angel, wielding her father's name as a fiery sword, and she will wash away my crimes and punish my tormentors. She will lift me out and kiss me with that face.

What's inside doesn't matter. It's only meat. It is that face that I love, and loves me in return.

The Doll Factory

By Tim Dedopulos

The tavern stank of sour milk. Clumps of straw were scattered like scabs over the filthy floorboards, and the ceiling, soot-stained, was claustrophobically low. It felt rather like being inside a gigantic, diseased mouth. None of the other port hostelrys were any better however, and the place was close enough to the main Factors' offices to be thronged with a socially diverse mix of customers. Miklos glanced down at his worn coat, and suppressed a momentary urge to cringe in shame. If any of his exalted colleagues saw him like this... Well, at the very best, it would be extremely embarrassing.

He stepped to one side, out of the doorway, and studied the crowd. Sorin – short, shabby, underfed, with thinning hair – would blend in perfectly. Most of the patrons looked to be several courses shy of a good meal.

‘Mihas. I say, Mihas old chap.’

Miklos glanced round, belatedly recognising the alias he'd settled on.

Sorin was approaching, now just a few feet away, a smile plastered onto his rat-like face. ‘Good to see you.’

His rich, resonant voice was totally at odds with his features.

‘Hello, Sorin.’ Miklos offered a handshake, swiftly accepted.

‘Come, I have a table. The others are already here.’

The men threaded through the room. Those patrons who were not in close, conspiratorial little groups were busy getting expansively drunk. Miklos found himself relaxing infinitesimally. The Black Market man guided him towards one of a short row of alcoves, all tenanted. The group of people that they were heading for looked more diverse than the others, but not by much.

‘I hired this spot for two hours,’ Sorin said. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not too expensive.’

‘Indeed.’ Miklos kept his expression carefully amiable. He sat in the chair that the man indicated, and waited for him to make introductions.

Sorin glanced around the table, and smirked broadly. ‘Sorry for the wait, people. I’d like you to meet your prospective employer, Mihas Lupescu. He’ll explain the task. Mihas, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Miss Mara Barbu, Mr. Dragos Serbanescu, Mr. Toma Lazar, and Herr Gustav Jelinek of Kaschau. I assure you that they are all ferociously competent.’

Miklos looked at each of the specialists in turn. Barbu was sharply pretty, all lean whipcord and hawk’s eyes. Serbanescu had the delicate hands of a surgeon or pianist, and a fussy mouth. Lazar was a hulk, but his movements were precise and graceful. The Slovak, Jelinek, was almost inhumanly still, and he wore his hair long. Each appeared extremely dangerous.

‘Lady, gentlemen, it is a pleasure to meet you.’ Miklos

allowed himself a genuine smile. 'I am extremely grateful for your presence. I need your help. A loathsome evil lurks in the Braşov hills, somewhere behind Recea and Breaza. It must be destroyed!'

Serbanescu made a dry noise in the back of his throat. 'You will need to be significantly more precise than that.' He sounded much as he looked.

Lazar nodded.

'Of course,' Miklos said. 'So... There is a place where experiments were performed, for a while. Terrible experiments. Blasphemies. There is much rumour about this time, but little fact. One of Promethea's most promising minds, some unspoken personal tragedy, the onset of madness, unacceptable experiments, the shame of discovery... The lunatic fled to a quiet place, a fallen estate of a fallen Boyar. Soon after, locals began to talk of strangeness intruding into daily life. Tiny automata on the edge of vision, there one moment, gone the next. Gruesome carvings found on doorsteps. Small coffins filled with entrails. Unsettling images painted on bedroom walls during the night, whilst the inhabitants heard nothing. Snatches of odd conversation from impossible places. Then a sickness came, and another. A man was found, stumbling pitifully out of the hills. Before his death, he spoke of a place of terror that he referred to as the Doll Factory. Later, the left half of a woman's head and torso was discovered, freshly placed. It was bloodless, the cuts so clean and precise as to beggar belief.'

'Quite,' said Serbanescu, not bothering to mask his sarcasm.

'Ignorant rumours, as I said. I knew none of this before I, that is... Last summer, my daughter was staying with her

aunt in Recea. One evening, she and her cousin failed to return. My sister-in-law and her husband organised a search the following morning. Much of the village assisted. Two days later, they found my niece, gravely wounded. She described a place, a desolate, broken-down estate. A place of madness. She said that my daughter...' Miklos trailed off.

Lazar gave him a sympathetic look, and Barbu dropped her gaze.

Wiping the corners of his eyes, Miklos said 'Forgive me if I cannot talk about it. My sister-in-law moved to Ilfov, but it was not enough to keep my niece from taking her own life. In the last year, I have learnt all that I could about this evil. I have tracked a handful of other cases. The lunatic is gone, dead, but some of his work remains active. Dangerous. I am determined to make sure that no others suffer as my Alina suffered. We will destroy the Doll Factory. It is all that I can do. This way, at least some small good will come out of her death.'

Barbu looked up from the table surface. 'How would we destroy it?' Her voice was light, but intense.

'Fire,' Miklos said. 'There is said to be a central control room, from which the remaining threats might be deactivated. We will find it, shut everything down, and burn the place to the ground. I possess enough ability to puzzle out the controls.'

'I have heard more detailed plans,' Serbanescu said.

'Yes,' Miklos said. 'I do not have first-hand knowledge of the Factory. There are obviously dangers. Which is why I need expert assistance.'

Serbanescu nodded.

'You all have impressive and complimentary talents, or

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else Sorin would not have assembled you here. I am confident that you are all more than capable in a fight. There should be no situation beyond such a group.'

'Unless we are gravely outnumbered,' Lazar said. He had a refined accent.

'Everything I have heard suggests that the dangers are individual,' Miklos said. 'But the risks are difficult to quantify, which is why the pay is generous.' He nodded at Sorin.

Barbu nodded decisively. 'All right. I'll do it.'

'As will I,' said Lazar.

Jelinek nodded as well.

'Very well,' Serbanescu said. 'If the situation is substantially different to the one you have described, however...'

'Of course,' said Miklos.

'Just one thing,' Sorin said pleasantly.

Miklos felt a pin-sharp point prick into his neck, over the jugular vein. He couldn't see the person it belonged to.

He swallowed, throat suddenly bone dry.

'That generous pay you mentioned,' said Sorin.

'Nngh,' Miklos managed.

The specialists were all looking at him curiously, utterly devoid of empathy. Only Lazar had the grace to bother feigning a hint of distaste.

'Quite,' Sorin said. 'You have it on your person, I trust? I do so hate having to be inconvenienced.'

'Mmm-hmm.' It was the most obliging noise Miklos could manage without moving his neck. He lifted his right arm slowly, cautiously reached into his coat's inner pocket, and brought out a thick envelope. Everyone stared at it intently. He dropped it onto the table.

Sorin picked the envelope up casually, opened it, and riffled through the contents. Finally, he nodded, and the knife-point vanished. There was a sense of movement behind Miklos, but he did not turn round.

Sorin smiled. 'I see you budgeted a little extra for this evening's drinks. Very hospitable of you, Mihas. Well played.'

Miklos forced himself to smile back.

'Remember, people. You get the second half when you bring the client back... Alive. Do try not to break him.'

The train journey to Braşov was a marvel of efficiency, all gleaming chrome and green leather. The journey east the following day, skirting the edges of Moldoveanu mountain, was its exact opposite. Miklos did manage to obtain the services of a coachman, but the transport was old and creaky, and the carriage reeked of horse shit. Jelinek opted to sit beside the driver, clearly unnerving the old fool, and thus helping to ensure he hit every rut and pothole on the road.

Eventually, the carriage slowed. 'The village Dejani,' called the driver. 'Can't get further. No road.' He clattered to a stop in the middle of a singularly unprepossessing tangle of run-down shacks.

Gaping peasants ground to a halt and stared as Miklos left the coach, followed by the rest of the group. They quickly looked away again as Lazar descended, and soon the area was quiet.

Miklos looked up at the driver. 'You said there was an inn.'

The driver nodded, and pointed to a small alley just off to the right. 'Down there, sir. It's not fancy, but they have

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rooms.'

'For all the passing traffic, obviously,' Serbanescu said.

The driver eyed him warily. 'Yes, sir.'

'Let the poor fellow be, Dragos,' said Lazar.

Miklos passed a coin to the driver, a substantial tip. 'You can be off now.'

The fellow nodded, flicked the reins, and began the business of turning the carriage. He started off, then paused and looked back. 'I'll be up the road in Recea in three days time. If you want to return to the city.' His desolate face suggested that he expected to be transporting their bloody remains. 'God be with you.'

'And you,' muttered Miklos. 'Right, everyone. Let's see if we can get lodgings tonight. Tomorrow, we head south into the hills with the dawn.'

The others looked at him with expressions ranging from indulgent tolerance to flat-out disinterest, but they followed in his wake obediently enough.

They found the inn a few minutes later. It boasted the grandiose name of 'The Pearl of the Mountains', but it looked like a farmhouse that had been cursed by evil fairies in the hour of its birth. He approached it, half-expecting it to rise up painfully on creaking chicken-legs and run away screeching. Instead, a wary-looking innkeeper appeared in the door, fat and scraggly. He calmed down a little once he understood that they were after beds, rather than his firstborn, or his kidneys, or whatever else it was that he feared.

The taproom was faded, and the common room's linens worn, but the inn was cleaner than many in the city, the food was hearty, and the beer was nothing short of heavenly. Miklos found himself warming to the unlikely

hovel. The specialists knew not to mention the Factory, but as the evening wore on, and the curious locals headed back to their own beds, the landlord took Miklos aside.

‘What is it, Petru?’

‘Groups of men arrive here sometimes, sir. Once a season, maybe. Hard men. Like yours, but not always decent.’

‘Oh?’

‘I’m not as green as my cabbage, sir. Your business is yours alone. But groups like yours don’t come back down from the hills. Not anywhere between Margineri and Lisa.’

‘I appreciate your concern, truly, but I’m just looking for some botanical samples. We’ll be back in two or three days.’

Petru sighed. ‘Of course, sir. Fortune smile on you.’ He wandered off shaking his head.

Miklos returned to the table.

Lazar looked at him curiously. ‘What was that about?’

‘Just arranging some extra provisions to take with us tomorrow.’

Serbanescu shot Miklos a suspicious stare, but said nothing.

Miklos had expected some basic produce for the trip, but the next morning, he discovered that Petru had provided them a wheel of cheese, a smoked ham, several loaves of bread, three large skins of his beer, and five crucifixes. He kept his amusement to himself, tipped the fat man extremely generously, and distributed the bounty reasonably fairly amongst the packs. The crosses he tucked away out of sight. Even Serbanescu seemed cheered by

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the beer and the cheese.

Once it was light enough to see, they set off. As soon as they got past the village fields, Jelinek took the lead.

‘From what I’ve learned,’ Miklos told him, ‘there’s a ridge in the hills above us with a crag that looks a little like a bear cub from down here. It should be slightly east of us. From there, we should be able to see a rust-coloured cliff-face, further south and west. Skirt that, and there’s a river that ends in a waterfall. The old estate borders the far bank.’

The man nodded.

‘Think that’s enough to go on?’

He nodded again, impassive.

Miklos smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Good man.’

An hour later, as they were approaching the foothills proper, Jelinek stopped and pointed off to the left. ‘Observe.’ His accent was thick and glutinous.

They looked obediently. He was pointing at a chunk of rock sticking out of the trees, a mile or two away and several hundred feet up. It did look a little like a young bear, clumsily reaching upwards.

‘Good work,’ Miklos said. ‘That’s definitely it. Once we attain it, the cliff should be visible. Can you see a route to it?’

Jelinek lowered his arm and nodded, out of words again.

Breaching the ridge took most of the morning. Goat-trails wound back and forth up the hill, and the supplies and equipment slowed Miklos down quite considerably. Serbanescu wasn’t doing so well either, but the other three appeared to be made of springs and boot leather. Jelinek

steered them true, although how he managed it once they were up into the trees was a complete mystery. It was nearing midday when they finally threaded their way to a towering heap of boulders that Jelinek identified as the bear. Miklos had Lazar set out some lunch while the Slovak scaled the pile to look for their next landmark. When he returned, he indicated his satisfaction as to their continued route.

The afternoon was somewhat less draining. Their route was not as steep, nor the trees quite so densely packed. There were a lot of boulders, presumably fallen from the mountains above, but they were easy enough to navigate around. As they approached the cliff, Miklos quietly told Jelinek to look out for somewhere to camp. The man spotted a glade shortly afterwards, slightly sheltered by a thicket of trees, and within earshot of a brook.

Dropping his pack, Miklos groaned, and said, 'This will do for today. We're two thirds of the way there, as far as I can tell, and this seems a likely spot.'

Lazar and Barbu shared an amused glance, but Serbanescu seemed grateful, and if Jelinek had any opinion either way, he kept it very well hidden.

It didn't take long to set up a basic camp. Jelinek refused assistance setting up lean-tos, and tersely vetoed a fire, 'Hostile ground. No flame!' So there wasn't much to do except to eat, check weapons and equipment were still in working order, and get to sleep once night fell. Lazar arranged the specialists so that someone would always be on watch, but left Miklos out of the rotation. 'You're not needed,' he said, kindly enough. 'We are better used to this.'

Deep in the night, Miklos rolled over onto a sharp stone

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and awoke. He realised that he could hear Barbu and Lazar talking quietly. They kept their voices low, but he could make out enough to tell that they were discussing his daughter and her grisly fate. He listened cautiously for a while longer, but eventually the conversation stopped, and one of them went to bed. A short while later, sleep reclaimed him.

Jelinek woke everyone shortly before dawn, and handed out hunks of bread, ham and cheese. Before Miklos had even finished his breakfast, the Slovak had broken the shelters down, tidied up the bedrolls, and erased most of the signs of overnight camping.

They set out with the sunrise, following the base of the cliff. It looked lumpy and rough, but without much in the way of sharp edges. The rusty stone was broken with streaks of greys and whites, and the occasional sparkle of what might have been quartz. When the cliff gave way to wooded hills, they kept going in the same direction, slogging through the trees. Jelinek seemed confident in the path he was picking out, so Miklos kept quiet, let him get on with it, and kept his uncertainty to himself.

They heard the river before they saw it, a deep roar or rumble. Jelinek picked up the pace slightly, and a few minutes later they could see glimpses of water through the trees. Then they were on the edge of the treeline, looking down into a rocky canyon. The river was a fierce torrent beneath them, leaping over jagged stones. On the other side...

A wave of dizziness swept over Miklos. His head swam, and he discovered that he'd sunk to his knees. The specialists were all staring at him.

‘Look,’ he said, and pointed across the river. On the other side of the river, just inside the trees, they could all see the unmistakable glint of tall metal fence-posts. ‘It’s there. It’s really there.’

Serbanescu peered down at Miklos. ‘Strange place for a Boyar’s run. Stranger still to ring it with metal.’

‘Everything about the Factory is strange,’ Miklos said. He struggled to his feet again. ‘But there it is. Right where it should be.’

Serbanescu nodded reluctantly.

Lazar and Barbu glanced at each other. ‘Mr. Lupescu, how did your daughter and niece get here? How did they get across?’

Miklos sighed heavily. ‘I have no idea. Perhaps they were brought here. More to the point, how are we going to get across?’

‘Crossing that river would be extremely dangerous,’ Lazar said. ‘Even with a rope guide. The climb down and back up would be equally troublesome.’

‘I could easily negotiate it and set up the ropes,’ Serbanescu said. ‘But can our esteemed client climb two ropes safely, and cross that rapid besides? That is risky to wager half our pay on. One would think that there needed to be some sort of existing way to cross. If the site is not accessible from this side of the ravine, any predatory acts would have fallen on settlements further east.’

‘We could scout up and down the river,’ Lazar said.

Jelinek frowned. ‘Tree bridge.’

‘What tree bridge?’ Miklos looked, trying to spot a fallen trunk.

Jelinek patted his pack. ‘With axe. But is loud. Easy to see.’

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‘Not as obvious as when we burn the Factory down,’ Miklos said. ‘It seems more certain than hunting for a hopeful bridge. Unless anyone has a better idea?’

‘I don’t demolish trees,’ Barbu said sniffily.

‘It may alert guards,’ said Lazar. Then he shrugged. ‘But if there are any, they may already be aware of us.’

Serbanescu scowled. ‘Very well. But afterwards, we progress with extreme caution.’

‘All right then,’ Miklos said. ‘Tree bridge it is. We’ll look out for unwanted attention.’

Jelinek set his pack down and dug out a short, heavy-bladed hatchet. He peered back and forth across the ravine a few times, squinted up at the treetops, and then vanished back into the forest. A few moments later, heavy thuds announced that he’d started working.

‘Do you think he can be sure his tree will fall in the right direction?’ Lazar sounded curious.

‘It’s not difficult,’ Barbu said. ‘You funnel the weakness in the right direction.’

Miklos pondered that for a short while. There would be some discrepancies arising from the slow application of damage – for logging – as opposed to the sudden violence of explosives, which came with their own additional force, but it seemed a reasonable working assumption on Barbu’s part.

Something howled, off in the distance. It sounded animal, but that meant little.

Lazar looked at Miklos, then smiled and pointed back south-westwards. ‘It came from that way. Unlikely to be linked to this Factory of yours. Don’t worry. Wolves won’t attack a group like this... And if they did, we’d have some nice new cloaks to wear.’

‘What a repulsive suggestion,’ Serbanescu said.

Lazar shared a grin with Barbu. They were getting on well, it seemed.

‘Was that a flash of movement across the river?’ Miklos made a show of peering carefully at the fence.

‘It seems unlikely,’ said Serbanescu. ‘I didn’t see anything.’

Barbu rolled her eyes.

‘I can’t make out any disturbance,’ Lazar said.

‘Maybe I was wrong,’ Miklos said.

‘Quite possible,’ Serbanescu said. ‘Definitely quite possible.’

‘Care!’ Jelinek’s shout came only instants before a thunderous cracking sound. Miklos tensed. A huge tree was toppling forward, towards them, towards- No. Towards the river, a few yards away. It crashed down in a cloud of dust, debris and odd screeching, making the earth shake, and bounced a little. Then it settled with a resonant thump. It bridged the ravine neatly, starting ten feet back from the edge or so, and extending well past the fence on the other side. It had clearly flattened the metal. ‘Tree bridge,’ said Jelinek happily. ‘And tree door.’

‘Good work, Herr Jelinek,’ said Miklos. ‘Very good work. We should...’ He paused. Lazar was already loosening his blade in its scabbard, and Barbu and Serbanescu were both unholstering guns. ‘That is, luck be with us.’

Jelinek swarmed up onto the tree trunk, and bounded across to the other side. Then he turned round and came back, as sure-footed as a goat. ‘Good bridge.’ He offered a hand up. The specialists all looked at Miklos. He managed a smile, took the hand, and levered himself up. Jelinek

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nodded, and then crossed again to the far side.

‘It is easier to keep balance if you move with speed,’ Serbanescu said. ‘Look at the woodsmen, not at the river. There are few branches that might distract you.’

‘We can rig a rope if you need it,’ Barbu said from below.

‘Yes,’ Serbanescu said. ‘That might be best. It would be annoying if you fell.’

‘I will manage,’ Miklos said. ‘I have no intention of being killed by a tree. Not now.’

‘Are you certain?’ Lazar sounded doubtful. ‘At least let me bring your pack.’

‘All right,’ Miklos said. ‘Thank you.’ He shrugged out of the straps, and passed it down. Then he started walking up the trunk. He tried to keep his eyes on Jelinek, but found himself glancing down at his feet repeatedly. The bark was fairly dry, but quite smooth, so footing was not entirely trivial. He realised that he was slowing down somewhat, but couldn’t bring himself to speed up, despite the potential benefits of momentum. He made his way past a branch carefully. The river was foaming hungrily beneath him, jagged rocks like teeth waiting to rip into his flesh.

‘Don’t look at it, fool!’ Serbanescu sounded worried.

Miklos wrenched his gaze back to Jelinek, who was nodding encouragingly. He started walking again, slowly, and then with more confidence. The tree moved suddenly, rolling a little, settling. Miklos gasped, and tottered. His weight dragged him towards the left edge. He tried to pull back, throwing an arm out. It didn’t work. Desperately he bore down on his right knee, pitching himself forward towards the middle of the trunk. He landed heavily, chest

and chin smacking into the bark with a sharp pain, and grabbed on.

Pausing for a moment to gather his breath, he wriggled himself back into a properly central position. He got up onto his hands and knees, and then rose, painfully and cautiously. Finally, he moved forward again. Less than a minute later, he was over grass again. Jelinek clasped his arm as soon as he came within reach. The Slovak jumped down off the trunk, and helped Miklos back onto blessedly solid ground. Overall, he was relieved to be just scraped up and embarrassed.

Once he was down, the others came across confidently, one after another. The crushed fence was just a few feet away. The specialists arranged themselves in various defensive positions around the breach, with Miklos tucked behind them. Tense minutes stretched into boredom. A while later, Lazar quietly passed around some bread and cheese, and a flask of beer. After the best part of half an hour had been wasted, Serbanescu finally agreed that it seemed all right to enter the grounds.

Lazar assumed the front spot as they entered the compound. At first, the grounds seemed much the same as the forest they'd just left. After a few minutes however, the feeling that something was wrong began to intrude. Miklos looked around, trying to pin it down. The trees. They seemed unusually similar. Their placement was becoming a little too even, as well. He glanced over at Jelinek, and caught a disturbed expression on the man's face. Jelinek met his eyes, and nodded slowly.

'The trees are changing,' Miklos said quietly. 'Becoming more regular.'

The others looked at him.

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‘Yes,’ said the Slovak. ‘Also quiet.’

Lazar studied one slowly. ‘Is it a problem?’

Miklos shook his head. ‘No, but I think it means we’re entering the Factory’s territory.’

Serbanescu shook his head minutely. ‘We knew that from the fence, surely?’

‘Consider it confirmation of something odder than just a decrepit estate,’ said Miklos.

The man nodded reluctantly. Lazar made some sort of military-looking gesture, and resumed walking. They all followed suit. Miklos looked back, towards the fence. Standing next to a nearby tree, watching the group, was a squirrel. Metal glinted from the right hand side of its face and scalp, and one of its paws was oddly misshapen. It cocked its head as it met his gaze, and then leapt away, vanishing entirely. Miklos turned back to the specialists thoughtfully, but decided, on balance, not to say anything.

A little more than five minutes later, the oppressive woods gave way to a wide, open space. Miklos stepped out, and gasped. A large, bowl-like area spread out in front of them, dense grass and shrubbery broken here and there by odd, sparsely-limbed trees. Above it all, on a small hill at the heart of the space, squatted the Factory. It had obviously never been a pretty building. Thick and low, with small, sour windows and a clear disinterest in symmetry, it looked somehow primitive, almost aggressive. But any brutal power it may have once possessed had been worn away. Sections of roof were missing, pieces of wall were beginning to crumble, and the stone was riddled with dirt and lichens. It reminded him of broken beggars, their virtues long-harvested, lying drunk in the gutter and waiting for death.

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Serbanescu sneered. 'Is—'

The trees in front of them jerked simultaneously. As one, they bent over to the left, shuddered, and then sinuously rippled back to the vertical. Branches shot out left and right, and then suddenly they were all twitching and writhing independently. The branches flailed... The branches...

'Merciful God! Arms!' Miklos clamped his hand over his own mouth, as if to snatch back the soft words, but there was no denying it.

Lazar made a revolted sound in the back of his throat, quietly. 'It looks as if the legs are off the ground. Are they on stakes?'

'Are they even entire bodies?' Serbanescu's eyes were wide.

Barbu swallowed. 'I don't know. We should destroy them.'

'No,' Miklos said. 'That is, not until we've dealt with the Factory itself.'

They all stared.

'HUA!' The noise, coming after so much quiet, seemed deafening. It was like a drumbeat just dropped into the day. It echoed all around them, reverberating out from the horrible, dancing remains. The bowl fell silent again, although the writhing continued. Miklos felt his skin crawl.

'Fucking this shit,' said Jelinek.

Lazar nodded grimly. 'Well said.' He looked around the grounds for a few moments. 'There's a route through that won't bring us to within more than ten feet of those things.' The specialists looked at each other, but no one protested. 'So be it. Mihas, stay close behind me. Mara

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and Dragos either side. Gustav at the back. Everybody stay tight, keep Mr. Lupescu sheltered. Move.'

The group set off, shielding Miklos through the grounds. They moved steadily but cautiously, switching direction frequently. As they came near their first dancer, Barbu hissed. Miklos looked past her. It had been a woman, once. The limbs and neck had been severed at the trunk, and then re-attached, at the end of a complex-looking tube of machinery. Wires coiled round the severed parts. The eyes were gone, replaced by what looked like black marbles. The face seemed fixed on him, despite the constant, idiot spasms. Only the hips were still, apparently fastened somehow to a thick metal pole.

Jelinek pushed at him, and muttered something totally unintelligible. 'Sorry,' Miklos said quietly, and started moving again. 'Are they all looking at us?'

'Yes,' said Lazar. He did not sound happy.

The next dancer had been a man, a heavily augmented one. There were several dark murmurs from the specialists at that. The one after that was also a man, but of slender build. He looked somewhat familiar. Miklos pushed the thought out of his mind, and flatly refused to think about it further. Instead, he concentrated on the rather unpleasant-looking bramble bush that the group were skirting.

'HUA!'

Miklos' ears rang from the force of the sound. He blinked. Lazar had already dropped to the ground in a wary crouch. The man looked around swiftly, hunting for threats.

'I don't think that they can walk,' Miklos said.

'Shush,' said Lazar.

Miklos shushed.

A minute or so later, Lazar stood back up, and they resumed their cautious walk. The ground started to rise shortly afterwards, and some of the stress eased out of Lazar's shoulders. They climbed easily for a bit, and then Lazar stopped. Ahead of them, the scraggly grass gave way to a broad area of crushed grey stone. It was bordered by a thin metal band, and led all the way to the factory.

'No grass,' Jelinek said. He sounded deeply suspicious.

'Maybe they treated the earth before laying the gravel.' Barbu didn't seem too worried. 'Salt. Sulphur. Acids. There are many ways.'

Jelinek grunted.

'All right, come on,' Lazar said. He stepped forward onto the stone, and the rest followed. The building was less than fifty yards away now, the big, half-broken doors maybe twice that.

'HUA!'

The unexpected blast of sound, so soon after the last, caught him off guard. 'That's a b--' Miklos began.

'HUA!'

Spots of gravel all over the covered area began to visibly vibrate. Together they made a low growling noise more like water than stone. Was it getting louder?

'HUA!'

'Run!' Lazar took off as soon as the word left his lips.

Miklos dashed after him, aware of the others around him. Just ahead of him, a set of long, ugly claws started rising out of the gravel.

'HUA!'

Sinewy, taloned hands were erupting everywhere

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around them, flexing horribly. The claws clacked against each other, adding a nasty slicing noise to the din.

‘HUA!’

Lazar cursed, and jumped aside. Blood spattered from his leg, where a claw had flicked out to slash him. Barbu pushed Miklos to the side urgently, ignoring Serbanescu’s immediate protest, and hustled him along behind Lazar.

‘HUA!’

Arms were starting to rise out of the ground now, pale bones wrapped round with ugly cords of long-dead tissue. Jelinek roared in sudden furious pain.

‘HUA!’

Fire erupted in a thin line down Miklos’ side, and he heard himself moan.

‘Nearly,’ gasped Lazar.

‘HU—’

The sudden silence was almost as frightening as the noise had been. Miklos looked down, and saw that they were standing on flagstones, the steps up to the door mere feet away. The dancers were still and silent once more. A moment later, the claws snicked shut as one, and slid easily back beneath the gravel. Everyone looked as pale as Miklos felt.

‘Any serious injury?’ Lazar’s trouser leg was stained with blood.

Jelinek shook his head.

‘Just a cut,’ Miklos said. ‘But any wounds should be cleaned.’

‘When we’re safe,’ Lazar said.

Barbu crossed her arms, tapped her shoulder with her fingers. ‘We’ll need more dynamite. A lot more. But I can clear a path. You do not need to pay me more to come

back later and finish the destruction.'

Jelinek gawped at her. 'I need... Much more.'

'We'll finish this,' Miklos said. 'I promise. But first, let's get this place switched off.'

'I will take the lead now,' Serbanescu said. He pulled a small hooded lantern from his pack, and moved up ahead of Lazar. 'The rest of you, follow exactly in my path.'

He climbed the steps, Miklos half-expecting the stone to burst into flame or something, then peered at the door. One side of it was closed, but the other had fallen off its hinges, and hung drunkenly half-open. Serbanescu snorted, and poked it with his finger. It collapsed with a crash. Miklos flinched.

'What?' Serbanescu sounded annoyed. 'People put defences there to keep strangers out, not to make it impossibly lethal to use your own door.'

No one said anything.

He glowered at them for a moment, and then turned back to the Factory. 'Just follow.'

A long, cold shiver ran up and down Miklos' spine as he entered the building. It was dim and dusty, with a faint scent of foulness on the air. Serbanescu had got his lantern working. It cast a surprisingly bright, narrow beam of light. They were in an entrance hall, a big, squarish room. Everything was grimy, but beneath the dirt, Miklos could see that the walls had been painted with swirling, oddly insectoid designs. Splashes of colour here and there added to the sense of looking at a strange dissection.

Archways led off left and right. For no particular reason, they decided to go left, and found themselves in a long, low corridor. Trios of doorways were set at regular intervals on both sides. Many of the doors were entirely

missing. In each case, two of the three doors led into similar looking rooms. Most of these had decrepit beds mouldering in them. The third door led to a small passage between the two rooms. Barred windows high in the bedroom walls opened onto the passage. This in turn ended in a sizeable window that looked out onto the grounds. There were often small sliding panels in the dividing walls too.

There was much to be disturbed about in these rooms. The bedrooms varied in decoration. Realistic bugs painted on the wall of one, staring eyes on another, wildly psychedelic swirls on a third, peculiar mirror images of the room on a fourth. All of it was dusty, fading, in some places clearly suffering from aggressive damage. One bed was just a metal frame, with leads clamped to it. Others replaced the bed with things such as sharp-edged bathtubs, or coffins dug into an earthen floor, or some crude, rust-stained altar. Some of the little passages held control panels, whilst others had long, cruelly hooked sticks, evil-looking puppets, or buckets filled with something that stank too horribly to examine closely. Miklos did his best to study everything, to try to understand, but his companions grew increasingly unhappy. After the Room of Eyes, Serbanescu flatly refused to enter any further bedrooms, although he reluctantly unlocked doors when it was needed.

After forty bedrooms or so, by way of a sharp bend, the corridor came to an end. There did not appear to be any way to carry on, so they retraced their steps. As they were crossing the entrance, Lazar said, 'Why have we not already set fire to this evil place?'

'There is a control room,' Miklos replied. 'There has to

be. We must reach it and deactivate it. You saw the dancers, and the Claw Guard. Who knows what we might unleash upon ourselves if we just start burning things?’

‘Very well.’ Despite his words, Lazar looked to be on the brink of mutiny.

‘Claw Guard?’ Serbanescu was staring at him.

Miklos winced. ‘Just a name. I give things names, when I’m nervous. It makes them less frightening.’

Serbanescu snorted, and shook his head. ‘You are insane. Clearly, I am also insane. We are all insane. Let us be done with this madness.’

The other corridor held larger, more varied rooms. There was something that had been an office once, although no legible notes remained. A destroyed stockroom was littered with broken shelving and rotting boxes. The kitchen was identifiable by the large, scarred range, deep fireplace and old cauldron.

They entered a fourth room, and Barbu made a strangled noise. It was bare of furniture, but the walls were covered with deep shelves. Each was packed solid with the dusty corpses of withered-looking infants, staring out of dry, identical faces. Miklos swallowed. Behind him, Jelinek groaned, a lost, mournful sound.

Lazar reached out, and tapped the nearest face with his finger. It made a dull, heavy clunk.

‘Wood,’ he said. ‘Dolls. Just dolls.’

They shared a nervous laugh of relief.

There was a brief rattling sound. Miklos looked around, but couldn’t place it. Then the doll that Lazar had poked shuddered, and rose slowly, reluctantly, to its feet. It stretched horribly, and turned towards him. He yelled, and jumped back, smacking into Jelinek. The

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group dissolved into confusion. More dolls were moving now. One leapt off onto the floor, landing with a soft thump. Miklos let the others hustle him back out into the hallway.

Serbanescu flashed his light into the room. 'They're coming,' he said hoarsely.

Miklos looked towards the end of the corridor. 'This way!'

All too aware of the scrabbling noise behind him, he ran for the door he'd spotted. Unlike the others they'd seen, it was sturdy, clean, and set in the end of the wall. He reached it at the same time as the specialists did, and gulped a ragged breath. He glanced back. Dolls were lurching out of the room, dozens of them, murky in the half-light of the Factory. The cloth wrappings had fallen from one or two, revealing finely-worked muscle and flesh beneath. The mouths of several were opening and closing suggestively, and it was clear now that they had wicked-looking metal fangs. 'Open this door,' he gasped.

Serbanescu gave the door a tug, then dropped to his knees and started sticking pieces of metal into the lock. Behind them, the shuffling little monstrosities were getting nearer. Barbu took aim with her large revolver, and both Lazar and Jelinek had blades out.

A loud crack made Miklos' ears ring as Barbu fired. The nearest doll exploded into shards of wood, scraps of meat, and a curious ichor. An unidentifiable stench filled the corridor, and vanished again. The other Razor Dolls kept coming. She fired again and again, hitting each time, but it was not enough. Lazar and Jelinek shared a dark look, and took a half-step forward.

'Done!' Serbanescu flung the door open, and nearly fell

down a flight of stairs. He caught himself, and immediately started rapidly descending. 'Quick.'

Barbu pushed Miklos through next and followed, swiftly. He looked back as they trailed Serbanescu into the dark depths, and saw Lazar come through last, desperately swinging his fierce sword. The door snicked shut, leaving the bobbing lantern as the only source of light. Lazar fiddled with the door, slamming a bolt home with a reassuringly firm thud. The Razor Dolls were still scrabbling at the wood, but Miklos couldn't hear any splintering or tearing noises. He resumed his descent.

They gathered at the bottom. Serbanescu opened various hatches on his lantern, until it was able to cast some moderate illumination all around. They were in a large, vaulted laboratory. Several rows of metal benches stood nearby, each one bristling with a range of savage-looking tools – bone saws, rib shears, eviscerators, marrow infusers, pins and scalpels, everything. Beyond those, complex electrochemical equipment suggested advanced augmentation capability, which was to be expected. The walls were lined with cupboards, bookcases and large vats. Unlike the upstairs, it seemed to generally be in good condition.

'Master controls will be at the back,' Miklos said.

'You seem confident,' said Barbu.

Miklos grinned at her. 'Aren't they always? Come, let's bring this nightmare to an end.'

Lazar frowned. 'What about last defences?'

'Those too,' Miklos said. 'But if you can hold them off for a few seconds, I will be able to shut them down.'

'How?' Serbanescu was clearly running out of patience.

'This level of technology is not unfamiliar to me.'

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Barbu blinked, and looked at him closely. 'True Promethean are you?'

Miklos didn't deny it.

Lazar arched an eyebrow, then shook his head as if clearing it of cobwebs. 'It doesn't matter. Let's get this done.' He started walking between the rows of benches.

Miklos and the others followed.

Serbanescu came alongside him. 'A True Promethean married a peasant.' His voice was openly hostile.

Miklos looked over at him. 'What?'

'Your wife's sister lived out here. You married a woman from Recea?'

'Oh, yes... That. No. My sister in law married beneath herself. For love. A tailor, of all things. It was a dreadful scandal. She isolated herself out here to be with him.'

Serbanescu made a dubious noise, but Miklos was already speeding past him. Through the augmentation equipment, at the back of the room, a complex bank of machinery was becoming clear. It was dominated by a large central console. On a stand above the console, connected to it by assorted wires, was a thin, uncomfortable-looking metal crown.

As Miklos brushed past Lazar and into the rear third of the room, a loud groan seemed to echo from the walls. Augmented men stepped into view from the deep shadows besides the tall vats. Four, eight, more. They seemed barely conscious, but they were as tall as Lazar, bristling with muscles.

'Hold them!' Miklos approached the console.

The specialists fell into place behind him, forming a loose barrier. The Guardians started forwards. Barbu got a shot off, which she followed with a worried curse.

‘The daughter would never be permitted a visit here.’ Serbanescu sounded like he was thinking aloud. His voice got louder, firmer. ‘It’s all lies!’

Miklos glanced back at the man. The Guardians were darting into close combat range, heavy fists held ready. The specialists were braced for the assault, but Serbanescu’s words were clearly distracting them. ‘Nonsense,’ he said pleasantly, and reached for the crown.

‘Stop him!’ Serbanescu’s voice was a desperate shriek, but even as Lazar turned, the Guardians attacked. The big man grunted, lashing out with his sword hilt to block a heavy blow.

The crown made Miklos’ fingers tingle as he lifted it. He slipped it onto his head. Someone screamed behind him. There was a blinding, aeons-long instant, a sense of infinite expansion... And then he was back. The console was as familiar as his own name. He toggled the activator, and bellowed ‘Stop!’

The Guardians froze, and a moment later, the specialists did too. Jelinek was clutching his side. Lazar turned, his face heavy with concern.

‘Immobilize them,’ Miklos said.

The Guardians pounced, grabbing the specialists, wrapping around them, using their own limbs as immovable ropes.

Lazar stared at him, fear dawning on his face.

‘Damn it!’ Serbanescu’s voice was nearly a howl.

Barbu’s shoulders jerked, and she looked round at him, her eyes wide. ‘But... Your daughter?’

Miklos smiled, genuinely amused. ‘You’re far too trusting, my dear. Alina was the name of my first horse. There will be no more lies, though. We’re all going to get

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to know each other very well indeed. My name is Miklos Dalca. I've been searching for this facility for a long time, ever since the lunatic Costea killed himself in a fit of guilt. Now, at last, you will help me restore it. Then, once I have crushed this nasty little region, Viktor will have to treat me with the respect I deserve.' He coughed. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to shout. I do so hate being slighted, though.'

'You piece of shit!' Serbanescu strained desperately against his captor.

Miklos pointed at him. 'Chain that one in the Room of Eyes.'

Serbanescu screamed as the Guardians began dragging him towards the stairs.

'You'll have to kill us,' said Lazar coldly.

'Oh yes,' said Miklos, as the remaining specialists stared at him. 'Repeatedly, I'd imagine. We're going to have so much fun.'

Way Out

By Iain Lowson

When the dogs started barking, she knew it was all over.

Brândușa was so very tired, cold and hungry, scared and sore, she just slumped to the cobbled ground, sobbing uncontrollably. Around her, shouting quickly filled the narrow alley. She was roughly pushed aside, a hapless bundle of rags tumbling away. Her arm splashed in a stinking puddle. Someone grabbed her, dragging her up. She flailed weakly.

‘Come on! Up! It’s all right. We’re almost there.’

Baffled and a little panicked, Brândușa looked around her, wild-eyed. There was a man holding her up. Who was it?! It was... It was... Vasile? He was doing his best, but failing, to hide his own fear. He pointed up the dark alley, insisting she look.

‘There was a man. The dogs, they didn’t like his smell. He must’ve been... Well, you know...’ Vasile didn’t want to use the word aloud, so whispered it instead. ‘Augmented.’

Chilled further, her skin crawling, Brândușa looked where Vasile was indicating. Moonlight and the glow of a

lamp hooked over a nail in the wall allowed her to see there was a skinny little man standing between two big men. They were grim faced, implacable, and armed. Resistance men. The skinny little man was pleading with them, his voice so broken with emotion and wet with tears and spittle that his words were lost. To one side, the man with the two dogs was crouched down beside them. He was holding their collars tightly but, despite his size, he was struggling as the dogs, growling and snapping, fought to be freed, to leap on the poor little man and tear him apart. One of the Resistance people pushed the skinny little man back. He wouldn't leave. He kept pleading, begging, tugging at them. He was pushed back a second time, but this time the man with the dogs stood up and walked them forward. He held their collars high, while they strained on their back legs, their mouths full of glittering teeth and frothing drool.

The little man staggered back from this, still crying, still wailing, but now he began to walk down the short line of waiting people, men and women all in the same pitiful state as Brândușa and Vasile. All were refugees, all dreading that their fate might be the same as the little, skinny man whom they now flinched away from. He stumbled off down the alley. One of the Resistance men let him get a little way away and then soundlessly followed. While the others had turned their attention back to the man with the dogs, Brândușa, last in line, watched the fighter walk by. He drew a large hunting knife as he passed, eyes set on the skinny little man ahead of him. The one who had failed.

Her fear redoubled. What if the dogs were to bark at her?! The others were passing by, one by one ushered past

the dogs to cross the dimly lit threshold of a house backing onto the alleyway. They were safe, for now. They had passed. What if she didn't? One more went past the dogs. They growled a little, and the man was told to stand still. The dogs sniffed at him, but then grew bored. The man was allowed to go, the relief clear on his face, his thanks effusive and ignored.

Then the next... And the next... Then it was Vasile. He turned to Brândușa and smiled.

'Watch. It's fine now. You'll see!' He walked down towards the guards, turning back and smiling as he reached the dogs.

'See?' he said, holding out a hand to the dogs.

One of them snapped at it, making the two Resistance men laugh cruelly as Vasile quickly pulled his hand back. He smiled again at Brândușa, but it was a weak, nervous smile. He began to walk to the door, beckoning Brândușa to follow, past the dogs. The two Resistance men were looking at her, expectant. She took one step forward.

Behind her, rushing footsteps. In front of her, the two previously impassive Resistance men reacted, showing a mix of fury and fear. The dogs were set free, and bounded toward Brândușa. She shrieked, turning in a rush to flee, but was thrust back against the alley wall by someone much larger than she crashing into her. Arms went around her, and a great dragging weight bore down. She struggled, squealing and gasping, pushing and flailing. The dogs, barking and growling, bounded past. She heard someone talking, a guttural whisper.

'H... Help... Me! Help... Me...'

With a thrill of horror, she realised it was the Resistance knifeman slumped against her, clinging to her for support.

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Reaching to help him straighten, Brândușa saw her hands were wet and warm. In the cold air, the blood steamed on her hands, her clothes, and on the growing pool on the ground. She looked into the eyes of the Resistance man, seeing the desperation there, seeing the life go out of them. He slid down her, crumpling to the ground to lie in blood and filth.

Brândușa stepped back from the corpse, slipping in the stinking gore that flooded from the dead man's torn innards, spilling from a ghastly tear in his stomach. Her mind was refusing to comprehend what was happening, but a part of her was able still to process sound. Dogs, yelping and growling, snapping and biting. She looked.

It was the skinny little man. A dog died as she stared, eyes wide. The skinny little man simply pushed his suddenly sharp, skinny little fingers through its neck. It shook and jerked as he cast it aside. He was grinning, moving like a rickety puppet, his red stick fingers flickering and twitching. The last dog crouched, snarling. The skinny little man snarled back through his rictus grin.

Someone grabbed Brândușa, dragging her back. She shrieked again. The skinny little man snapped his head around. Now he was grinning at her. The screams died in her throat. The snarling dog leapt. The skinny little man span back, slashing out with his hands. Blood sprayed through the air as the dog yelped in brief mortal agony.

‘Come on, woman! Move!’

It was one of the other Resistance men, the dog handler. He was dragging her back. She felt paralysed, her body an alien thing in which she was trapped. The other man stepped forward, between her and the deadly, skinny little man. Fire and thunder bloomed in his hands,

illuminating charnel house horrors. In the narrow alley, the skinny little man was blasted back, tumbling like a thrown toy. When he stood again, his grin intact, his remaining eye glittering, it was too much for Brândușa. She heard voices, shouts, more gunfire, and then nothing at all.

Rumbling. An engine struggling, choking, fighting back. Bruised. Her body, bouncing gently as a cold floor bucked under her. Wet. The water dripping and splashing on her face. Rain? Sore. The light on her face, in her eyes.

Brândușa woke. She started up, looking around her, frantic as a tumble of images of death and darkness blasted her mind. There were others, some dozing in their seats, some looking at her, baffled. There was Vasile, smiling broadly.

‘Ah! Good. I am very glad.’ Vasile smiled around at the others. ‘She is awake. Isn’t that good?’ When nobody reacted with the enthusiasm he clearly felt, Vasile’s smile barely faltered. He shrugged at her, slightly theatrically.

The chubby, short man seemed to feel his duty to the others around him was to be permanently cheerful. The only thing that bothered him was the state of his dark hair and the condition of his clothes. He had apologised for both as his opening, conversational gambit when the group had first been brought together in Predești. He’d latched on to Brândușa because she’d smiled back when he spoke to her. She didn’t mind. His good-natured prattle, though out of place, was a mundane distraction she needed.

‘You are a farmer now,’ he began before quickly correcting himself. ‘Well, a farm worker. We are in a

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truck.' Vasile shrugged again, chuckling. 'Obviously.'

He helped Brândușa sit up and move out of the way of the dripping water. It was raining softly outside, almost a thick, foggy drizzle. The canopy at the back of the truck was threadbare at best and full of holes. Brândușa was relieved to see no sign of the Resistance men. She looked at her hands, at her clothes. Both showed rusty red evidence of the horrors of the night before. The cloth of her dress and her thick shawl were crusted hard in places. Brândușa stared at the dried blood, rocking back and forward. Vasile put a hand on her arm, seeking to comfort her.

'They killed him,' Vasile said, sombre. 'After you passed out. The other man, the one who fell on you, he probably saved your life. When they shot the agent... That thing... When they killed him, well, it was... It was all a little crazy.' Vasile pushed his free hand through his greasy hair, he wasn't smiling now, 'Everyone was running around but no one really knew where to go. People were left behind, I think. You almost were. The agent, he... He didn't die easily. He... The men shooting...'

He faltered. Brândușa's heart went out to him.

'You came and got me,' she said. 'Despite everything that was happening. You came and got me.'

Vasile nodded, smiling through the tears that were falling now. He has stayed strong maybe too long, Brândușa thought to herself. She shuffled over and, hugging his arm, leaned her head against his shoulder.

'So,' she sighed, 'I am a farm worker now.'

Vasile just patted her hand. The truck continued on. After a while, Brândușa dozed.

The group of refugees worked on a farm near Cetate. Before the truck arrived there, it had stopped to pick up other small groups of workers. In ones and twos they boarded. Before that, the truck had stopped briefly to allow the Resistance men to hand the vehicle on to a contact. One of the men, the dog handler from the previous night, had passed out travel documents and work permits. He said only that they shouldn't talk much to anyone else until they reached the farm. Once they were there, they would be contacted individually and given further instructions.

The papers were collected by one of the gang bosses at the farm as soon as the workers arrived. Brândușa never saw the forgeries again. She never knew who was Resistance and who wasn't. The men and women were separated into different accommodation blocks, but mixed freely at meals and in the fields. There, they weeded fields of a crop Brândușa didn't recognise. She had been a city girl. Vasile stayed by her, chatting with her, as often as he could. He was the only other person Brândușa spoke with to any significant extent, so much so, that all the others assumed they were a couple. This turned out to be a good thing, as it meant the single men stayed away.

For two weeks they refugees laboured away with everyone else. Brândușa had started to enjoy the simple, oddly satisfying tasks. She was fed, housed and it felt safe. One day, she spotted an official had arrived at the farm. Abruptly terrified, she had watched the man from the shadows of an outbuilding. Sitting on the porch of the main administration building, he was talking with the foreman as he checked through reams of work permits and other paperwork. It was all so... So normal. Finding

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herself oddly frustrated by this, Brândușa expected the official to draw his gun at any moment and start the killing. Instead, he finished his cursory check, shook hands with the foreman, climbed onto his bicycle and peddled away.

Unsure what to feel, Brândușa turned to leave, but immediately walked into someone who had come up behind her, unnoticed. It was one of the work team leaders, a tall, heavy man with a thick beard and a distinctly Hungarian accent that marked him as being from the north of Promethea. He took a firm grip of her shoulder and held her at arm's length. His face was not friendly, and Brândușa's relief at the departure of the official was driven from her by a thrill of fear. Suddenly, the man chuckled, clapping her on the shoulder.

'Don't worry, little bird,' he said, smiling and winking conspiratorially. 'You will fly this cage soon enough.' With that, he brushed past her, heading for the foreman's office. Still shaking, Brândușa watched him go.

She told Vasile what had happened that evening as they ate their meal outside. The crop they had been tending was a late one, but the early Autumn weather had been kind. Even at dusk, it was still comfortable enough to eat outside and watch the stars appear in the darkening sky. To the north and west the terrain rose to meet the distant mountains. The far off mountains to the west at least were Bulgarian. To the north, the Transylvanian Alps felt like a looming threat. The land around them to the south and east was flat, and it was south that they looked to as they ate and talked. In that direction was the Danube, a dark line in the distance, with freedom beyond.

'Well,' Vasile breathed. 'It is good to have some kind of

news, don't you think?' Brândușa shrugged, but Vasile laughed quietly at her, 'What? You are so enjoying the farming life?'

She scowled at him, but spoiled the effect by smiling a little. 'I don't know. Sometimes, yes. It's very... Certain. Normal. Predictable. After... After everything... Sometimes I want things that are normal. Safe.'

Vasile nodded, gazing south into the gathering night. 'Yes. Perhaps... Perhaps we shall become farmers on the other side. We can grow our own potatoes.' He looked sideways at Brândușa, nervously, 'On our farm.'

'Our farm?' Brândușa sighed. 'Vasile...'

He shrugged, self-conscious, 'Well, I just thought...'

Brândușa laid a hand on his arm, a sad look in her eye, 'Vasile, we can't think such things. We can't.'

'Can't I have hope?' he asked.

Brândușa drew her hand away, shrinking into herself, a dark huddle of dark clothes. She shook her head. 'I don't have hope', she said. 'I don't want hope.'

Vasile looked at her, his eyes sad, 'What do you want, Brândușa? What can I help you to find?'

'I just want to be away from this place. From Promethea. Far away.'

'And after that?' Brândușa shrugged, the motion almost lost in the shadows of her heavy shawl.

'I don't know,' she admitted. 'I don't believe in an after. Not yet.'

Vasile contemplated this for a while. He grunted, nodding curtly. He reached over and dragged one of Brândușa's hands from the folds of her clothing, holding it tightly.

'I shall believe hard enough for both of us.' He patted

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her hand then, releasing it, he stood and walked off.

Brândușa said nothing, and did not look to see where he went.

In the morning, Vasile was gone.

It wasn't until her work gang came in from the fields that Brândușa first noticed. She idly looked around for him at first, wondering if she should apologise for her gloomy mood of the previous night. When she didn't see him outside the mess hall, she went in to search for him. By now, her heart was beating faster. Telling herself she was being foolish, she sought out one of the men she'd previously seen Vasile talk to. He casually admitted, that no one had seen him all morning. A few others at the table butted in to agree, with one saying that Vasile had been called away early in the morning, before he'd even finished dressing.

Brândușa's self-imposed isolation from those around her suddenly left her feeling terrifyingly alone. Muttering her thanks, blood pounding in her head, she fought with herself not to run from the suddenly claustrophobic hall. Forcing herself to walk, she made for the foreman's office. Along the way, in the gap between two buildings from where she'd watched the government official just the day before, she had to stop. Leaning against one wall, her breath was fast and ragged, her thoughts coming in a cold rush.

Was this how it was supposed to be for those seeking to escape Promethea? Would she get summoned in the early morning? Called away in the dead of night? Did the last, desperate journey begin like that? Or was this something else? Should she ask about Vasile's disappearance? Would

that bring it all crashing down? Would there be an investigation? What attention would she call down on herself? Was this it? The beginning of the end? All those questions rushed at her, but no answers came to her defence. No answers at all, save one terrible vision she couldn't push past. She knew the penalty for Resistance involvement. In her mind's eye, she could see the Evisceration rack waiting for her. Images tumbled through her mind, fractured, red and violent.

By now, Brândușa was slumped on the ground, her head resting on the rough wood of the wall. The panic attack rendered her all-but insensible, so she barely felt herself abruptly dragged to her feet. She was held by the shoulders and shaken like a doll. She moaned, eyes rolling. Was someone speaking? Sharp pain suddenly exploded in her face, the sensation forming a path her consciousness could follow back to harsh reality. A great bearded face hovered inches from hers, with concerned dark brown eyes making a lie of the otherwise angry expression. That, however, was not uppermost in Brândușa's mind.

'You... Slapped me,' she said simply, her hand to her red, pulsing cheek.

The man let her go, and said, 'Are you ill?' It was the same man from yesterday catching her in the same place.

'I... No. You slapped me.'

'Are you ill, woman?!' the man hissed, glancing around.

Brândușa shook her head, 'No, no. I just...'

'Then shut up and go back to your work.'

The man shoved Brândușa away from him. She staggered back, confused, afraid. She moved no further. The man shook his head.

'Go. Back to work', he growled, glancing behind him

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then back to her. 'He was sent to work on another farm. Do you understand? Another farm?'

Brândușa could only stare. The man rolled his eyes and shook his head. 'You will see him again soon,' he said in a frustrated whisper. 'Don't come back here again.'

'Th... thank you. Thank you,' Brândușa stammered as she stumbled away, still dazed.

The man watched her go. He winced when she blundered into another worker, mumbling apologies as she made her way unsteadily toward where the last stragglers from her work gang were heading back to the fields.

'Not a chance,' he murmured to himself, shaking his head sadly.

She was taken from her work gang while on a water break in the middle of the morning. It wasn't the man with the beard. She never saw him again. The work gang leader simply told her to come with him. He refused to answer her questions as they walked away. The rain, continuous since early morning, had turned the paths back to the farm complex to mud, and Brândușa slipped and slithered in her outsized work boots as she struggled to keep up with the man.

He'd got quite a lead on her, and was talking quietly but intensely to an old man in a tall, woollen hat when she caught up with him near a side road into the farm. A cart and horse were by the open gate, already turned around and waiting to go. The work boss handed the old man something and then turned and walked back, passing Brândușa without a word.

The old man in the hat beckoned to her. 'Come on,' he called. 'The rain is getting heavy. I want to get moving.'

With that, he clambered up onto the creaking cart and waited, his back to her.

The rain fell harder, as though to underline the old man's prescience. Huddled in her wet, heavy, dark clothes, the only constant in her fractured life, Brândușa Grul stood alone in the yard. When she finally gathered her resolve and moved, the mud sucked at her feet, the very ground seeking to bind her. The old man glanced back.

'Wait,' she called, surprised by the urgency in her overly loud voice.

She stepped out of her boots, stooping to pull them from the mud. Barefoot, Brândușa ran to the cart, throwing the boots into the back where they clattered into a pile of low wooden boxes, stirring up a stench of fish that not even the heavy rain could mask. She clambered up onto the seat of the cart and sat, breathing heavily.

Both the old man and the horse were looking at her. Both seemed curious, amused even. Brândușa flicked a smile at the old man.

'I'm ready,' she said, nodding to where a rough track wound vaguely south. 'Let's go,' she added, impatient.

The old man chuckled, a broad smile crinkling his beardless, heavily lined face. Brândușa could see he had few teeth left. He shook the reins a little and, with one last long look at the odd woman sitting next to his master, the bony old horse turned to the matter at hand and plodded off.

It took the rest of the morning for Brândușa to get used to the smell from the boxes and for the cart to reach the Danube. The rain had stopped just an hour or so after they left the farm, but Brândușa and the old man, Gavril,

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were cold and wet. The view did little to cheer Brândușa. While the river and the green lands beyond were a sign of hope, those who held power in Promethea had done all they could to ensure those hopes would be dashed.

An earthwork gouged a furrowed scar across the land, stretching off east and west as far as the eye could follow it. So fresh was the great embankment and the trench before it that the grass had not yet fully covered it. There was a towering heavy chain-link fence running along the top of the embankment, mounted on stout metal columns sunk deep into concrete foundations. At regular intervals, always each within sight of the one before and after, there were guard towers straddling the fence. Some were clearly manned, their shutters raised. Others, shutters down on all four sides, were less obviously occupied. Still, Brândușa didn't trust there was no one inside. She was convinced shadows moved there, watching her.

The old track they had bounced along for so long soon joined the hard pack military road that ran alongside the fence. They had to bump across the military railway line to reach it. The railway tracks had simply obliterated the old road, making getting to the new one a struggle. Both Gavril and Brândușa had to climb down, and the old horse made heavy work of dragging the ramshackle cart over the shining steel track and muddy, churned-up ground beyond onto the new road. It was a wide thoroughfare, and well made, but Gavril pointed out that they still might have to bump off to the side if one of the larger military trucks demanded to pass by.

'If we're lucky, we won't get stuck,' he grumbled. 'If we are lucky.'

Brândușa couldn't stand to look at the fence as they

rumbled down the road beside it. She felt like it would fall across her, holding her down, keeping her pinned until she could be collected. The open towers with guards in them were frightening enough, as the guards waved to Gavril as they passed. Brândușa was more scared of the shuttered towers. The slit windows seemed to scowl down at her, and she shrank in on herself each time they passed one. Eventually, Gavril couldn't take any more.

‘Brândușa, you must relax,’ he said, an air of irritation in his voice. ‘You will not survive getting past the base.’

Immediately Gavril regretted his choice of words. Brândușa's eyes went wide and she looked around wildly. The old man reached out and grabbed Brândușa hard by the arm. He looked straight in her eyes.

‘Look at me. Listen! Look at me!’

Brândușa was panting, but did as she was told. Gavril released her, sitting back.

‘We are going to be passing a small base. They have them every few miles, right along this fence they are so proud of. We do not have to go in, but there is a check point we must pass to get through to the other side, to the river.’

Gavril turned back to watch the road ahead, correcting the path of the cart a little. He went on, ‘We have very good papers. Even if they stop us, it will be no problem. Okay?’

When he got no reply, he looked at Brândușa, one eyebrow arched almost comically. ‘Okay?’ he stressed.

She nodded, shivering.

Gavril shook his head. ‘I tell you something,’ he said. ‘I never told anyone this. I... No, I tell you something else first. You need to realise,’ Gavril said cheerily, ‘No one

cares about you.'

Brândușa was surprised to find that she was a little hurt by his words.

Her companion nodded, smiling. 'It's true. No one cares. They don't know who you are. All they will know is what is in the papers I have.' He patted his pocket, then prodded himself in the chest, looking proud. 'Me they would care about, if they didn't run and hide so fast from the smell of fish.'

Gavril left the obvious question hanging in the air for a minute or so. Eventually, when it became clear that Brândușa wasn't going to rise to the bait, he sighed theatrically.

'Okay, I will tell you. Since you ask over and over.' He looked around, in case someone might be spying from the roadside before telling his tale. 'I fought once, against them,' he said, waving in the direction of the fence. 'Killed a few too. They find out, come to my house. I wasn't there. I came here.' He nodded, grim-faced. 'Now,' he intoned, voice dropping to a whisper. 'Now, I am a fisherman.' He looked around again. 'And do you know what?'

Tentative, Brândușa shook her head, 'No... What?'

'I hate fish!' Gavril bellowed at the top of his voice, going so far as to stand a little as he did.

The horse looked back and whickered in irritation. Brândușa looked about her in panic. Gavril laughed uproariously. Brândușa thumped him on the arm, but he kept laughing. She hit him again, and then sat sulking. Gavril, still chuckling, noticed Brândușa had stopped shivering.

As they travelled, the bright afternoon sun dried them.

Gavril took off his hat, stuffing it onto a post sticking up beside him. Giving Brândușa the reins, he stripped off his sheepskin coat and shirt, turning to drape them over the side of the cart. His whip-thin body was as weathered as his face, but still showed some of the sinewy strength a hard life bestows. A few scars gave credence to Gavril's earlier story.

Gavril caught Brândușa looking and smiled slyly. He took the reins off her. 'Restrain yourself, woman,' he grinned.

Brândușa chuckled, shaking her head. 'I will try.'

Gavril nodded, sagely. A moment of silence. He sighed, 'It is hard, I know. I am sorry.'

Brândușa laughed for the first time in forever.

Gavril smiled. He looked at her wet clothes. 'You should do the same,' he said, then caught himself. 'Well, not quite the same.'

Brândușa's smile abruptly faded, and she huddled into herself, clinging to her shawl, staring fixedly ahead. In his head, Gavril cursed himself for a fool. They clattered on, the river, cart and horse making the only sounds.

After a little while, Brândușa slowly took off the shawl, draping it over the edge of the wagon beside her. She looked shyly at Gavril. He pretended not to notice. Later, Brândușa awkwardly hid under her shawl, fumbling her shirt off and drying that. Gavril made a point of keeping his eyes on the road. If his passenger had secrets, that was her business. He could guess, he thought, of what might have happened to Brândușa and he didn't pry. If nothing else, he didn't need to hear another terrible tale of cruelty and violence.

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It was late afternoon. The base looked huge to Brândușa, and no amount of reassurance from Gavril that this was a small example made her feel any better. The base straddled the fence much as the watchtowers did, with the barrier fence seeming to both split and duplicate itself to sweep around and protectively encircle the huts and other buildings that made up the facility, before reforming as a single entity to continue on into the distance. There were two watchtowers on diagonally opposite corners to monitor the area within and without. That was all Brândușa could see to begin with.

The road looped around the base. Beside it, on the opposite side of the road, simple platforms on both sides by the railway lines waited for supply trains to make their deliveries. On Gavril's insistence, Brândușa studied the base as the cart passed slowly by. He'd told her to see if she could spot the secret. He also told her it would be less suspicious for her to gawp at the facility than to cower away from it.

The buildings inside the fence were all of wood, save for the largest building roughly in the middle. Its lower level was built of brick, though the upper levels were wood. All the other huts were the same size and basic design, pointing to their prefabricated origin. Gavril nodded subtly to the large building.

'Augment facility,' he murmured. Despite Gavril's earlier warning, Brândușa shrank away.

The cart came around the side of the base and Brândușa saw the crossing point. Wide gates in the fence stood open, and there were guard huts to either side. Only one was occupied, and that guard barely nodded as he raised the swing barrier to let the cart pass by. Brândușa

was amazed, trying hard not to show it. They rode on for a few minutes before Gavril finally broke the silence.

‘Well,’ he asked. ‘Did you work out the secret?’

Brândușa was confused. ‘I... Well... No, but how did we get past the guard so easily? I mean, why didn’t he even look at the papers?’

‘Pah! Mihai never bothers with papers.’

‘You know him?’ Brândușa’s heart fluttered. What was going on?

‘I bring fish to the soldiers now and then. They know me.’ That said, he grunted. ‘Well, they know my fish.’ He looked straight at Brândușa. ‘So? Did you work out the secret?’ He was insistent, even slightly amused.

She shook her head.

Gavril grinned. ‘How many soldiers did you see?’

‘In the base? There were...’ Brândușa stopped abruptly. She even turned and looked back to the base before catching herself and sitting back around quickly. She was stunned. ‘One. I saw one. Mihai?’

Gavril nodded. ‘There are maybe fifteen, twenty soldiers in that base. The rest are out in the towers. Not every tower. Most though.’

Gavril’s good humour passed as he talked. ‘Don’t get me wrong. They are very good soldiers. If anything were to happen, a train would bring more, or trucks maybe, and quickly. Many more soldiers.’ He looked at Brândușa. ‘There are not enough soldiers to keep every base full in all of Promethea. But there are enough to keep us in Promethea. Unless...’ he said, his smile returning. ‘Unless we are very clever and bring them good fish.’

Gavril fell silent now, and Brândușa watched the river for a while. Her mind was whirling with all the new

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information. It was almost too much for her to take in. It felt to her that Promethea was suddenly that little bit more fragile than she had always believed it was. Now she knew a secret, it was less intimidating, now she knew its armour was tarnished. These thoughts kept her occupied and silent for quite a while.

As darkness fell, Gavril lit a lamp and fixed it to the side of the wagon that faced the river.

‘The boats,’ he said in answer to Brândușa’s questioning look, and started the cart off again. ‘We’re overdue a patrol,’ Gavril muttered, half to himself, before addressing his passenger again. ‘If we don’t show a light they start to shoot. No warnings.’

Brândușa was about to ask more questions, her alarm clear, when Gavril’s attention was drawn to the river, as though on cue.

‘Watch. Listen. You will see. We have no problems,’ he said.

She heard the engine a moment later, a deep thrumming sound. At the same time as she first saw the approaching boat a bright light shone from it onto the water. That light quickly swept over to pick out the cart, blinding them. The horse stumbled, whickering, then plodded on. Gavril muttered curses under his breath, waving to the boat. He nudged Brândușa sharply, and she waved too. She stopped when Gavril did. Nonetheless, the boat kept the light on them the whole time as it passed, snapping off only when there could be no chance that it was in their eyes.

‘Bastards,’ Gavril said, his teeth gritted hard.

As the sound of the engine faded into the gathering night, the old man told Brândușa she should try to get

comfortable in the back of the cart. She did, but didn't think she'd sleep. As Brândușa was climbing over the seat and pushing smelly boxes aside, Gavril had said that he would be leaving her at the crossing point in a few hours. In the end, Brândușa surprised herself and fell asleep almost immediately, her head resting on Gavril's sour-smelling woollen hat.

'We passed a foot patrol and two more boats,' Gavril informed Brândușa when he woke her, the news cutting through the fog of sleep instantly. 'We are alright,' Gavril said, relaxed. 'Good papers.'

Brândușa climbed back to the front of the cart, looking around her. The moonlight cast everything in pale relief, but all she could see was the wide, wide river. It was slow, deep and whispered in the darkness. While it had been full of promise before, Brândușa was afraid of it now. However, off to her left some distance away, the lights along the security fence and in the watchtowers provided silent, sinister motivation to go on.

'In a little while, I will slow the cart down. When I tell you, get off, and go hide in the bushes by the river. I will not stop. Do you understand?'

Brândușa nodded.

'And you must be quiet,' Gavril added. 'That most of all.'

'Who is meeting me?' she asked, her mouth dry.

Gavril looked at her, surprised. 'Meeting...?' he began. 'No one is meeting you.' He turned back to the dark road ahead. 'They will have left you something to help you cross. Not a boat, before you ask. I don't know what.'

Brândușa was confused, scared.

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‘What do I do? I don’t... I don’t understand.’

Gavril put his hand on her arm, looking at her with a sad smile. ‘It is up to you, Brândușa. You hide in the bushes until a patrol finds you and you get shot. Or maybe worse. Or you swim. You swim and hope a patrol doesn’t see you. You swim and hope you don’t get tired and drown. You swim to the other side. Maybe.’

‘What then?’ Brândușa asked, miserable.

Gavril took his hand away and watched the road again. He shrugged. ‘No idea,’ he said. ‘I don’t swim.’

She listened to the cart clatter away. She couldn’t see it. The bushes she clung to were too thick, the bank she had slid down too high.

Her legs were in shallow water, and she was already very cold. One arm burned where it had scraped down a rock. In the dark, after stepping from Gavril’s cart, their goodbyes said, she had rushed to the bushes he had pointed out as they drew near. She hadn’t seen that they came up from below the level of the bank, and Brândușa had half-run straight off the edge.

She’d cried out a little as she fell, but the cold of the river water had shocked her to silence. She almost couldn’t bear to let herself down into it, but nor could she hold on much longer. She scrambled with her feet and found that the water was shallow enough to stand in. The water lapped around her thighs, and she winced with each millimetre higher it went when a wavelet slapped at her. The lakes she had swum in, as a child, had never felt so lost in her past.

In the dark, Brândușa tried to make out something, anything. Initially, she dismissed the very thing she’d been

looking for, still hoping for something more. In the end, when she inspected the heavy branch partly tangled against the bushes growing from the bank, she discovered it was tethered to the roots with twine. As her fingers inspected the knots, she found a small knife had been stuffed under a few loops of the string.

Clouds meant it was pitch black when she finally freed the branch. Before she did, Brândușa stripped her dress off and ditched her heavy shoes. She let the river take them as Gavril had suggested. Down to her slip, shivering so much she wondered that she could move at all, Brândușa tied her shawl about her waist. Next, she fumbled with numb, alien fingers to free the knife and cut the string.

It took a little manoeuvring to get the branch out into the river enough to float free, and Brândușa was sobbing with cold and frustration by the time she succeeded. The current tugged at it and at her as she wrestled the wood. When the river finally took it, Brândușa was pulled hard after it, splashing into the deeper water with another cry. This time, water in her mouth stopped it, leaving her choking and desperately holding on with one hand. When she managed to gain some kind of stability, she clung to the branch shuddering.

The chill of the water all-but robbed Brândușa of logical thought. She could barely hold the branch, much less guide it or swim. She looked about her, aware for the first time of how fast the wide river was carrying her. She felt the power of the current and a thrill of fear chilled her further. If she hit anything, a rock or submerged branch, she would be killed. The Danube was the ultimate guardian of the border between Promethea and the rest

of the world.

Brândușa began to feel again. The initial shock was passing. She tried swimming, tried to push the branch by kicking her legs, but it was useless. The branch was too heavy. It twisted in the current, threatening to entangle her. Brândușa knew she had to let it go, before the deadly cold robbed her of the little energy she had left. In her head, she counted down. She reached the end of that countdown twice. She moaned, cursing herself, bitter and incoherent. Gasping, she let go with one hand, hoping to steady herself before letting go completely.

The branch tore free, and Brândușa immediately vanished under the water. Though it was only for an instant, it was a dark eternity for Brândușa. She fought and kicked and scrambled, the effort revitalising her. At the surface, she realised she could hear her own struggles and stopped, treading water as best she could. Her confusion was absolute. Only the pull of the current gave her any chance of working out where she should swim. She couldn't see either shore. Her whole world was the freezing blackness of the river.

Brândușa began to drag herself through the water, all the time being swept on and on. Steadily, her world shrank, her conscious self becoming smaller and smaller. Eventually, when she could feel nothing, see nothing, all she had was the memory of the action of swimming.

She carried on. Perhaps. Was she swimming or just remembering? Sensation. A memory of a hint of sensation. More than a memory. It had a name. Warmth.

She woke. Her body ached, and her head felt like a great weight was surrounding and crushing it. Light was too

much, lancing through her brain like fire when she tried to open her eyes. Rough blankets covered her, so Brândușa just lay back and let the world come to her. She felt the hard floor under the thin covering beneath her. It was stone, but not cold. The sensation felt luxurious against her bare skin, and she rejoiced in it for the handful of beautiful moments it took for the fact of her nakedness to fully register.

The rush of adrenaline cleared her head, and she sat up. The blankets almost slipped, but she clutched them to herself, pulling them up to her chin, making sure her shoulders were covered. Frantically, she cast around for her clothes, taking in the details of the small room she was in.

It was a cell. The floor, walls, and low vaulted ceiling were stone. In the corner opposite her, a brazier spilled wood ash onto the floor. A pitcher of water and a crude clay cup were close to her. There was a bucket nearby too. Light filtered through a horizontal slit window high up one wall. The heavy cell door was wide open, but little light came in that way. The man watching her had been able to sit in deep shadow. She missed his presence entirely until he stepped forward, his rifle held loosely.

He looked at her, silent, his face a neutral mask. Brândușa gasped when she saw him, shrinking back even further into the blankets, abandoning the cup she'd been reaching for. She looked at him, her terror clear for him to see. He shook his head, his eyes sad.

'You got out,' he said. Brândușa took a great breath in, unable to comprehend the news. 'You were found. Brought here,' the man with the rifle said, briefly glancing around the cell. 'Baba Vida. You're with the Resistance

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now.'

Brândușa's mind was awlirl. She had left Promethea?! The man turned and walked slowly to the cell door. He paused there, half turning to speak over his shoulder and destroy Brândușa with just four words.

'We saw the scars.'

He closed and locked the door behind him.

The blankets slipped down as Brandusa wept, her head on her knees, arms wrapped tightly around her legs - arms that were not her own. A birthday gift, the latest fashion inescapably imposed. The scars looping over her shoulders were rough on her wet cheek, the future they implied inevitable. The Resistance allowed no Augment, however slight, to leave Promethea.

Awakenings

By Andrew Harman

You arise early, Mr Howard. Did you find our previous conversation left unsettling visions in the gallery of your thoughts? Did you find Mother Slumber an elusive bedfellow? Was your mind alight with question, thoughts, fears? I sense I have no need to enquire too deeply. Even in this half-light I am all too aware of the slight down-turn that your shoulders are wearing, your hair combed with insufficient and patchy attention, your eyes somewhat redder around the lids than last night suggest that your sleep having been 'restless' may be veering towards an understatement. A shameful state when one considers the surroundings in which one is currently stabled. If such comfort as goose mattresses and damask curtaining cannot calm the whirling mind then I fear, Mr Howard, that you may have to adjust to more disturbed nights. Such is the truth of Promethea. Do you take Demerara with you coffee?

I can, if you feel it is required at this time, offer a small and clichéd crumb of comfort. Yes, you feel that is necessary? Very well. Mr Howard, sip a little pre-dawn

coffee and listen to my medicine of the soul.

It will get better. There, an incantation to reassure the restless. Four little placatory words and within the instant you have kindled within you the glowing spark of hope. Yes? God bless your childish naivety, man. Has the mystical power of clichés suddenly grown so powerful? Father Christmas shall bring presents to you and your kind. Diligent pixies shall craft a mattress of their hair to ensure your nights are blessed with slumber. Believe that with as much credibility, do you? Is your faith in winged horses and sea maidens as strong as that with which you cling to my four words? Do you see Promethea as you would Atlantis? Do not even appear to agree, Mr Howard. Give me no excuse to dislike you. It would not go well for your future if I sense you begin to fall behind my expectations. Gullible is one trait I do not ascribe to you, Mr Howard.

So, the truth, then. It will not get better. Yes, a less rose-bordered epithet, but I'm afraid I believe in that unavoidable concept of reality, Mr Howard, that inescapable brother of truth. It is my duty to bring news of a less hopeful and contrary nature. It is the realist within.

It will not get any better, Mr Howard. Not without a great deal of effort by you, by any stretch of the imagination. You see, of all the miraculous advances added to the pantheon of Promethean Science, a cure for insomnia by cliché is not one of them. If you are wondering just how you will ever find the ability to sleep with any soundness and drift, calmly and undisturbed through a full eight hours then there is only one way. Accept what you hear and see around you with open eyes

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and a heart free of morality, or embrace a life as a perpetual insomniac. Accept the niggling discomfort of new doubts, new worries and concerns, new aspects of understanding. Accept them as I had to in Iasi. Baptisms of fire, rebirths of agony and discomfort, reinventions of the very way you understand life. Consider Promethea as one would a society evolved upon a distant planet, untethered by the simplistic confines of Earthly rules, unfettered by the judgements and petty considerations of those that hold religious office. Cease attempting to judge, to weigh and measure ethics and rites as if they are commodities, and accept our ways as we do. As Promethean. Once you begin to see the wonders around you as magnificent advances rooted in a new morality then, perhaps, you may sleep relaxed. Do you see, Mr Howard, the subtle shift of perception by which my four word reassurance can be found wanting? It will get better? Nonsense. It is too big to change, we are too far ahead of your tiny expectations to shift into reverse and become acceptable to you. No, Mr Howard, it is up to you to find a way to sit comfortably within yourself and ride this new world. Promethea will never bend to your way of thinking no more than a planet would shift its orbit on the will of a mote of dust. Consider yourself that mote, Mr Howard. Consider your choices. Quince jelly and brioche with your coffee? It awaits you in your room. Go, refresh yourself for the approaching dawn.

Mr Howard, welcome back to the world of the living. It is agreeable to see how brioche and coffee can improve your demeanour. Your greyness of spirit lifted even as the sun climbs the sky. You now appear, as The Baron may have

said to his creation, almost human. Would you care to partake of a measure of Zwack? I find Dr József's herbal tonic to be stimulating to the senses. No? That is your oversight. I consider that if a liqueur is sufficiently good for the Hungarian Emperor then who am I to argue. Joseph II was blessed with a fine taste and a worthy outlook on the powers of life and the strengths of a promise given. Na zdrowye. Värtute. A fascinating and complex taste. I still find that eight of the forty herbal infusions remain a mystery to my palate. I am certain that were I to request an in depth analysis of its make-up and formulation then there are many in the Baron's employ who could offer such an analysis from one of their machines. One of the many fine and faceless men still employed in various establishments since the demise of the Physicians' and Naturalists' Society. You would be more than astounded at the concoctions those men can whisk up. I can tell you things regarding sea sponges that would make your head spin. And yet, knowing the precise recipe of this fine drink would remove some of the magic of the unknown, do you not think? Whether it is aniseed or a twist of mace that adds to the complex bitterness should, for my enjoyment, remain a mystery I think.

Mysteries are some of the purest of life's entertainments, do you not agree? I sense the opposite in you. You are perhaps surrounded by too many mysteries, too many unknowns, dropped as you have been offshore in an ocean of tumultuous concepts and wild wonders beyond the safety of normality. Shall I furnish you with an answer to pour water on your burning curiosity? It seems only natural. That is after all why you are here. Let me see, what tasty crumb of flesh to flick to my inquisitive

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Komodo dragon? Shall I choose to regale you with tales of the Creature and his rise to invisibility? How he is the supposed leader of all those opposed to the Promethean dream, his influence seen only by the clumsy footfalls of his followers as they attempt disruption? Perhaps. Will I offer undreamt of insights into the workings of the very science of Promethea? How the Baron's hand can influence the very forces of life itself, stretching, creating, enhancing? It is possible. Or shall I delve into the murky history of the dying days of the last century and hint at the manipulations the Baron made? How the mysterious Karl Bader changed the future of power politics and rose above all to create this very country from nothing? Or shall I show you the elegance with which I have moved through this changing landscape of influence, rising on the shoulders of others to a position where I can change countless lives with a small effort of will – or of what I can offer the world outside?

There are momentous changes coming in the world. Nations will rage against one another in ways that have never before been witnessed. Those with the sense and the knowledge will call on my help, ally me to their cause, and maybe then will they not be crushed and ruined by the coming onslaught. I sense you growing as moist as a virgin anticipating a mounting. Perhaps a finger buffet of tales chosen from all or some of the above, yes? Wipe yourself, Mr Howard, and I shall begin.

In a sense, it is all the more satisfying to have risen to my current status following a fallow period of setbacks than had it all flowed toward me calm as a mill race. Had the Baron, upon our return from the shores of Lake Como, handed all you currently see to me through

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Ghergiev then I would not be a fraction of the man I am today. After all, that which fails to kill increases strength, does it not? Vārtute. ‘To strength’ in your mother tongue.

I am afraid to say that the patience of Vladimir Ghergiev, failing salt merchant and, in the dying months of 1828, man most likely to be solely responsible for losing the family fortune, was not great. He felt that promises made, demonstrations shown in Como where being left undeveloped, unused. A little harsh I think considering his position in the grand scheme. Precisely why he alone seemed to expect instant miracles upon return from Italy is a mystery, the fact that he was upset and intolerant to the extreme however, is not. Irritations of a more local nature where scratching at him. Those who held the strings of power in Solikamsk were about to act against him and even the strongest of characters respond negatively under such circumstance.

I, of course, was the first to pick up on the rumours of gathering unrest. In our absence moves had been made, meetings taken behind closed chamber doors and gatherings held in open session to act against the Ghergiev brine plant. Those on the Solikamsk Branch Council of the State Salt Board had decided, quite simply, that it had to close, to be wiped from the registry, our future be damned. Reputations it seemed were fragile and for the kopek factory that was the salt industry, to be damaged even slightly would not do. It was deemed that our tainted brine, unfit for consumption by even the lowliest of humans and purchased by a single customer was a blight upon the pristine name of Solikamsk salt production. As unwelcome and insulting as spittle upon the face of the Madonna. There was but one solution. All extraction of

our brine was to halt and the borehole plugged impenetrably for generations to come. Cork that tainted fluid back in its bottle of earth where it could fester out of harm's way. And no compensation for the Ghergievs.

If commercial reputation, simple profit grabbing and the ability to control over half of the salt production in Mother Russia was the entire issues jeopardised by our filthy brine production then, if I were to adopt my most generous of spirits, I could concede a legitimate apprehension. The 'salt king' Strogonovs would stand to lose many millions of kopecks if our corrosive piss were to erode the salt profits, perhaps even spinning their future into a spiral of decline from which recovery would be impossible. As amusing and satisfying as it would be to observe such public demise I recognised immediately that such an outcome must not be allowed to occur.

You look askance, Mr Howard, confused that I am in full and apparent agreement with those plotting our commercial downfall. Observe how easily you leap, eager as a whore into the bedchambers of the conclusion incorrect. Rest in assurance that I had not found a sudden inner generosity for my fellow man's fortunes, perish such thoughts, simply that such troubles would attract attention, and attention attracts questions as shit brings forth flies from the courts of Moscow. Soon they would be wanting to know more, digging deeper, cross-examining, scouring through our inventories and sales charters, wanting to reveal precisely the identity of the single customer on our books. That, I was utterly certain, was a secret more valuable to me than the entire Solikamsk production combined. That secretive identity was the wedge struggling to hold open the doors to unknown

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chances. Give that away and all would be lost. You see, even back then I was starting to see beyond the horizons observed by others. I was recognising opportunities before they had even set seed, let alone begun germination. Armed such, is it of wonder I have achieved so much?

But, I still see confusion writ large upon you, Mr Howard. You cannot see a path clear to allow the seemingly impossible outcome – maintain our brine production unshaken and yet damage not the fortunes of those around it. A difficult juggling of circus plates I admit and, for some short time, I was at something of a loss of direction. But there was one vital device to bring to the task, the nutcracker of will, politics.

Control the semaphore signals your body broadcasts, Mr Howard, or your fortunes will never be made at the poker table. Yes, politics was to be my weapon. And even then, unrecognised by me for many years to come, I had stepped, by necessity, onto the path by which the Baron would travel. Ironical is it not that Victor Frankenstein's science gave life to that which was to become Promethea, but it was the forceps of politics which pulled it screaming from the womb into an unsuspecting world.

Politics is akin to witchcraft do you not think? The bending of will, the making of actions, the changes of behaviour, all conducted by slights of hand, shifts of words and subtle movements in the fabrics of understanding. Watch carefully how the cups move, Mr Howard. Nothing at all up my sleeve, you see? Mirrors, distraction and smoke. Watch and learn.

The precise details of quite why Stanislaw Tuchaninov couriered two letters from his mansion that day is really of little importance. Smoke. That they were sent mere hours

prior to the annual review meeting of Solikamsk Regional Committee for Domestic Planning and Borders is somewhat coincidental. Distraction. That the complex personal reasons behind his suddenly announced retirement as president of the committee involved the youngest of his daughters continued health and wellbeing however is not. That threat was mine, although as untraceable back to me as were the fictitious hill vagabonds who were purported to have her held captive. Mirrors. It was also my untraceable influence that swayed the remainder of the elderly committee to accept one Vladimir Ghergiev to the board as acting president, as suggested by the second of Tuchaninov's couriered letters. Slight of political hand.

It was, I admit now, an inelegant concoction of levers cobbled together to achieve the shift in the committee's direction, but forget not, I was still, in 1828, very new to such manipulations. However inelegant the persuasions may have been, the necessary results did appear. Votes were cast under Ghergiev's first moments as acting president and, with only the slightest of guidance necessary, an already existing border dispute saw an unexpected, but efficacious solution. Four acres of Solikamsk territory to the north was generously given over to the neighbouring community of Nizhneye Moshevo in return for a quarter mile extension to Solikamsk fishing rights, effective immediately. That those four acres of territory happened to be owned by the family Ghergiev was seen by all present as a noble gesture by the new president in the name of neighbourly co-operation between two communities of the Urals. That the same four acres happened to encompass a certain brine

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extraction works was merely a peculiar and convenient coincidence of fate. In that instant a certain brine extraction well effectively vanished from Solikamsk jurisdiction and with it the risk of that foul solution affecting any reputations adversely. Fortunes which moments before looked to be stood upon shaky foundations found themselves bankable again and the swarms of shit-fly questions simply flew on to roost on other steaming piles of secretive gossip. One small omission several months later, when the local territory maps were redrawn, saw all traces of the Ghergiev brine works vanish completely from the cartographical records. Even today the extraction pipe is only locatable by knowledgeable local trackers and those whose business it is to know.

You look, again, somewhat disappointed Mr Howard, as if somehow such elbows of diplomacy sit uncomfortably with you. Of course, you sit now in Promethea, rumours fresh in your ears of enhanced men especially strengthened and improved to bend others to their master's will, stories of dread weapons tantalising your thoughts, and you wonder why they were not deployed at the flick of my fingers. Shame upon your comprehension, Mr Howard. Do you forget that the year was 1828? Promethea was still quietly gestating in the underbelly of the world, the Baron still worked upon his sciences and, hard as it is to believe as you look around the palace I have created here, I was still unimportant. I was still to earn my place, my right, my position of power within an evolving country which had yet to find borders, leaders and a shape of government. I was still far from prepared to take any place – for one consideration, I had

yet to taste first hand, experience for myself the powers of the Baron's science.

I sense the household awakening, the servants leaving stealthily from rooms they know they should not have slept together in. How transparently they move, do you hear them? The ash girl and the stable hand stirring in the attic from the place they think only they hold secret? No? Forgive me, I forget that your ears are lacking certain attunements. Come, breakfast beckons.

Does hunger elude you, Mr Howard? You have barely dabbled with breakfast. Are you not tempted to at least try a small mother of pearl spoon of sterlet caviar? I had it shipped from the Caspian Sea especially - so much more subtle than the lead shot beluga that purports to be finer. Keep it I say, I will have the golden choice of the Tsars. But you, Mr Howard, not tempted to try even one of those shimmering eggs? I can guarantee that you will never have the chance once back in Great Britain. But do I sense that it is more than simple lack of appetite? Perhaps you hesitate as one backs away from the unknown or the step too far, or simply a lack of any imagination. After all, how can the egg of the longest-lived of bottom feeders, unchanged for 200 million years, possibly have anything other than the taste of the vile and the decaying? You judge before you try and the opportunity is gone. Prejudice is the killer of inquiry, anathema to progress. Remarkable to consider, is it not, that your reluctance to consume caviar for fear of finding distaste is the same small-minded insularity that held back the Promethean dream of our Baron for almost a century.

While we privileged few, on that day in Como, were

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perhaps the first outsiders to be invited to witness Frankenstein's advances we were far from the last. Scientific endeavour is a peculiarly hungry child with the most unusual of needs. Years, decades can be spent by devoted individuals, seeking out answers, prospecting for understanding, panning for the gold of advancement and truth. And while one individual may happen across any one of these unknown answers and have the outstanding wit and wisdom to see what it means, it takes others to add their efforts, build towards the momentous. Science cannot thrive without money and manpower. Testing and re-testing, purification and storage, manufacture of bigger and more precise equipment does not just happen with casual spontaneity. If scientists and discoverers are the midwives to the birth of knowledge, then the nurseries - the colleges and universities - to develop those struggling concepts to full understanding, are supplied by the hands of business and finance. Such an irony that what those essential creatures lack in imagination they more than make up for in terrified prejudice and the terminal nervousness of anything unknown. Remarkable is it not that the very Promethean sciences you seek to hear of, that the world craves to use, were rejected and passed over by a business world that should have known far better. And the scientific world was no less forgiving, ridiculing the claims made by Frankenstein, treating his breakthroughs with the scorn and derision normally reserved for the supernatural and mystic. I have to admit that it was only afterward with the hindsight of small snippets of communications that I have been able to reconstruct some of the Baron's journey. He was, even then, very adept at hiding his trail. From most eyes that is. Once one has the sense to observe the

minute ripples left in history then the footsteps of the Baron can be followed as they rove frustrated across many decades and countless miles.

I first felt his presence in Munich. It was a small an unassuming obituary in *The Journal of Surgery and Ophthalmology* that first caught my eye. It related to the untimely and tragic death of Thierry Kreschoff, Professor of Medical Anatomy and renowned Prosector at the University of Munich. It seems that, desperate to build on his growing reputation of producing the finest prosectioned organs for anatomical study, he was developing a technique to enhance the realism of his precisely dissected organs. Galvanism – the science of moving muscles and organs by the power of electricity. The obituary has it that Professor Kreschoff simply made a tragic and unforeseen error whilst working on the high voltage stimulation of a horse's leg. An electrical contact was reported to have loosened, striking his body with a voltage too high for any man to survive. He died working to improve his surgical craft and aid the understanding of man. Allegedly.

It was uncanny the way there was no mention of the influence of one Victor Frankenstein. But then that was the aim of the obituary writers, explain away the death of their infamous prosector in a simple way designed to avoid suspicion. It is a technique that fools almost everyone, except those versed in the similar arts of deception and manipulation. I would pause and explain the telltale signs if I thought you would understand, Mr Howard, but since you are no master of such arts then I fear it would be a waste of precious time. Suffice to say that you, as a so-called professional journalist, can, I presume, instantly

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recognise articles presented as fact that have their roots firmly planted in the shady world of speculation and hearsay. In the same way, I can sense when details have been deliberately obscured. So the obituary of Kreschoff attracted me, not for what it purported to say, but for what glaring omissions it resolutely refused to mention. They stood as beacons aflame upon a hilltop.

It took me no small amount of enquiry, but I did stumble across a written permission for the delivery, to the University, of fluids of a type unknown, by a courier labouring under the name of the Langenberg Shipping and Transport Company. To the vast majority this would have been dismissed as irrelevant, but for me it was all I needed - as telling as a finger on the trigger of a smoking pistol. It was into the vessels of this same company that we loaded barrels of a certain brine. It became clear to me as had it been illuminated by a million candles. The hand of Frankenstein was involved somehow in the untimely death of one of the foremost Prosectors in all Europe. Although some of the details are still less than transparent it is clear enough to me that this was the first time that the Baron had approached anyone other than the group at Lake Como, to introduce to them his world-changing science. And soon, after much deeper investigations and requests for paperwork, I began to see an emergent pattern. Each and every few years the Baron would approach individuals or groups that he believed would see the benefit of his ongoing works. Professors in academia, entrepreneurs in industry, pioneers in business, he would approach them all, offering advances in science, manufacturing, social engineering, medicine, understanding, and each time the results were identical. Those who should have welcomed

these advances with arms open, rejected them, fled from them or simply could not grasp what was being shown them. The Baron, the future King of Promethea, was sidelined, shunned and ignored. He was facing two of the greatest enemies of advancement - ignorance and time. A wall of stupidity standing against the greatest developments - unmoving, dense, impenetrable. While, for the small group of disparate allies, the Como faithful, time was moving on, each passing year bringing old age and its associated illnesses ever closer. Ignorance and time – the death of progress.

How many times has this happened, Mr Howard? How often have we missed world changing moments, discoveries, inventions, new outlooks on this wild and complex monster we call life, all for the sake of the slow of understanding or the missing of a window of opportunity? How many empires and civilizations have fallen beneath the weight of ignorance and time, how many golden chances buried beneath the wheels of stupid impatience? Promethea could have been another such strangled birth, lost in the mud of failure. I shudder to consider how close that may have been.

I must admit to having been surprised when the couriered communication appeared before me, unexpected, unannounced. A panting horse, an eager rider, my signature and it was over. Seconds. World changing seconds.

All communications came to me. Ghergiev was increasingly leaving business under my charge, growing more disinterested in the daily pumping of brine to one customer, seeing each barrel as nothing more than fresh funds for a few more chances at the gambling tables or to

supply the vodka he found more necessary to get him through the growing list of meetings the Solikamsk Regional Committee for Domestic Planning and Borders demanded of him.

I recognised the writing immediately. That spidery, crafted script, written precisely on the distinctive paper he used. I didn't require the breaking of the seal to know who had written that letter. I was, of course, wildly curious to know what the Baron was choosing to communicate. I could have risked the gentle application of heat to the underneath of the seal to gently ease it off the paper, but somehow that seemed an unnecessary and inelegant risk. The fact that the Baron had chosen to contact Ghergiev in such a swift and secure method meant that the message contained within was important.

This fact was reinforced as soon as I saw Ghergiev's expression after reading what the note contained. He sat back in his large chair, snatched at a brandy and devoured it in two mouthfuls. There was nothing too unusual there. But the silence as he gathered his thoughts was out of the ordinary. Most communications were dismissed by him in a clenched fist and a trajectory towards the fire. This was different.

'Iasi?' he asked, pouring another large Hennessy. 'What in the name of the gods is in Iasi?'

The name hung in the room, resonating with possibilities. All of them resoundingly dull. Political capital of Moldavia. Burnt down by the Tatars, Ottomans, Russians – at least some of us have taste. Plagued in 1724. And now overrun with Jews. Nothing unusual at all. The normal swathe of monasteries, palaces and churches. I was becoming confused, what could possibly be of interest

to one Victor Frankenstein in Iasi. First Romanian language newspaper, first public park being laid out with a dull obelisk being erected on a base of lions. I was beginning to believe that the Baron had decided to become staunchly Romanian and take us down that path with him. Until, that is, I recalled that there was another first to be chalked up for mostly insignificant Iasi. The Natural History Museum.

It had recently been completed, fine frontage puffed up, and justly proud of its world beating collection of exhibits. I began to sense that this, perhaps, was something to do with the invitation. At least it had something vaguely scientific about it. My hopes began to rise. Until I discovered the Museum was unnecessarily interested in collecting molluscs and insects, creatures that should be leagues below the horizon of the Baron's dream.

I have to admit, I found a fraction of my faith in Victor's vision feeling somewhat tarnished. A tiny glimmer of rust appeared on the shining future I had imagined. It was, I know now, the tarnish of confusion, of misunderstanding. What possible reason could he have to want us there, in Iasi? The man that I had seen in control of the very forces of life and death itself, resurrecting a Russian aide on the shores of Lake Como, wanted us in the Romanian speaking capital of culture. It seemed unutterably wrong. In fact, I even dared to consider that perhaps he had lost sight of his visionary future, crushed and directionless against a wall of apathy. But even in the instant I considered such a turnaround of fortune I somehow knew that I was wrong about it, wrong about him.

There was, as is said in common parlance, but one way

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to find out. I had to make that leap of faith and head out to Iasi. But as willing as I was to embark on such an expedition, I had the unfortunate baggage of Ghergiev to consider. For me to arrive alone would have signalled the slamming, barring and bolting of many doors of opportunity. He had to make the journey with me in tow.

I am afraid I had to resort to somewhat crude threats in order to winkle Ghergiev from his vodka comforts and gambling excitements into our coach. I fell back upon threat, feeding his worry, nurturing his concern that where he not to attend the hotel mentioned in the letter at the appointed time then impacts upon the demand of the brine he was supplying may be unduly influenced. Faced with creeping poverty and financial strangulation, a picture I painted in the most graphically destitute of manners, it was unsurprising that we were soon journeying towards Iasi. To put it in somewhat crude a way, that man was going, whether willing or otherwise, *compos mentis* or drugged and in a box, it was his choice as to the degree of comfort in which the journey would be made. Fortunately for us both the use of leather restraints was not required.

Barely before we had arrived at the appointed hotel and started to clean the travelling dirt from ourselves there was a knock at the door and it was pushed open. I recognised the man who entered in an instant. His face had haunted me for many, many nights after leaving Como, swimming into my nightmares twisted and screaming as his lungs drew breath through a crushed neck, fingers clawing at the boards of that derelict shell of a building as he crawled his way back to life. The man, who had until that night been equally a Russian aide and dead, stood in the hotel room.

His head was shaved, the skin tight across it, looking to those who knew what to concentrate on, just slightly too pale, slightly unhealthy. He looked at us, eyes just too liquid and uttered two words. 'Follow me.' It was a suggestion that demanded no argument.

I have to admit, that moment, seeing that dead man arisen, was when I knew for certain that my expectations were not wrong, something interesting was definitely afoot. My worries that this Iasi excursion was to prove less valuable than I would like, vanished when he ordered us down a flight of drab servants stairs, out of the hotel and into a waiting coach, leather curtains obscuring the view outside. We were moving through the streets before we had settled. I caught Ghergiev's expression. He was trying to hide it, to look nonchalant and calm, but a vital nervousness ran through him, betrayed by how he was holding himself, shoulders too stiff, neck rigid.

I soon lost track of the direction we were heading, the heavy curtains at the windows and what I suspected was a deliberately circuitous route, proved far too confusing. I resigned myself to the position I was in, being driven through the streets of Iasi to a destination unknown, to meet persons unknown, for a purpose which was also, quite frankly, very unclear. Precisely why I wasn't anything other than overwhelmingly curious and very excited was something of a mystery. Perhaps it had something to do with seeing the Russian aide. His presence was at the same time unsettling and oddly comforting. He was a living link with a dramatic past event that had proved very useful to Ghergiev and myself. Of course, I severely doubted that the man sat opposite was indeed still an aide to the man he had accompanied to Como. His clothing showed that

immediately. The long coat of heavy material studded with small insignia – that same badge of honour I had seen worn by the men on the lakeshore – the hand cradling a flame. An emblem of power for a country that, back at that moment, existed only in the minds and hearts of a small number of people. The people of Promethea.

The sound of the horses' hooves and the rumble of the wheels on the road changed as the carriage slewed around a corner. It was suddenly enclosed, a short echo on every edge of sound. A few moments of this and then the movements stopped. The carriage doors were pulled open to reveal a lantern lit passageway that felt like it was under a huge building. A pair of unnaturally heavysset men made unmistakable gestures towards an open doorway. The ex-Russian aide stood, ushering us out of the carriage and on up a flight of stone steps. We were moved through institutional corridors, some carpeted, some polished wood, up and deeper into the building until a large wooden door was pushed open and we were shown into a bare antechamber. The guards withdrew, leaving us alone with the smell of polished wood and a hint of brine, a smell that seemed to ooze from the men.

For a moment it was almost quiet, the room filled only with the gentle bubbling of air through the large tanks that lined the walls. I peered in through the glass at a perfect slice of one of the world's oceans. Corals of many colours seemed to thrive in the clear water alongside a variety of sponges, sea urchins and starfish. It appeared as any of the finest museum exhibits should, except that the specimens on show were somehow imperfect, misshapen, not for public viewing. At first I thought the large starfish moving along the sand was alone in having a missing arm,

but soon I saw more, each with an absent body part in a different stage of regrowth.

‘Remarkable are they not?’ came a voice close behind me. I was startled, turning quickly to face a very familiar man. ‘Remove any limb and these creatures, slow of wit, have the ability to regrow it in a surprisingly short time.’

Seeing him again seemed to erase the time between that Autumn day on Lake Como. It was as if none of the intervening five years had touched him, in fact, if anything he looked more alive, more vibrant than he had then.

‘More life is created in one month in one of the oceans of the world than on the remainder of the planet’s land masses. More different and dramatic species, more variety, colour and wonder, thrives beneath the waves than above it. Fascinating how little we know of the mysteries of the seas from which we originally came. Are you captivated by such profound mysteries? Or are you willing just to be one of the many who simply paddle in, sail upon and haul fish from the waters of life? Ahh, but I forget, you and your Mr Ghergiev simply pump the ancient seas from their rocky prison under the Urals. Good of you to come, let us talk of future business.’

And that was it, no grand preamble, no polite chitter-chat of small politics and society, no concern about the journey, straight to the business in hand. I followed into a smaller, less austere room and took a chair in a corner as Victor Frankenstein led Ghergiev towards a pair of high backed leather chairs close to a well-established fire. I looked for a moment out of the large window across the frontage of a grand building. All the columns and fittings gleamed, flags and banners flew in the wind, all

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celebrating the opening of the treasure of Iasi – the Natural History Museum.

Frankenstein seemed to fit very well into that museum annexe, almost too well. Watching the two men in conversation in that cluttered room, it was hard to believe that a world changing discussion was in play. To the casual observer it could have been two acquaintances chatting about the current state of polo, or the slightly disappointing returns they were getting from overseas investments. At no point did it look as if they were discussing throwing the very rules of nature out, rules that had held sway since the dawn of man, and wheeling in a new regime of longevity, controlled by those who would put themselves in charge.

In truth it was partly due to the fact that this wasn't the topic under discussion. That shift, Mr Howard, the dictatorial shift of power - that came later. Slowly, inevitably and, I do believe at that time, unexpectedly. The Promethean vision being discussed was a simple and elegant solution to a stubborn and wasteful problem, waking the scientific community up to accept Frankenstein's science and put it in place for the benefit of the world, the advancement of man.

As I listened in fascination, Victor talked about how his time had been spent developing newer and more improved scientific advancements and offering this pantheon of work to the scientific world, making contacts, building teams, moving slowly towards acceptance. But every attempt was met time and again by an old guard of traditionalist professors who would not accept this new work as anything but fiction. The breakthroughs, from the serums and drug infusions that would allow enhancement

surgery to humans, to the microsurgical advances he had pioneered to increase sensory capacity, via the engineering leaps in understanding electricity and harnessing steam generation in new and ever more efficient and powerful ways, all of that, and a host more, was rejected by those with heads of wood rather than wisdom. The only way Frankenstein could see that his science would be embraced would be not to change the science, but change the attitude of the scientific world. If his advances met the ears of the sympathetic and the appreciative then acceptance would be as inevitable and unstoppable as springtime. All it required was the placement of influential people in the right places, political lynchpins to lever opinion in the right direction. It was a simple concept, crippled only by one thing – time. Opinion is a ship notoriously hard to steer and prone to take an age to alter course – too long, in most cases, for one man to change in his lifetime, and impossible to guarantee to hold steady on that course. A task too hard to perform? Unless one can change one aspect of the condition human, then an answer would be in the affirmative. But if the rules were alterable, if certain faithful people could be given the necessary longevity that such a global change in opinion would need...

The question hung tantalisingly in the museum room. I confess my heart began to race as I began to grasp what Frankenstein seemed to be suggesting. This was why we were here, to be judged suitable, to assess how we would react to the proposal he had in mind. Would our minds be sufficiently strong to go through it all? Consider it, the chance to extend your mortal existence, increase the years you were to spend on this earth, hold the inevitability of

death back as if at the end of a pointed and unbreakable stick. That was what was on offer. Would that be a source of temptation to you, Mr Howard? Or a well of seething nightmares as you awake each morning with a life span determined by others stretching ahead? Would today be the first of a million more, or the last hurrah of the many extra decades you have outlived the others? Your fate determined by value judgements beyond your control – you enjoy the reassurance of longevity for as long as you have a useful purpose. And if you were deemed worthless? A burden? Then what sentence should pass? A swift removal of life, or an eternity of discomfort, imprisoned, forgotten? Or worse, kept in a state unworthy of being called life, made an example of as rebellious Christians once were, hung and crucified to die, but not in a short matter of days, the sentence would end at a time of their choosing. Some of these thoughts scurried through my mind as we were led back to the coach and couriered back to the hotel. These thoughts twisted and writhed, taunted and backed away, and yet, it seemed so simple to me. I had to have it. A life eternal for the price of fitting in, doing as instructed. What was there to refuse?

There were, however, two very major matters to overcome before I would be in the realm of acceptance. Let us, for clarity, Mr Howard, call these obstacles the twin sisters of agony and worthiness. The physical and the political, both with the will to refuse.

In that museum room annexe, Frankenstein had headed part way towards a brief explanation of some of the concepts behind the science. He mentioned those star-shaped sea creatures, dim of wit, unchanged for millennia and yet with the ability to regenerate limbs. He spoke of

the sponges that could be shredded, subdivided to the cellular level and, from this cloudy soup of sea flesh, recombine completely to form once again, as if reborn anew, that same living sponge. Skills such as these seemed almost wasted on such life forms and yet we, humans so advanced in so many ways, have lost those abilities. That such potential could be gained from reacquainting our species with such abilities would be undoubtedly beneficial is, as they say, one consideration. The other, more immediate and pressing question to the individual involved in such major redesigning of human anatomy and physiology is surely, how close will sister agony become? A brief ecstatic affair of excruciating pain, leaving one breathless and drained - or a marriage of bone wrenching torture and chronic muscle tearing spasms? How deep into my flesh will she pierce her finger tips, how long will she spend tugging at my muscles, shredding my guts, squeezing at my brain? An even after the immediacy of the procedures, what then? How long before a life normal is re-attained? Or is the new normality an aching of every joint, pain behind the eyes and itching, unreachable beneath the skin? Can such a long life be worth enduring?

There was insufficient information to formulate any reasonable answer. But, we have yet to confuse matters further by consideration of sister worthiness. By far a more slippery creature is she, Mr Howard. This is the harpy that rigs elections, sabotages fortunes at gambling tables, shreds a myriad of plans. That it would be my choice and my suffering to endure the excesses that agony could inflict is given, but it was the decision of others to choose if I was worthy of receiving at all the gift

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Frankenstein offered. Those decisions were influenced directly by the choices of Victor himself and Ghergiev.

I was completely clear that Frankenstein's offer extended to Ghergiev. He fell squarely into a category of person ideal for moving the Promethean vision forward. He had ownership of valuable land and political sway in a small part of an important slice of Russia. He was a somebody, a small scale somebody, but nonetheless... He had sufficient influence to be heard, but not enough to risk creating an unstoppable megalomaniac. Within tolerances Ghergiev fitted and with the double manipulators of time and firm guidance he could be foreseen to become a worthy cog in Frankenstein's attitude changing mechanism. But myself? I was sufficiently self aware to know my position. What influence had I to persuade Frankenstein to imbue me with his gifts? Directly I had none.

Ghergiev spent the night assigned for us to consider Frankenstein's offer, partly at the gambling table and the remainder sleeping in the company of girls and vodka. I had no valuable sleep whatsoever, my mind was alight with the fires of coercion, the coals of persuasion and the oxygen of need. I knew I had to be the first of us to accept Frankenstein's procedure, but as I struggled into the night I could not see how to bring it to pass. I considered that, whilst Frankenstein may admire the strength of character necessary to murder Ghergiev and appear in the museum in his place, he would probably not trust such a character with a long life in which to commit similar atrocities. The dawn grew ever nearer and I felt as far from an answer as ever.

The morning found me slumped at table, sleep having

finally overtaken me. As I roused Ghergiev, paid the girls what he had promised – an extortionate fee I might add for some smelling so unclean – I realised that my mind had continued working long into the early hours. I saw a chance, a glimmer of an idea. Even then, half formed as it was, I knew it would require my most adept of manipulations to convince Ghergiev it was all his invention. I barely tasted the sumptuous looking breakfast, my mind being otherwise engaged.

As we waited in the room for the appearance of the ex-Russian aide, I broached the subject of the proposed procedures. That Ghergiev relished the idea of a life sufficiently long to witness those who had opposed him in the Urals wither of old age was very apparent. That he was keen to be a part of Frankenstein's vision was also clear, although I believe that even then it was seen by him as more the riding of coattails of glory than as any real and dynamic contribution. If there was a call to arms then I believe he saw himself as the merchant selling them rather than a gun wielding General too close to the front line. He was, I was relieved to find, behaving true to form, considering the benefits without examining the details of how he was to arrive there. It would have been a simple task to have raised with him issues of the pain the procedures would involve, of the length of time to be spent in recovery, or indeed of the possible risks to one's anatomy. Any mention of the need to abstain from intercourse or vodka, or both, would, I am certain, have had him returning to Solikamsk as intact as he had left, refusing any of Frankenstein's offers. But that was not my aim. I was moving between two lines of fire, treading carefully to maintain his enthusiasm so as to be hungry

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enough to accept, but be sufficiently uncomfortable to willingly strip bare himself and enter the operating theatre - at least not without sufficiently robust assurances of the safety of the procedures.

The door of the hotel room opened too soon for me. The ex-Russian aide half entered and, from the door, gestured for us to leave. I needed more time. Ghergiev was not ready, not prepared to give the right answers. I had spent too long skirting the subject and now it was in his hands. Throughout the retraced journey of the previous evening, I wanted to speak up, to ensure that Ghergiev made the right suggestion, but I knew the moment had gone, and with the ex-Russian aide in the carriage with us I feared that being seen to interfere with the Baron's plans would prove detrimental.

Frankenstein was awaiting us in his museum annexe room, back to the fire, arms folded in the small of his back. He looked lean, almost too thin to be contemplating moving the world on his shoulders.

'Do you have a decision, Mr Ghergiev?' asked Frankenstein once again dispensing with casual affairs.

'I accept,' answered Ghergiev. You have no idea how far my heart sank when I heard this, Mr Howard. It was as if all the doors of opportunity had been barred and bolted in an instant. With Ghergiev changed there would be no need for any of the Baron's benefits to come my way.

'The theatre awaits,' said Frankenstein, moving towards a door in the far wall.

'You will be performing the procedure yourself?' asked Ghergiev.

'Of course.'

‘It will be an honour to have your talents working exclusively on my humble body,’ said Ghergiev.

Frankenstein paused for the briefest of moments. ‘The honour is all mine. Now please, this way.’

‘All yours... That is reassuring. An honour undiluted by others,’ mused Ghergiev. It was a clumsily constructed half-question. Had it been posed to any without knowledge of honourable etiquette it would have failed to have any effect. But stated to Victor Frankenstein in such a loose way, it demanded a reply. A truthful one. I felt some hope rising inside, as I began to realise what Ghergiev was attempting. The doubts were coming home to roost within him. Or was I perhaps hoping too much?

Frankenstein faced Ghergiev. ‘I will not be working alone. This procedure has complexities which require the assistance of others.’

‘These others, are they...?’

‘I trained them myself. Fellow members of the Physicians’ and Naturalists’ Society, I would trust them completely.’

Ghergiev smiled, stepped towards the door to the theatre. He adopted almost a casual tone – only those familiar with him for years would have spotted the strain of nervousness, barely hidden. ‘I have had need for few surgical procedures. Nothing as major as this, you understand.’ His laugh was almost convincing. ‘Appendix. The removal of lead shot gained during a particularly chaotic hunt. And each time it has been my pleasure to observe in the field, as it were, those about to operate on me.’

He looked in to the operating theatre, studying the group of men gathered around the procedure table. He

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paused, dropped his voice to whisper. 'I recognise none of those men.'

I was barely able to believe what I was hearing. Ghergiev had been listening to my advice after all. Whether deliberately or otherwise, he had taken it in and was now wrestling with a horde of doubts. Fighting opportunity with risk and the fear of personal agony. All I could do was see how this would play out. Yes, Mr Howard, I appreciate the irony, my future, that moment depending on Ghergiev making a decision unaided. I tell you, not often has that error been repeated on my part.

Frankenstein was taken aback, the criticism causing discomfort. 'I can assure you that—'

'I have no doubts. I am human after all. This body of mine, it would be remiss of me to damage it. Consider the disappointed women if anything were to go awry. Although, observing them in action once will convince me to go under their, no doubt, expertly handled knives, potions and syringes.'

'They are prepared and awaiting a subject now, Mr Ghergiev. The solutions are ready. It is time to operate.'

Ghergiev paused, considering. My heart raced as I sensed the doors of opportunity were moments from being barred and bolted for all time, swinging closed.

Ghergiev pointed decisively at me. 'Then take him,' he said. 'I will observe how they work on him.'

Whether it was the need for more test subjects or something deeper I will never know. Frankenstein agreed. In moments I was being shown to a small side room where I was washed and prepared. Blood samples were taken. Swabs were wiped around the inside of my mouth, nose and other places. And as I lay back on a wheeled table, I

felt a stabbing pressure at my neck as a large syringe of what must have been a sleeping draft was administered. I have no recollection of what happened four seconds after that moment. My field of vision shrank to a pinhole, sounds drifted away and I was unconscious in moments.

Imagine, Mr Howard, if it was possible to distil discomfort, concentrate it down, turn it into a serum to inject with a million needles just under the skin of every part of the human body. Add to that the feeling that every scrap of marrow buried in each of my bones had been replaced with living colonies of termites, restless, pressurised and trying to gain some respite of release. Combine it with the straining of every muscle, clenching, fighting with its opponent in a squealing cramp of lactic acid infusion. Then consider the disorientation headache and the wild confusion of a thousand thoughts upended and smashed together in a tumble of swirling chaos, surging through my mind with the regular constriction of my raging pulse. If you can imagine that, Mr Howard, even to one hundredth the intensity it held me, then you will have some vague notion of the sensations I felt upon awakening. I was told later that I begged, pleaded, for relief, for the sleeping draft to be administered again.

The feelings were less intense the next time I erupted into consciousness. Slightly more bearable, diminished fractionally, and yet through it still almost impossible to breathe even more than fitfully. It was as if I could feel the air molecules scratching at the inside of my lungs, tearing their gaseous way through the walls and into my blood, sense the bubbling gas dissolve and be snapped up by voracious red corpuscles as they raced throughout my

body helping every cell heal.

At that stage I could only imagine what processes my body had been exposed to. It was months later, when he too had fully adjusted to the procedures, that Ghergiev illuminated some of it for me. My body had been drained completely of my blood, emptied gradually into a tank of cloudy solution made up from some incomprehensible mix of extracts of sponges and starfish, as well as many more unpronounceable salts and organic compounds extracted from the tainted brine we were draining from that stinking lake. This mixture was what now coursed through my body, pumped by a heart enhanced by extra musculature. Yes, Mr Howard, the aroma which you have been attempting to ignore is in fact myself and not the mud banks of the Prut Estuary. The marrow of my bones had to be replaced since it was now producing more than the simple red cells you still find so essential to life. The new marrow was seeded with colonies of cells capable of maintaining the balance of my new life chemistry. In short every cell, every system, each organ was now affected, changed and improved to work in ways impossible, but for a few to fully understand. It was as fundamental as the changes made when a liquid breathing offspring is hurled into air, now having to control its own oxygen uptake, its own temperature, its own nutrient input. As dramatic a change to the human as birth is, it was as nothing to this.

That expression again, Mr Howard, revulsion tinged with wonder. It seems to hang often on your face as the questions burn at you. Was I scared? Would I repeat such a rebirth? Would I offer a recommendation for others to attempt such a transformation? In reverse order I will answer. Categorically - no. I cannot, nor would not

attempt to persuade any other human being to undergo Frankenstein's gift, since to do so I would be knowingly guiding that person toward unfathomable pain to which no mortal should be exposed. It has taken years of conscious acceptance to ensure that a degree of comfort can be had amid the constant aching of bones and skin, teeth and muscle. Would I repeat such a rebirth? Again - no. That is as relevant to me now as for you to re-emerge from the womb, naked and smeared in placental blood. And in finality, was I scared? Gods, yes... I experienced soul-shaking terror.

I would have been unutterably naive not to be scared, even before I was aware of quite how far and how deep the procedure went. I was volunteering to undergo radical modification to my body using surgeons whose skill had been barely tested and using procedures that had barely moved from the theoretical to the practical. I was terrified to the very marrow. And I realise that now I should not have been. I should have had more trust. More faith. Every day, Mr Howard, you casually trust your body to work for you, do you not? You expect your heart to beat, blood to pump, cells to repair and multiply. Those of a religious leaning assume that this happens since we are created in His vision and His likeness. Do you consider yourself God-like, Mr Howard? More like Him than say the man now addressing you? You are a wise man to be shaking in the negative. Was Christ terrified as he died upon the cross? If he was human then the answer was almost certainly gnawing at his fear-laden heart. But it should not have been. Look to what he achieved, what he became after three days of transformation.

On my third day I could hardly bear to lie still, allow

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my jaws to unclench, give permission for small sections of my body to relax. And as I managed somehow to accept the wild, body wide discomfort I began to feel something new. It was something I would grow to know as the changed me, the new improved body I was destined now to inhabit for as long as it was decided. It is a difficult sensation to find words for, Mr Howard, that is one of the reasons I have brought you, a wordsmith, here so that perhaps in some small way you might make these sensations more understandable by those that will need to know. Mankind shapes language to make shared experiences understandable so, naturally, the more novel the experience the fewer the words available to communicate. I have tried many times to find the words.

Have you ever found yourself out in a small rowing boat, far from the shore on a moonless night? You are aware of the boat and oars, the wood close to hand and solid. Beyond there are the few feet of water just visible, the surface cracked and fluid in what little light there might be. In truth this should be all that one can sense, perhaps save the iodine tang of the sea salt on lips and in nostrils. This is what I consider I knew of my surroundings before that procedure in Iasi. Surface, shallow, immediate. But sit in that boat longer, hours, perhaps many nights, and you will gradually feel more. The weight of what is beneath, untouchable, unfathomable, dark and cold. It should be out of reach and yet it is not. Concentrate on areas of the darkness and one can begin to sense shapes in the current, different densities of water, temperature variations, the movement of life beneath, shoals and reefs. I feel this every day now, growing stronger, deeper, more and more profound. In

everything I touch.

After those three days I awoke looking upon the same world, the same dawn as others, but seeing beyond the surface, beyond the present, beyond the confines of mere decades. I began to sense the changes in the darkness, feel the shapes in the currents, sense how the shoals of opinion moved, how the reefs of possibilities were shaping themselves around me. Believe me, Mr Howard, until you experience it for yourself you cannot begin to own any, even the most slight of comprehensions. Even then, with my first, fumbling gropes into awareness, I was exhilarated. Every living moment seemed to come with an added depth to it, a resonance, a context of deep past and future possibilities. I began to sense my place in the currents of destiny and cause, of determination and effect. I glimpsed vague shapes of opportunity and potential. Promethean potential.

I knew that the doors to Promethean progress had been cracked open. Freed from the twin evils of ignorance and time.

You sit in your fragile short-lived boats and you see waves, ripples and splashes. I started to see tides, seasons and years. Brief moments began to no longer count, days could be glimpsed and then gone, unregistered if I choose. At risk of you considering I have developed what the small minded christen a God complex, Mr Howard, I can tell you now and with no reservation that I move no longer burdened by the desperate race to achieve everything in the few decades of a normal lifetime. I was changed, realisation sparking within me, already a part of the inevitable progress of Promethea. I had awakened from a lifetime of numbness, of normality, into an outstretched

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future where all was there for me to take. Possibilities, chances, the future, I just had to reach out, begin shaping the very fabric upon which mankind's future is to be embroidered.

I was awakened, reborn. I had become a Promethean.

Afterword

One of the principle pleasures of gaming is that, when it's at its best, it's a social thing. You play with others. One of the mixed blessings of writing is that, generally speaking, it's a solitary experience (though with no heavy lifting, as the great TP once pointed out).

It has been a sincere pleasure in putting together the *Dark Harvest: The Legacy of Frankenstein* books that I have had the chance to work with some very remarkable individuals. A memorable RPG session is a shared story telling experience, and that's the same with an anthology. It has been a thing of joy and wonder to see the stories come in, take shape, and then appear in this final volume. The same can be said with the cover and the logo. My thanks go out to everyone involved - you can read about them in more detail after this.

Particular thanks must go to Matt Gibbs. As well as providing an excellent story, Matt proofed and edited the tales herein. He also put it together in Scrivener. In more ways than one, this is his book as much as it is anyone's.

Thanks also go to Dom and Jon at Cubicle 7 Entertainment for their sterling support throughout, and

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to the legend that is Ian Livingstone for the foreword.

Lastly, all our thanks to the ever growing community of Prometheans throughout the world. You are the best readership an old Creature could wish for.

Iain Lowson

November 2012

Biographies

Iain Lowson (Control, Way Out and Witness) is mostly to blame. Dark Harvest: The Legacy of Frankenstein was his idea. It's his fault. When not involved with all things Promethean, he has spent the majority of the past decade and a half writing official Star Wars stuff, with brief forays into writing for video games. If you really want to know all the gory details, have a look at his LinkedIn profile. That'll learn you... <http://www.linkedin.com/in/iainlowson>

Andrew Harman (Driving Ghierghiev and Awakenings) started writing because he had to. It's just one of those things that happens to some people. An idea appears in your head, takes a liking to the place, moves furniture in and just will not go away until it is ripped out of there and slammed onto a page. The first idea that came to stay started as a short story and grew until it was a full novel size. That ended up being 'The Sorcerer's Appendix'. It was replaced by its cousin and several others which led to more comedy fantasies including 'The Frogs of War', 'A Midsummer Night's Gene' and his head has

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been a nagging shelter for lost ideas ever since. Curiously lots of other people seemed to like the ideas and they ended up being published and read in quite a few countries. Now he's developing his ideas into screenplays for movie and TV and working on an urban horror novel of a rather sinister nature.

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan (Hollow Face) writes and designs games. Notably, he wrote the Mongoose Publishing edition of Traveller and the 25th Anniversary edition of Paranoia, as well as the novel Reality Optional. He's currently managing the Doctor Who, Primeval and Laundry Files roleplaying lines for Cubicle 7, while also being 1/3rd of Serpent King Games: <http://serpentking.com/> and 1/2 of Milkyfish Press: <http://milkyfish.com/>. He lives in puppy-generated chaos.

Greg Stolze (The Immigrant's Confession) is a novelist, game designer, and general frivolous dilettante. He's responsible, in whole or in part, for the games REIGN and UNKNOWN ARMIES, as well as the novels A HUNGER LIKE FIRE, SWITCHFLIPPED, and MASK OF THE OTHER. He has some talent for persuading people to pay for free things, and the assorted fruits of that endeavour are found online at: http://www.gregstolze.com/fiction_library/, currently the busiest part of his website: <http://www.gregstolze.com/>. He's on Twitter as [@GregStolze](#). Really, he just plasters his name on any clean surface he can find.

James 'Grim' Desborough (Natural) is a game designer, writer, self publisher, freelancer, rakish fop,

gentleman bastard, bon vivant, gourmet, sybarite, neo-pessimist philosopher, devout atheist, professional clown, amateur subversive, and parasite by choice. Ten times more charming than that Arnold on Green Acres. <http://postmortemstudios.wordpress.com/> and <http://talesofgrim.wordpress.com/>

Jan Pospíšil (Cover Art) started his art career as a concept artist for PC game mods almost seven years ago. Since then he's been creating incredible fantasy illustrations as a hobby. Still, there comes a time in every artist's life when hobby becomes full-on profession, and for Jan that time is now. You can see examples of his work on his DeviantArt page: <http://merlkir.deviantart.com/> and you can read more about Jan and his paintings on his blog: <http://janpospisil.blogspot.com/>

Kate Harrad (The Cult of Victor) is the author of All Lies and Jest (Ghostwoods Books, 2011: <http://www.gwdbooks.com/>), a mildly speculative London adventure about fake vampires, religious excess and saving the world in unorthodox ways. She's also self-published genderswitched classic novels, edited a book of advice for women called The Ladies Loos, and written for the Huffington Post and the Guardian. As well as writing for Dark Harvest:LoF, Kate also has two stories in the upcoming multi-authored novel Red Phone Box. Kate blogs as Fausterella at: <http://loveandzombies.co.uk/>. In her spare time she has two children.

Magz Wiseman (Family Feuds) Having worked in a variety of places from an Art Gallery to a Theatre, right

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down to the seedy depths of a call centre, Magz has finally found a job she rather enjoys. As well as having worked on treatments and screenplays for US clients, she has also written several spec scripts which have done surprisingly well in various UK and international competitions. She has been fortunate to contribute short fiction, and various pieces for the Dark Harvest books to date, and is currently working on her very own shiny anthology of short stories. A lover of pizza, tea and gadgets, just don't, on any account, ever give her fruit. Be warned. <http://magzwiseman.blogspot.com/>

Matt Gibbs (Scar Gang) is a freelance writer and editor. He has worked on games such as Sega's Binary Domain and Ubisoft's Driver San Francisco, and is collaborating with a number of talented artists on comic and graphic novel projects. Alongside his freelance editing, he is the managing editor of Improper Books. Originally an archaeologist, he spent several years grubbing about in holes before turning to writing as a career. <http://mattgibbs.net/>

Sara Dunkerton (Logo Design), a 24 year old farm girl from Somerset, found her calling as an illustrator and animator during College. She carried this realisation through to university where she graduated in 2010. Out in the real world she had worked on illustrating comics for Bayou Arcana, Dark Harvest: Resistance, Sugar Glider Stories 2, Into the Woods: A Fairytale Anthology and an unofficial Doctor Who comic titled The Impossible Crossing. Ever with another project eagerly lined up she has loads more on their way! <http://>

saradunkerton.blogspot.co.uk

Stuart Boon (A Rending Crack of Thunder) was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He moved to Great Britain in 2002 and now lives in Scotland with his wife Michele. He is the author of the multi-award winning 'Shadows Over Scotland', a sourcebook for Scotland and Scottish adventures for the Call of Cthulhu role-playing game. An avid film and music fan, and active role-player, Stuart spends entirely too much time indoors. He is currently working on a number of projects involving the Cthulhu Mythos whilst trying to retain his sanity. <http://stuartboon.posterous.com/>

Tim Dedopulos (The Doll Factory) has been writing stories, books and other things for decades now. He has well over 100 published works, including novels, game stuff, treasure hunts, esoterica and some truly random lunacy. You'd think he'd know better by now. You can find him on Twitter as [@ghostwoods](https://twitter.com/ghostwoods). <http://www.ghostwoods.com/>

Glossary

What is Dark Harvest: Legacy of Frankenstein?

The brainchild of writer Iain Lowson, DH:LoF is a detailed alternative history of Europe in general and Romania in particular. It was published as a role playing game (or RPG) by Cubicle 7 Entertainment in April 2011. Unlike many RPGs, the book was written with non-gamers in mind too. As one reviewer said, "...this is the RPG that authors built". DH:LoF RPG puts the rules of the game in one place, allowing every reader to get caught up in the setting and enjoy the half dozen short stories that draw you in deeper.

More details, along with excerpts from the book, including a potted history of how Frankenstein created Promethea, can be found at: <http://www.darkharvest-legacyoffrankenstein.com/>

What is the Harvest?

When Frankenstein established Promethea, he sought to use his Gift, the science that developed the Creature and gave Frankenstein himself virtual immortality, to allow science, industry and learning to flourish. He saw no

reason that men and women whose genius could benefit society should be lost to the world through illness or accident. By establishing a national store of organs and body parts by Harvesting the newly dead, there would be no reason for the great and the good, or anyone else who could afford it for that matter, to be subject to the fatal vagaries of Fate. Emergency legislation allowed for the Harvesting of others when it was vital to save someone of significant value to society. Those Harvested in this way were not to be abandoned, but were to be compensated and 'repaired' at the earliest opportunity.

The beliefs of many of the people of Promethea clashed with the intent of the Harvest. The military and the authorities use Augmentation to create super-soldiers and deadly agents. Worse still, some in the elite of Promethea abused the Harvest legislation to Augment themselves out of personal vanity. Scars and delicate, skilful stitching have become high fashion in Promethea.

Augmentation?

Frankenstein's art allows the adding of Harvested tissue to living people to make them stronger and faster, or to boost their senses, their ability to withstand injury, and many other things. Frankenstein guards his science carefully, and it is not allowed to pass beyond the secured borders of Promethea. He's fully aware that the rest of the world is not ready to use it responsibly – the abuses within the borders of Promethea are proof of that.

How secure are the borders of Promethea?

By 1910, with the exception of certain mountainous areas to the north and those sections where the mighty

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Danube runs, the border between Promethea and the rest of Europe and Russia is fenced or walled off. A dedicated military railway line runs along almost the entire border, and military bases of varying sizes ensure it is constantly patrolled. Only one overland route into the country exists – at Bors on the western border. A couple of heavily fortified ports are still used for international trade, with all others reduced to rubble. There is no Promethean navy, nor are there any civilian boats. Though rumours speak of airships and planes being developed in Promethea, no air travel is permitted. Even the Resistance does not interfere with the patrolling of the Promethean border.

Who runs Promethea?

Victor Frankenstein does, as its king, with the help of his Advisory Council. There are various Ministries who provide information to the Council and who run various day-to-day aspects of life in Promethea. The most powerful is the Ministry of Information, whose agents deal with internal and external threats, usually agents from the Great Powers of Europe, in association with the Domestic Security Forces, the DSF. The Promethean Military Forces, the PMF, are separate from the DSF, though they have a duty to supply troops and equipment to DSF operations. The Promethean Royal Guard are a heavily Augmented elite unit whose sole duty is the protection of Frankenstein himself.

What about the Creature?

The Creature is in Promethea, organising the resistance against Frankenstein's rule. As with Frankenstein himself, the Creature is able to play the long game. His plans are

Tales of Promethea

subtle and are likely to play out over decades. Never in one place for long, the Creature comes and goes as he wishes. The Resistance, though constantly endeavouring to complicate matters for the authorities, are an additional barrier against Frankenstein's science escaping the borders of Promethea. It is often they who deal with agents from foreign powers; those who contact the Resistance imagining they will be an easy way to learn Frankenstein's secrets, or seeking Resistance help in getting into the country.